

Chapter 1: The Secret Prince

In the smallest bedroom of number four, Privet Drive, a boy of no more than ten, sat on his stool and surveyed his latest piece. Vivid blues, golds, oranges, and reds formed into the abstract of a flower, pouring out a vibrancy that clashed with the dull, gloomy image of its maker. Pale skinned, lanky, and dressed in dingy over-sized clothing, the only hint the boy held any sense of beauty lay in his vibrant green eyes, which flashed between his painting and his pallet in contemplation. With slow deliberateness, he dipped his brush into the black acrylic and set it to canvas. With a continuous, spindly line he completed his latest work with a single name.

Heinrich.

“Heinrich! Lunch!” a shrill call rang up from the kitchen.

Quickly, he set about collecting his supplies. Small tubes of acrylic paint, brushes, a spatula, and his pallet. He took them to a large bucket of water and began to clean them carefully and thoroughly. It would not do to be lectured on proper respect for his relative’s gifts. Especially, since they were the only gifts he received from them. One look around the stark, gloomy bedroom was testament to that. A creaky bed, small table and chair, and a wardrobe (that couldn’t decide if it was white or the color of rotten wood) were all the furniture supplied (in other words, already happened to be there when he first arrived three years ago). There were no photographs, posters, toys, or books. The only sign of personality were the few watercolor pictures he had painted himself, each with their own glaring flaw that made them unsaleable, and cheap enough to make so that his relatives didn’t destroy them because of his intentional waste of their gifts.

He left his stuffy bedroom, stopping briefly in the bathroom to wash his hands and a smudge of paint from his nose. Barefoot he reached the bottom of the stairs, and barely saved his toes from being crushed when Dudley, his whale of a cousin, nearly stomped them as he rushed into kitchen first.

“Watch it, ‘sauerkraut’,” the larger boy sneered, not even stopping.

'Heinrich' scowled at the back of his head. He could hear the television still on in the living room, blaring out a noisy, ridiculous dialogue of some cartoon super hero. Had Dudley been waiting for him to come down just to pick on him? Probably. Which meant his cousin was in one of his moods.

He entered the kitchen, making it a point to stay out of his cousin's reach and intending to make it the trend for the rest of the day. His Aunt Petunia was just finishing up with lunch. She set a large slice of roast beef, carrots, and potatoes in front of Dudley, cooing at her 'Duddykins' like the fat baby he was, before turning to him. Her scowl made her horse like face look even longer, as she picked up what he assumed was his plate.

"Picture?" she asked.

'Heinrich' tilted his head, as if trying to understand her, then lifted his hand and made a gesture for 'tiny'. She scowled and put her free hand on her boney hip.

"How long?"

Ah, now he was having a conundrum. If he told her it was done, then he would get to eat, but he might also be sent outside to garden, making him fair game for Dudley's cruel, infantile jokes. If he told her it would take too many hours she might send him up to his room without eating, scolding him for being lazy. After considering for a moment, he held up two fingers. Her scowl didn't ease up, but she handed him his plate. It was only carrots and potatoes.

"It better be done by then, or you can forget about dinner."

"Danke, Aunt Petunia," he said, sitting down. He pushed his chair as far from the table as he could manage to avoid his cousin kicking him, and ate in a sullen silence. Petunia joined them a moment later, nibbling at pieces of carrots as she flipped idly through a beauty magazine. Despite 'Heinrich's' smaller portion, Dudley finished scarfing down his meal first and elbowed him sharply on his way back to the living room, abandoning his dishes on the table. When he

finished, he gathered up both of their dishes, and washed them, along with his aunt's, and all of her cooking utensils.

Finally, he made his way back up the stairs to his room. He hesitated when he reached the top of the stairs. Hadn't he closed his door when he came down? With a sudden feeling of dread, he opened the door the rest of the way.

Dudley sat, a parody of deep thought, flipping through a sketch book. 'Heinrich' froze, a cold, heavy sensation settling in his gut. That was not his 'project' sketchbook. That one was large and spiraled at the top. That one looked more like small text book, with plain black binding. That one was his 'private' sketchbook.

"Hhhmmm," Dudley said, looking at one picture with particular interest. "This'un isn't half bad." The fat boy turned to his cousin, tilting the colored pencil picture so he could see it. A woman in a sun dress and hat stood under a flowering tree, her hair a brilliant red and verdant eyes that mirrored 'Heinrich's' own. She was smiling, a cross between sly and coy that had boggled him even back when he had attended primary school. Mom.

"Real looker," his cousin said, turning the picture back towards himself. "Kinda of slutty looking, but hey... You know what a slut is, sauerkraut?"

The coldness in his gut suddenly turned hard, and the hardness spread into his chest, and moved into his shoulders, before finally reaching his hands that clenched so hard he might have shattered stones in them. Dudley leered at him.

"So they taught you that much at least, huh, stupid?" Abruptly, he ripped the picture from its binding. A corner was torn off, coming dangerously close to decapitating the beautiful woman. 'Heinrich' stepped forward quickly. Dudley took the remains of the picture in two hands, looking at his smaller cousin with sadistic glee. 'Heinrich' stopped. "Mind if I take this? Daddy won't buy me girly mags yet, but this will due for a while.."

If possible, his insides hardened further, seeping into his head, crushing all thoughts except rage and horror. His vision was turning red, like the blood that was now seeping out between his clenched fingers. Dudley, stupid and arrogant, saw only the usual impotent rage, heedless of the danger and laughed. In a final act of cruelty, he stuck out his tiny pink tongue, and gave the image a lascivious lick.

What happened next, Dudley would relive in nightmares for the rest of his life. Though therapy and endless repetitions of 'it was a bad dream' would stave off the fear in his waking hours, sleep would bring the terror and incredulity of that memory back in all the vividness of the event itself. 'Heinrich' would remember it as his first conscious act of magic. It began as he stepped completely into the little bedroom. His cousin's porcine laughter was abruptly silenced as the door slammed shut without being touched. For a moment, Dudley seemed merely surprised. The completed painting near the window suddenly bursting into flames quickly turned his confusion into blatant fear. He shot off the bed, dropping the notebook and the picture. He made a run for the door and 'Heinrich' was certain he would have been knocked to the other side of the room, if the thin sheets on his bed hadn't suddenly seized the fat boy.

Dudley let an ear splitting shriek, shattering the stone-like power that had been crushing 'Heinrich's' fear and surprise. His thoughts and feelings suddenly scattered into so many directions, leaving him weak and suddenly terrified of what was happening. On his bed was the rather hoaky idea of a ghost, a dingy grey sheet draped over some unseen person. Only there was nothing hoaky about this. Parts of the sheet had twisted themselves into tight spirals, forming skeletal hands that clutched and clawed at their fat prisoner, who beat at them uselessly. No matter how hard Dudley struggled the sheet wraith refused to relinquish its hold, intent, it seemed, on dragging him to the bed itself.

'Heinrich' floundered uselessly for a bit. A part of him wasn't sure if he could help his cousin, and certainly not without becoming the... thing's next victim. If that happened he certainly wasn't going to get any help from his cousin. Another part whispered that the disgusting little Stück Abfall deserved this. That he had wanted this to happen. That he had made it happen.

Oh God, he had made it happen.

He didn't know how, but he was certain of it. He was bloody Carrie! Luke Skywalker! That girl in Firestarter.

A FREAK!

A new fear arose, almost as terrifying as his cousin being smothered to death in front him by the linens. A fear of his Uncle when he found his son smothered to death in the FREAK's room. As if to taunt him, he could suddenly hear footsteps hurrying up the stairs.

"Dudders? Baby? What going on?" came his aunt's voice.

"MUMMY! HELP ME!"

A moment later, the handle to the door was jiggling. But whatever power had slammed it shut was still holding it shut. Petunia let out a desperate yell, resorting to kicking and throwing her stick-like body at the door. Panicked almost as much as his relatives, for entirely different reasons, 'Heinrich' forced himself to move.

He ran around Dudley, snatching up his private notebook and the picture of his mother, leaping back quickly incase the sheet wraith attacked him as well. He went, ignored, to his opened bedroom window, careful to avoid the charred remains of the painting, and barefoot he made the jump he had longed to make for the last three years.

Behind him he heard the door finally give way to his aunt. He had no time to wonder what she would do. The ground came up to meet him, and he barely remembered to unbrace his legs and roll as he landed beside the shrubs. He laid there stunned by the impact, stunned by what he was doing, before stiffly climbing to his feet. His feet hurt from the landing, but nothing was broken or sprained. As quickly as he could, he hobbled away from number four, Privet Drive and prayed it was forever.

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Mr. Dursley had never been so angry in his life. He was a man very prone to anger so that was saying something. He had been in the middle of yelling at some nitwit at work, when a call had come in from his wife. She had been frantic and stuttering, crying about 'Dudders' and about something that wretched nephew of hers had done to him. Nothing she had said made much sense to him, but he could tell it involved some of that Potter weirdness.

As he drove home from work, taking the day off and threatening to fire an entire department if even one person dallied while he was gone, his thoughts ran in a continuous angry circle. He knew, he knew, he should never have allowed that boy into their home. He knew that expenses had been a little tight, especially as Dudley was growing into more expensive tastes in toys and games, but the government stipend for his care and the boy's rather impressive trust fund could not have been near enough to cover the mere inconvenience of housing the ungrateful wretch.

For one, he couldn't speak a whit of English. His British parents didn't have the bloody decency to teach their son the proper Queen's English! They could shout and lecture him all day and he would just tip his head at them and look confused. Or worse, he'd start talking in that funny German way, and he knew it wasn't anything good. No matter how patiently Petunia tried to teach him, just wouldn't learn. Sending him to a proper English school was out of the question. They wouldn't tolerate the sheer embarrassment it would cause them.

As if that wasn't enough of an issue, the brat had the nerve to refuse the cupboard under the stairs as his bedroom. When they had first tried to send him to the little room, he had looked at them with utter disbelief. This was followed quickly by anger and a stubborn refusal to move. It hadn't bothered Mr. Dursley much, as he a little twig of a kid, and he threw him in anyway and locked it. The brat had kicked up such a racket! He had screamed and kicked the door, and it had been amusing for the first fifteen minutes, but then he wouldn't stop. All day and into the sleepless night, he kept kicking and screaming. Not even yelling or belting the boy had silenced him. Eventually, a very cranky

Dudley had generously offered the smallest bedroom to his cousin if only to shut the other boy up.

That was years ago. Now all the little leech did all day was laze around the house and paint. A foolish past time, but apparently one his clever little wife had found profit from. That there were so many ridiculous people in the world who would call a child's paint smudges art and actually buy it, was infuriating.

And worst of all, was the boy's parents. What a perfectly abnormal lot they had been. Doing their silly wand waving and nonsense muttering and frog spawn cooking. And look at the trouble it had gotten them into? Run out of the bleed'n country (and good riddance too!) by their own foul ilk! Even then, they couldn't settle for being normal! They went off and became a bunch of smelly, hippy artists! Which was only slightly better than... that other thing.

He didn't care what his sister said about the boy not knowing any of their freakishness. If he knew how to paint, then the brat likely knew the other stuff. And this had just proved it. The moment he got his hands on that boy, he was going to beat all that nonsense out of him and use that trust fund of his to send him to the cheapest, most miserable, most far away boarding school he could find.

Mr. Dursley pulled into his driveway, his knuckles alternately popping and turning white as he clenched and unclenched his hands around the steering wheel. If he weren't so furious with the entire situation, he would grin with anticipation. Finally, finally he would be rid of that miscreant, and the Dursley family would once again return to the perfect normalcy they had previously enjoyed.

He mounted the steps to the house, ignoring his neighbor's friendly waving, and reached for the door. Yet, amazingly, before he could touch the knob, the door swung open. A tall man with a hooked nose and dressed in a formal black business suit stood before him. The man's greasy, shoulder length hair, which was enough to earn Mr. Dursley's disapproval already, but then the other had the nerve to be standing in his house.

"What-" he began to bellow.

“Good afternoon, Mr. Dursley,” the man practically hissed, “You wouldn’t happen to know where your nephew is, would you?”

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The next two days passed slowly for ‘Heinrich’. He wandered around aimlessly, his only precaution an avoidance of Privet Drive. All of the houses looked the same, all the gardens were unoriginal, and cars in the driveways were generic. Even if the monotony was not so all encompassing, he had nowhere to go anyway.

He slept short, fitful hours in garden sheds, sneaking in after the houses had gone dark, and leaving before dawn. The hunger set in early the morning after the ‘incident’. He managed to ignore it until evening, where he finally gave into his body’s needs and stole tomatoes from a garden, feeling like a wretch with every bite he took.

His feet started to crack and bleed shortly after.

With every passing hour, the fear of the Dursley’s unknown retribution was being smothered by how utterly helpless he was on his own. He had no clothes, shelter, or food. He was filthy, tired, and hungry. He had no friends to stay with and no neighbors he trusted to take pity on him. There was no one he could turn to except...

But bloody hell, he hated the Dursley’s.

He hated them, but as evening came on and the air began to smell of rain he realized he needed them. With this miserable understanding, he finally returned to number four, Privet Drive. He was vaguely surprised to see the porch light was on. Had they left it on for him? Did they want him back? He snorted to himself. They probably just didn’t want the stigma of having their oh-so-grateful little orphan actually run away.

Steeling himself for the inevitable shouting and perhaps the worst belt thrashing his uncle had ever inflicted, he stepped up to the front door. The sound of voices stilled his hand over the door bell. There were

several of them, faint and muffled, but definitely not his uncle's thundering baritone or his aunt's shrill tones. Had the Dursleys actually called the police? Had they been called to find him or arrest him? Was there a charge for assaulting someone with a bed sheet?

With a little less certainty, he pressed the doorbell. The house went suddenly silent. Unease crawled into his gut, and he felt the distinct urge to run away. He turned around to do just that, but the door opened and he was hauled into the house by his collar. Letting out a startled yelp, he fell to the floor, barely avoiding the edge of the stairs. He whirled around on his hands and knees, expecting to see his uncle.

Instead, he met the coal black eyes of a complete stranger. The man was tall with a large hooked nose, and was dressed as if ready to attend a funeral. Bloody hell! They called the government. They're going to dissect my brain!

"Young man," the stranger said, his voice silky even in disdain, "Considering how tiny your brain is, I doubt anyone would be able to find it, let alone dissect it."

He read my mind. That is so ...awesome... or would be if he weren't such a twat about it.

"Language, Heinrich. You've caused quite enough trouble to vex a great many people... you do not want to add me to that list. Get up and go to the living room. There are matters that need to be addressed."

Reluctantly, he climbed to his feet and skirted his way around the stranger and made his way to the living room. There were two more strangers there. A woman and a man. Unlike the dark man, however, they looked considerably less dour. One was a middle-aged woman, attired in a rather nice blue dress with a matching ribbon tying back her blond hair. She reminded him of one of his school teachers back in Germany, who talked softly and always reminded everyone to play nice. The man was older, with thick white hair and a neat mustache, dressed in brown tweed and red tie. They both gave him a comforting

smile when he entered, and he felt his lips twitch to return it. However, the sight of the Dursley's kept his expression completely blank.

Dudley was, fortunately?, still breathing, although he was looking white enough he might have been mistaken for the dead. He was staring ahead at nothing, saying nothing. His aunt had a protective arm around him, rubbing his arm and shoulder as if he might be cold, cooing softly and telling him everything was alright. Vernon Dursley, however... well 'Heinrich' was glad he wasn't alone with the man. The man glared mutinously at the benign pair, and turned even darker as gaze landed on Harry. When the Dark Man strode into the room though, his beady eyes quickly settled on the floor.

Harry quickly moved out of his way and took a seat on the ledge of the fireplace, next to 'Mr. Tweed'. 'Miss Blue' smiled knowingly at him, and took a seat in his uncle's sitting chair. The Dark Man planted himself directly behind the Dursley's couch, his hands coming to rest on either side of the family patriarch. He couldn't help admire the sheer dignity the tall man maintained while still exuded the highest level of malevolent intent. His uncle always came off as a raging walrus and Petunia merely looked like she had bitten into a lemon.

"Ah, good, we're all here," began the woman, her voice well suited to children and perhaps overly timid adults. "We were rather worried something had happened to you, Mr. Makowski."

'Heinrich' threw her a baffled look. I'm Makowski now? That's not even a German name. The Dark Man gave an impatient sigh.

"Yes, yes. Burned at the stake and fed to Catholics, or some other horrible fate, but since the worse you seemed to have suffered is a brief stint to a third world country, perhaps we might move on to relevant matters."

"Really, Mr. Snape-" his aunt began.

"Professor Snape."

"Professor Snape, it's pointless to ask him anything. He barely knows any English. He can't string a sentence together to save his life."

“Really? After three years under your tutelage and still so little progress? I suppose that’s why your not Professor Dursley then,” Snape sneered.

Petunia turned pink. Vernon, already red, turned purple and moved to stand. Snape’s hands were suddenly resting on the larger man’s shoulders. The effect was immediate. Mr. Dursley sat back down, his face looking as haunted as his son’s.

“Professor...” ‘Mr. Tweed’ admonished, although his expression was clearly amused.

“Why don’t we just try some questions first, and see how it goes. Will you answer some questions for us, Mr. Makowski?” ‘Ms. Blue’ asked. ‘Heinrich’ merely nodded, unused to a complete stranger looking at him with such affection. If she started cooing at him, he resolved to take the first opportunity to run away and stay away this time.

“Of course,” Professor Snape agreed, “Perhaps, we will luck out and someone here will actually tell the truth. It’s a novel idea, but one most conducive to one’s health, yes?”

“Now see here, are calling my family-”

“Shut up.”

Mr. Dursley’s mouth snapped shut. ‘Heinrich’ could barely suppress a laugh, but managed it rather quickly when those dark eyes suddenly fell on him.

“The truth, if you please, young man. What is your name.”

“We told you his name. It’s-”

“Madam, if you do not hold your tongue, I will make you swallow it. Am I perfectly clear?”

Somehow she managed to turn even pinker.

“Y-yes, sir.”

“Yes, what?”

“Yes, Professor.”

“You both will remain silent until spoken to. I will not warn either of you again,” he said, his voice soft as silk and sharp as a knife. He turned his attention back to the subject of interest and found him watching him with rapt attention.

“How do you do that, Professor?” the boy asked, his voice carrying just the slightest hint of a German accent. Everyone in the room, even pale Dudley, turned to him, startled. Everyone except the Dark Man, who regarded him with cool disdain.

“There are those who strive for violence, young man, and those who live it. Those who strive so meekly can not possibly hope to stand up to those who live it. Like those who try and those who do. They are people on completely different levels. Now, your name.”

“Harold James Potter.”

A strangely sardonic look came across the professor’s face, and his scowl twisted up in a mockery of a smile. “Of course it is.”

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1. Piece of trash

Chapter 2: The Prince and the Dragon

“...Now, your name.”

“Harold James Potter.”

A strangely sardonic look came across the professor's face, and his scowl twisted up in a mockery of a smile. “Of course it is.”

Harry frowned, wondering if the man thought he was lying. It would be the first time he had used that name since moving in with the Dursleys. They knew he was Harry Potter. At least Vernon and Petunia Dursley did. He wasn't so sure about Dudley. The idiot only ever called him things like 'sauerkraut' and 'lederhosen-boy'. Regardless, the Dark Man continued with his questions.

“Date of birth?”

“August 1st, 1996.”

“Parents?” Again that sardonic tone, as if he knew already and found it amusing.

“James and Lily Potter.”

“Siblings?”

“They keep my evil twin in the closet under the stairs.”

“Ha. Ha. Stay on topic, boy. Have you ever been informed of wizards or witches outside the relation of fiction or religious fanaticism?”

“Er... I wouldn't know?”

“Do you have any objections to witchcraft due to religious beliefs?”

Harry hadn't been allowed near the Christmas tree, let alone gone with the Dursley's to church on Sundays, and his youthful memories of it with his parents had all seemed rather dull. He couldn't ever

remember them lecturing him against it in Sunday school. Why was he being asked such an absurd question to begin with?

“As long as Satan isn’t involved in anyway, I guess I don’t care.”

Snape looked ready to sneer, then seemed to remember something or someone, and moved on.

“Any allergies or health concerns?”

“Er... I’m allergic to penicillin.”

“And your eyes?”

“What about them?”

A sigh. “Near-sighted, far-sighted? Astigmatism?”

“Er... I couldn’t see a barn while standing next to it without them on?”

“Astigmatism, then. Is your prescription current?”

“I dunno.”

“No, then.”

“Are you taking any medication or nutritional supplements?”

“No.”

“Parasites?”

“What? Of course not!”

Snape eyed his dirty, ragged appearance critically. “We’ll see.”

“Hey!”

“Let us be on our way then. This has taken more than enough time as it is,” Professor Snape said with an air of finality. The other two

strangers nodded in agreement and rose to their feet. Harry stood instinctively. The Dursley's were about to stand as well when the three strangers each removed what looked like twigs from out of thin air, and simultaneously called out 'stupefy'. His relatives suddenly slumped back limply onto the couch, their expressions dazed.

"What did you do?!" Harry cried, moving to Dudley's side to make sure he was still breathing.

"A simple stunning spell, Mr. Potter," 'Mr. Tweed' said, patting him on the shoulder. "No cause for alarm. We've found it's easier for all parties involved if muggles are stunned just before they're obliviated. Less of a struggle. Less chance for mishaps."

"What? Stunning spell? Obliviated? What are you doing to my relatives?! Who are you people? What are you people?"

"Why, we're wizards, Harold," 'Mr. Tweed' said, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world. "Just like you." Harry turned to him, looking for any sign of mockery or dementia. The elderly man stared back, his expression calm, his eyes sparkling with intelligence and confidence. A hand landed on his shoulder, making him jump. He looked up to see Professor Snape's cool regard.

"It's time we were on our way, Mr. Potter. Do not bother with goodbyes. In an hour, they won't remember you anyway. You will take nothing..." With the speed of a cobra, he snatched away the sketchbook Harry had been clutching through the entirety of the strange interview. "...of your current or past life with you."

Harry immediately went to grab the sketchbook back, but Snape held it above his head, and the boy was more than a little embarrassed that he was short enough for the tactic to be effective. But as the man had said earlier... there are men who try and men who do. Refusing to be defeated, he leapt up onto the back of the sofa, and then made a lunge from it once again. Snape was actually caught off guard, and rather than be taken down along with the boy, he released his hold on the book. Harry landed heavily on his arms, but with his prize in hand, he scrambled to his feet and made a dash for the front door.

He was half way down the hall, when he heard the shout of 'lipo' and his legs snapped together. He fell forward, his sketchbook flying the rest of the way down the hall. Shaking, and a bit stunned by the fall, Harry lifted himself on to his elbows. He tried to move his legs, but found them firmly stuck together.

The Dark Man strode forward, his expression promising violence. The boy cringed at his approach, but the man strode right past him to snatch up sketchbook once again. As he did so, however, the picture Dudley had assaulted days before, fell out of the binding and landed at his feet. Snape glanced down, seemed to disregard it, but then looked again. Longer this time. His expression turned inscrutable. He then turned to look at Harry, still sprawled out in the middle of the hall glaring daggers at him, and seemed to consider something. He finally picked up the picture, getting a closer look, then carefully replaced it in the sketchbook.

"Mr. Potter, I can tell you are going to make this difficult. I am sure I can make it doubly so. In the interest of your health and my time, which I would rather not spend filling out paperwork on why you are no longer intact, I am willing to make a deal with you. If you come along quietly and behave yourself, I will consider returning your little scribble book."

"And if I refuse?" Harry snarled.

"I will burn it right in front of you, cast a full body bind on you, and drag you along... without consideration for stairs, broken glass, or any sort of foul matter we should happen upon along the way... to WYRA Headquarters. Don't get the delusion that you actually have a say on whether you are going. You may only decide on how you'll get there."

"...WYRA?"

Snape smirked. "Don't worry, Mr. Potter, you will be well acquainted with WYRA soon enough." The man strode back down the hall, over Harry, and back to the living room to inform his compatriots that he was taking their charge on ahead. They cheerfully waved him off, then continued to do who knows what to the Dursley's. He pointed his

stick, Harry believed it was called a 'wand', and muttered 'solvo' at him. Immediately, Harry felt his legs release and he scrambled to his feet. Snape's thin, powerful hand was on his arm before he had even balanced himself, dragging him purposefully towards the door.

They left the house and made their way to the street, where Harry was surprised to find a sleek black car, that looked better situated for the 1920s than the 1990s, was parked. The door opened for them and once both were seated in the back seat, it started and drove away without a driver. Harry balked, a thousand odd, incredulous thoughts flitting too quickly through his brain.

"So... a wizard," Harry said, forcing himself to focus on something solid. At the moment, the most solid thing present was the snarkiest bastard he had ever had the misfortune to meet.

"Yes."

"And you're abducting me because I'm a wizard?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

Snape didn't turn his head from the front window, but his dark glittering eyes slide over to him. "Wizards belong with wizards."

A jolt of excitement ran through Harry at the prospect. Other wizards? Like 'Mr. Tweed' and 'Miss Blue'? Like him? There must be other children wizards then. Would he finally make friends? Would he go to school again? Did they have schools just for wizards and witches? Wizarding teachers? Wait...

"Do you teach at a magic school, Professor?"

"Yes, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, the finest wizarding school in Europe." There was a definite sound of pride in the man's voice that time.

"Will I go to a magic school?"

"Can you read?"

"Yes."

"Can you write?"

"Yes."

"Can you cause spontaneous combustion, seal a room, and animate bed sheets into relative-eating monsters?"

"Er... I guess."

"Then the chances are that you'll go to Wizarding school. Considering the level of accidental magic you performed, you'll probably end up in Hogwarts, or maybe Redbridge if you continue to be an utterly incorrigible brat. Although... you're rather a bit older than most children WYRA comes to collect."

Harry shrugged. His thoughts were dizzy with the possibility of wizarding school. Of any school at all really. He hadn't been to school since he came to live with the Dursleys. They had been so convinced when the social worker dropped him off that he wouldn't know a sniff of English they had immediately went off into a long, meaningless dialogue that would be the defining moment for the rest of his life with them. Out of spite, and more than a little fear, he had not disillusioned them. It had been a very small, but very real power he had held over them. The only form of control he had over his life.

"Tell me, Potter, where are your parents?"

There was a pregnant pause.

"Potter?"

"They're dead, Professor. They've been dead for three years now," he said finally, and then, just to keep the other man from asking he continued. "They... they were shot to death in a robbery. In the

middle of the day. Just like that. No one saw a thing. Perhaps if they had...”

There was another pause, one that Snape shared with his charge in quiet introspection of some past memory. Finally, the man plowed through the silence.

“Where was this?”

“Cologne, Germany.”

“That would explain why it took so long for us to find you. You probably did accidental magic when you were younger, just not in England.”

“There isn’t a Child Abduction Squad in Germany?”

Snape let out a snort at the ridiculous title.

“WYRA’s jurisdiction extends only to the British Isles. Germany’s policies on magical children’s upbringing is considerably more... liberal.”

“But what is WYRA?”

“Look out your window and see for yourself.”

In the fifteen minutes Harry had been concentrating on Snape, the view outside his window had changed from a monotonous suburbia to... something else. The roads were cobblestone, although the car ran smoothly along, and everything outside seemed to come out of a Victorian novel. Gas lamps lined the narrow street, illuminating shop windows with store names like “Madam Madora’s Magical Menagerie” and “Popkin’s Artificial Anatomy and Prosthetics”. A few vendors selling jewelry, or furs, or small animal corpses were packing up for the evening, flicking their wands about until their stalls and wares folded themselves down to the size of a suit case. People strode about, many of the men dressed like ‘Mr. Tweed’ and the women in frilly full length dresses, most of them with robes of various colors in

the place of jackets and shawls. Even as it was approaching eleven at night, the entire neighborhood was still bustling with activity.

Where were they? They couldn't possibly be anywhere in Little Whinging. But where could a community this large and this... unusual go unnoticed? Just as he was about to turn ask Snape that very question, the car stopped in front of a large official looking building.

At first, Harry thought it was a bank with its Greek style columns and sturdy stone architecture, but then he noticed the statue. It was a bronze statue of a tall, handsome man with a young boy on his right side and an even younger girl on his left, both clutching either of his hands. Harry noticed that while the man was dressed in elaborate robes, the children looked like he had just pulled them out of a slum in their tattered clothes. It all looked a bit contrived to Harry. Then he noticed that there were words written on the pith of the statue.

"Wizarding Youth Reclamation Agency," he read out loud. He turned to Snape, who was smirking at him. "It's an orphanage!"

"It is not an orphanage," the man snapped. "It's just as it says it is. A Reclamation agency. Only in this case, they reclaim wizarding children."

"And do what with them?"

Snape made a dismissive gesture. "Quarantine. Then adoption. Some preliminary education if necessary."

"It's an orphanage."

The Dark Man sent him a rather wicked smirk. "Orphanages are for children whose parents are dead or abandon them. I assure you most of the children you find here do not fall under that category. Now, get out of the car."

The car door opened, and Harry scurried out of it if only to avoid being mowed over by the taller man. He whirled around to face him, but was struck speechless when he realized the car they had arrived in had completely disappeared. He probably would have stood there

gawking for several minutes, if Snape hadn't grabbed him by the collar and pulled him roughly towards the Agency's doors.

"Bloody hell, you really are a Child Abduction Agency. That's sick!"

"Oh, Mr. Potter, you have not even glimpsed the depravity of this world. This is likely the most humane aspect of our government that you will ever encounter. Now stop dallying. Your romp through wild suburbia has set us days behind schedule, and I do have more important matters to attend."

"Need to go back to your lair to pull the wings off pixies, eh?" Harry groused under his breath.

"Now that you mention it, I am running low," the man said evenly. Harry couldn't tell if he was joking or not. There was really no winning against this man... bat... ghoul... whatever.

They entered through a set of large marble doors inlaid with a carving of a phoenix, which opened and closed with an ominous rumble. Inside, Harry was surprised it looked just as grand as the outside. There was thick gold carpeting, antique but comfortable looking couches, several small potted trees, and pictures of children decorated the wall. Strangely enough, all the children in the paintings appeared to be asleep. He was dragged to what seemed to be the reception desk, and as Snape began talking to the pretty woman behind the counter, he thought he might have seen one of the children yawn.

"Did that-"

"Yes," Snape said, and then turned to leave. Confused, Harry moved to follow him, but the witch behind the counter placed a hand on his shoulder to stop him. She gave him a comforting smile.

"You'll be with me for now, sweetheart," she said.

"Oh."

Just as Snape reached the door, Harry remembered why he had been following the man in the first place. He turned back, slipping out of the woman's gentle grip, and ran towards him. "Hey! My book!"

Snape stopped. "What about it?"

"You said if I behaved and came along quietly I could have it back."

"No," he said, his voice dripping with cruel condescension. "I said I would consider giving it back to you. And I have considered... and decided against it. Goodnight, Potter." With that, the man walked out the door. Flabbergasted, Harry just stood there, then made a rush for the door only to find there was no handle with which to open it.

"How the bloody hell- That slimy, greasy, lügen, diebstahl, Bastard. Ich töte ihn!" he raged at the door.

"Mr. Potter..." came a deep voice from behind him.

Harry turned around to see the pretty woman still standing where he had left her. Only now she was joined by an older, much larger man with a no-nonsense face that rivaled his previous warden's. Though he wasn't wearing what Harry normally associated with guards, there was a hardy blandness about his robes that reminded him of security guards. In one hand he held a clipboard, and in the other a wand.

"... I trust we won't be having anymore trouble out of you, eh lad?"

The only thing Harry could do was nod meekly, and follow the pretty woman deeper into the mansion.

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Severus Snape returned to his private quarters in Hogwarts just after one o'clock. He went immediately to his liquor cabinet and selected the strongest bottle of brandy he had. In thirty minutes, he had shed his robes and was nursing his third glass in his favorite chair. His thoughts twisted about, finding paths to old memories he had thought forgotten. Memories of less complicated days, when enemies meant

fist fights and jibes, and his greatest responsibility was to pass his NEWTs. Nostalgia was strange company for someone like him, and memories of his childhood nemesis and crush were particularly unexpected.

He had heard about their deaths of course. Albus had made a vague reference to it. Murdered by a muggle. Ironic. Sad. Vaguely pathetic. He had not thought about it much then. He hadn't seen or heard from the Potters in seven years, when- in a rather unGryffindorish act- they had fled Britain and the fight.

He had completely forgotten that they'd had a child.

Forgotten about it until he came face to face with the incarnation of them. James's, the plebeian narcissist, shaggy hair and stubborn mouth and Lily's eyes, so brilliant they should have glowed in the dark. It had been... painful? to see those forgotten features in living form, no longer a past idea, but something that thought and spoke and felt. He had almost forgotten that James and Lily had been actual people.

He wished he didn't remember.

He wished for purely selfish reasons, that whatever cruel bit of fate had thrown Harry Potter right back into the twisted hands his parents had fled the country from had never occurred. And knowing that wish was now utterly futile, he wished that he never saw the boy again. Yet even as he repeated that wish over and over in his head, his hand rested on the stolen sketchbook, twitching every so often as if to fight the urge to open it.

Chapter 3: The Enchanted Fortress

The next three hours were likely the most uncomfortable hours of Harry's short life. From the lobby, he was taken straight to a white tiled room lined with showers. While the pretty woman, who told him to call her 'Edith', waited outside, the large man, referred to as Mr. Mufflin, stood guard at the door and informed him in a tone that brooked no disobedience, exactly what he was to do. Reluctantly, Harry stripped off his ragged clothes and showered, scrubbing every nook and cranny until the man was satisfied.

Once he was done showering and thoroughly mortified, Mr. Mufflin flicked his wand about and muttered something, and Harry suddenly found himself dry. Another wand flick and mutter, and some clothes appeared at Harry's feet. They were only a pair of draw string shorts and shirt that had to be tied close, in identical pale blue. No socks or underwear appeared. He dressed quickly. The moment he tied his shirt close, the name 'Harold' suddenly appeared in dark blue stitching over his left breast.

From there, he was taken to another room that vaguely resembled a doctor's office. Only instead of cotton swabs and stethoscopes, there were shelves crammed with phials of different colored liquids and eye balls in jars that seemed to be moving. He sat on a stool as the boniest man he had ever seen hovered around him, holding up one of said eyeballs to his face and looking him over. Every so often he 'hhhmmm...' and gave him a phial to drink (he quickly came to dread that 'hhhmmm...') and scribbled something down. Finally, after what seemed like hours and twenty phials of liquified 'ick', Edith and Mr. Mufflin escorted him down a long corridor to a door the same pale blue as his clothes.

"Now, Harry," Edith said, crouching down so she could look him in the eye, "I know this must be very confusing and frightening for you, but I don't want you to worry. We'll make sure nothing bad happens to you. You trust me, don't you, Harry?"

Frankly, he didn't. He didn't know how she could expect him to trust anyone who participated in child abduction. Although, she did appear as if she was more experienced with children much younger and

more gullible than him. In any event, he was tired and still embarrassed from the shower fiasco and just wanted to be left alone for a while, so he nodded.

“I’m glad. Now, I know you’re probably very tired, so we’re going to take you to the boy’s dormitory. The others are sleeping right now, but we’ll be sure to introduce you in the morning, okey-dokey?”

He nodded... or twitched. He wasn’t entirely sure.

They opened the door, and from the light filtering in from the corridor, Harry could make out eight small beds in two columns along each wall. Seven of them had little bodies in them, and as they walked quietly towards the one empty bed, Harry could see they were little boys between the ages of five and eight.

Something painful clenched in his heart as he stared at their peaceful cherubic faces, thinking of the mothers and fathers who must be out there worrying and crying over each stolen child. In a soft whisper, Edith performed a spell on his newly assigned bed, and it grew in height and length.

Depressed and suddenly fearful of his future, he slowly crawled into the bed. He did not think sleep would be possible after his intoxicating, frightening, frustrating thrust into a world where magic was as common as sixpence. However, there must have been a spell on the bed, because as soon his head touched the pillow the world went dark, and he felt himself sink into a warm, quiet place.

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The seven beds were empty when Harry woke the next morning. He blinked owlshly, his vision blurry without his glasses, and sat up. After a bit of floundering, he found his glasses sitting on a night stand that hadn’t been there the night before and got a good look around. Sunlight filtered in through the two large windows that stretch almost floor to ceiling, through which he could see a peaceful countryside he knew could not possibly exist since he knew WYRA was in a city. Each bed had an old-fashioned style gold bar head and foot boards

with identical sets of dark blue and gold sheets, and a blue trunk with gold fastenings at the foot of the bed. If he looked closely he could just make out name plates on the trunk. Aside from that, only the colorful crayon drawings at the head of each bed differentiated them.

The rest of the room was decorated in creams, golds, and blues, from the furniture to the fixtures. A short shelf and an open toy chest revealed collection of children's toys, coloring books, and puzzles. A grandfather clock beside the door read seven ten. There was another smaller door across the room, that he assumed was either the bathroom or a closet.

It was a rather depressing realization that this pseudo-orphanage was a lot nicer than his sad little room at the Dursley's or of any non-wizarding orphanage he had ever heard of. It was also a bit depressing to realize he had been placed in a nursery. Sighing, he climbed out of the bed intent on doing some exploration.

Something grabbed his ankles.

"GAH!"

Harry immediately jumped back into the bed. A loud burst of giggles emanated from beneath him. Curious, he stuck his head under the bed to find seven impish faces grinning back at him. Somehow, all seven of his new dorm mates had squeezed underneath his bed to wait for him to wake up. He rather admired their resolve.

"Well, good morning to you too," he said. The boys all giggled and pulled themselves out of their hiding spot.

"We got you good!" said freckle-faced boy. "You yelled really loud!"

A blonde child with a cut on his nose, mimicked him by shouting out a 'gah' and jumping onto the bed next to him. That brought another round of giggles, and even Harry managed to crack a smile.

"Your name's Harold, ya?" the oldest boy of the lot asked. "That's what it says on your trunk."

Harry stood up and walked around the end of the bed. Sure enough, he had a trunk with the name 'Harold' engraved on the name plate. Where did these people get these things? Surely there weren't spells for every little thing, right? He looked at the other boys, who were now all crowding to sit on his bed and looking at him eagerly.

"Call me Harry."

"Just like me!" said the blond boy. "My trunk says 'William', but it's really Billy. No one but the nurses call me 'William'."

"Yeah, the nurses are weird like that," piped in another of the older boys. "My name's Nat, even though everything here says I'm 'Nathaniel'. Blah."

"So..." Harry said, pointing to the two boys. "Billy and Nat. And the rest of you lot?"

"Edgar!" called one the smallest boy, his smile missing half his teeth.

"Brandon!"

"Norton!"

"Freddy!"

"Michael!"

"Nice to meet you," Harry said politely.

"Hey, how come your so old? You're way older than Norton," cried Edgar. The boys all nodded in agreement, and Nat and Norton threw him a suspicious look. Harry felt suddenly nervous. He didn't have much experience with younger children, and for the life of him he could not remember what he was like when he was their age. He didn't remember being that hyper.

"I don't know. Snape said it was because I didn't come to England until I was older," he said finally. At the mention of his main kidnapper's name, the boys each shared a look of horrified disbelief.

"You actually talked to him?!"

"No way!

"He didn't make you eat your tongue? He said he'd make me eat my tongue when I started asking questions!"

"Does his head really twist all the way around? Norton said he could turn it all the way around like an owl, but I don't believe him!" said Freddy, who had been quiet until then.

"How would you know, you got picked up by a girl!" Norton retorted.

"I still don't believe you!"

Seeing that things were quickly escalating into...something, Harry spoke up to distract them. "I didn't see his head turn all the way around, but he is a wizard. He could probably turn himself into an owl and do it for sure."

"Oh yeah, I didn't think of that," Freddy conceded.

"That would be brilliant! I want to turn into an owl!"

"I want to turn into a tiger!"

"When I'm a real wizard, I'm going to turn into whale and swim all over the world! Even to the bottom of the ocean!"

"What about on land, stupid! If you're a whale you can't climb a mountain or swim up a creek."

"Ha! I'd turn into a whale and a...a... dog! Or monkey! Or anything I want!"

Pretty soon the boys were all speculating on what sort of animals they would turn into and what sort of adventures they would go on. It wasn't long before they were all acting out their future plans, barking and flying and climbing all over the place. Harry sat on his bed and

watched, baffled at his current predicament. How long was he going to be staying with this band of mayhem incarnate?

Just as Norton was about to be set upon by a pack of shapeshifting lions, the door opened and a jolly looking woman walked into the room dressed much like Edith had the night before. With her plump, rosey cheeks, Harry thought she looked like she should be serving cookies to Santa in the North Pole. The boys immediately stopped what they were doing, some of them looking rather guilty. The woman took a sweeping inventory of the room, put her hands on her hips, and scowled (and still managed to look cute while doing so).

"I don't suppose you've all brushed your teeth?" she asked.

"No, Miss Marilyn," they replied in practiced unison.

"Have you washed your faces? Changed your clothes? Gotten your bags ready?"

"No, Miss Marilyn."

"Well, then hop to it!" she said, clapping her hands together. "Go! Go! Go!"

Or else I'll tell Santa to put you on the 'naughty' list, Harry mentally added.

The boys broke apart into well organized chaos, some heading for the second door which did turn out to be the bathroom, while others dived for their trunks. Harry just stood there, unsure what to do. Miss Marilyn, quick to spot him, marched right up to him.

"You must be Harold then," she began, a little less sternly than when she'd walked in. "You are a bit older than we're used to, but don't worry. I've been here since WYRA first started, and have seen young men and women older than you pass through these doors. You'll do fine."

"Ma'am, with all due respect... what exactly will I be doing 'fine' at?"

"They didn't tell you about WYRA when you came in? No, I suppose you came in a bit late... Well, just get ready for the day. I'll give you a proper introduction while the boys are having their lessons."

"Lessons? Like wizarding lessons?" he asked, eager to start those himself.

"Oh no, just reading, writing, and math. Spells and such aren't taught until they're at least eleven..."

"I'm almost eleven..." He couldn't hide the eagerness in his voice. For all the uncertainty of his future, he could not help but think that becoming a true wizard would somehow clear everything up. After all, there was a spell for everything. Certainly there were spells that help him get even with that Snape bastard and well on his way to Germany. Snape did say the German wizards were more liberal and didn't go around kidnapping children. He could be happy there, right?

"Yes, well... we'll talk about that later. Norton! Come here and help Harry. Show him what to do, just like you did with Edgar and Nathaniel, ok?"

She quickly wandered off to help some of the younger children dress and find their supplies, and Norton quickly appeared and led Harry away to the bathroom. Harry mimicked the younger boy as they prepared for the day. The bathroom had a low shelf with small baskets of personal hygiene items. They brushed their teeth, washed their faces, and Harry made a half hearted attempt to tame his hair. Back in the room, Norton opened Harry's trunk and pulled out a plain black school bag. As the younger boy started loading it with pencils, a notebook, and other items; Harry changed into the set of slightly darker, but otherwise identical set of clothes. They had just finished getting ready when Miss Marilyn called everyone to the hall.

The children all lined up from oldest to youngest (except for Harry who lingered in the back of line), and made their way single file through the hall, where they were joined another line of boys in green and two lines of girls in pink and purple. Altogether there were about forty children, five nurses, and two large 'guards' in the procession.

They all made their way through a series of corridors to a large dining hall, where two sets of parallel tables and one shorter table at their head. The girls went to one long table and boys to the other, while the adults took the short table so that they might oversee them all. The tables were all fully set and there were large dishes piled high with all sorts of breakfast sorts. When everyone had settled, everyone bowed their heads and took their neighbor's hand to pray.

"God bless Britain," Miss Marilyn began.

"God bless Britain," everyone repeated.

"God bless the Community of Magic. And God bless me, that I might grow powerful, wise, and fearless. Bless my brethren, that they may grow powerful, wise, and fearless beside me. And bless the Father of the New Wizardry of Britain, so that he may lead us to a world of glory and justice for all wizarding kind. Amen."

When the prayer was done, leaving Harry feeling strangely like a foreigner, the dining hall broke out into a wordless chaos as children eagerly gathered up food onto their plates and passed dishes around. Harry grabbed some waffles, eggs, and sausage as he realized how truly starving he was. He hadn't had anything but a few tomatoes the morning before. Gradually, as tummies filled, the children all started talking and gossiping.

The atmosphere was all very amicable, and Harry wondered how these children couldn't be even a little distressed at being ripped away from their families. Certainly all their parents hadn't been nearly as wretchedly selfish and neglectful as the Dursley's had been to him. Yet no one mentioned their father or mother or siblings or past friends or pets. It was as if they had completely forgotten about their life outside of WYRA.

He had a dreadful premonition that it was a sort of magic, and as he looked down at his wonderfully delicious breakfast he couldn't help but wonder if it was enchanted somehow. If he stayed at WYRA long enough, would he too forget about his family? He certainly wouldn't miss the last three years spent cloistered at number four, Privet Drive with the Dursley's, but what about his parents? What about the

memories of summers they'd spent together wandering the beach, spring festivals, and Christmas? What about all the quiet moments they spent together in the studio, his mother teaching him about perspective and proportions, and his father teaching him the proper way to mold clay?

Only half done, Harry pushed his plate away.

He spent the rest of breakfast listening to the other children, and piecing together what life was going to be like at WYRA. It all seemed a bit like boarding school. Everyone got up at the same time, went to breakfast at the same time, took lessons on generic subjects like math and geography, had lunch, had recesses and activity times for play, a story time, study and homework time, a shower just before dinner, a nightly prep, and finally lights out. Although it wasn't said directly, he got the impression there were no weekends or holidays. And then he overheard a conversation at the girl's table involving 'quarantine'.

"Miss Rachel says I'll be done with quarantine this Friday. I'll get to go with you guys next Saturday if I don't get sick," said an eight-year old girl with ebony hair pulled up into pig-tails and a purple outfit. Her friend in pink beside her squealed in delight, and started speaking in an Irish accent.

"Tha's great! It's non fun going anywhere without ya. Beth picks on me when yar gone."

"If she tries it while I'm there I'll pop her in the nose, and then see who wants to adopt her!" The little girls laughed and started talking about Beth and all the mean pranks they could pull on her when the adults weren't looking. Harry turned to Norton.

"What happens on Saturdays?"

Norton made an unpleasant face. "Adoption parties. They're a real drag. We just wander around a room and adults talk to us about stuff. Sometimes a kid gets adopted, but mostly it's a waste of time. The food is always really weird too."

“Adoption parties? Who adopts us? Who get’s adopted? What’s quarantine?”

“Gosh, I don’t know. Quarantine is just us waiting around to see if we get sick. Sometimes a kid gets something like chicken pox, only they get blue spots and the lights turn off every time they sneeze. If you go so long without getting sick, you get to go to the parties. I don’t know who adopts us... wizards and witches I guess.”

“How long does it usually take to get adopted?”

“I dunno. The younger kids usually get picked up pretty quick, though. I’ve been here three months, and I’ve been here the longest of our class,” he said, fairly glowing with pride. He didn’t seem to release that him being there so long meant no one wanted to take him home. Harry didn’t have the heart to suggest it to him. Frankly, he was probably in the same boat. Who would want to adopt someone as old as him? If it was as Snape suggested, he would going off to school soon, so there really wasn’t much point was there?

Breakfast ended, and while the nurses and guards escorted the children to their lessons, Miss Marilyn pulled him into a small office for a private chat. The office looked like an office, only it ran itself. The mail slot seemed to be having an ongoing battle with the filing cabinet, spitting out or swallowing pieces of parchment as they zipped through the air. A diagram on the wall depicted WYRA headquarters in its entirety with little colored dots that moved about it. Harry suspected each dot was a person, which seemed to be confirmed by the blue dot and the black dot that occupied the room they were currently residing in.

“Now Harry, I just wanted to take a moment to see how you are doing and explain a few things. You seemed be taking everything in stride so far, but I’m sure this must be disconcerting for you,” she said.

“Oh...well, yes... I dunno. It’s strange... kinda scary, but... not too strange really... not yet anyway. The kids all seem well taken care of, even if you do kidnap them.”

The woman coughed into her hand at his last statement. "Yes, well... there are good reasons for that, I assure you. Most importantly, it's dangerous, for both the child and their non-magical families to suddenly have a witch or wizard in the family. Neither one understands what is happening and the outcome can be... tragic. Before WYRA was founded there were a lot of horror stories about wizarding children being abused or killed by parents who mistook their magic as a sign of demonic possession or the anti-christ. You understand, I hope, that all the children here, you included, were removed for your protection?"

He didn't like it.

Parents should at least be given a chance, he thought. The idea that his parents could possibly reject him because he had magic seemed absurd to him. He couldn't help but think they would have been delighted at the idea. At the same time, his parents had been artists. They were weird by most people's standards. The Dursley's certainly wouldn't have been a safe place for a child with any unusual talents. Would they have doted on Dudley if he'd started levitating things or turned into a owl or something? And of course, WYRA did seem to think they were doing what was best for the children.

Except for maybe Snape. How that callous, lying, greasy bastard could be allowed anywhere near children was beyond him.

"Of course, Ma'am."

"I'm glad you understand. Now, I know you didn't get a proper explanation about what we do here at WYRA when you came in. Basically, we're a transition center. Children who display magical abilities are brought here from all over Britain. First we register them as citizens of the Wizarding Community of Britain, they're given a thorough health exam, vaccinated- I'm sure you recall all those awful potions you had to drink when you first arrive?- and then held over a period of three weeks to make sure you don't get sick. Understand that despite the vaccines, a lot of children still get Blue Pox or the latest magical flu. This waiting period also helps children adjust to being away from their families, become used to magic, and the like.

Our main purpose, however, is to place all the children here into proper wizarding homes.”

“So that’s what the adoption parties are for?”

“Ah, so you heard a little something about those?”

“I heard the younger children are the first to get adopted. I can’t help but think I’ll be here for a very long time.”

She gave him a sympathetic smile.

“That’s what I really wanted to talk to you about, Harold. I’m afraid the chances of you being adopted are... well, very slim. The good news, however, is that you’ll be old enough to attend a wizarding school come September. Since you are old enough that childhood ailments are less of a concern, we’ll let you skip the quarantine period and attend some of the adoption parties- just to give you a fair opportunity- but if you’re not adopted, then when you go to receive your education, you’ll become a ward of the Community and under the guardianship of your school’s administration. Do you understand?”

“If I’m not adopted by a wizard family, I’ll be adopted by a school... Do I get to keep my last name then?”

“Of course. I must say, young man, you’re taking this all rather well.”

Harry gave her a sardonic smile. “I’m used to big, sudden changes in my life.”

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It wouldn’t be until later that evening, as she settled down to more carefully review Harold James Potter’s file, that Miss Marilyn fully appreciated exactly what he meant. His records played out like war-time drama. His parents turned out to be wizards, which would have been a major benefit to his future, if it weren’t for the fact that they had both been very high on You-Know-Who’s Most Wanted list. They

had been in league with Dumbledore, James Potter was even an auror, but they had pulled out of the country and the fight shortly after their son was born.

No one knew what had happened to them. There were apparently some reports that they had gotten to France, but after that there was no documented information. Snape's report suggested they had hidden themselves from the wizarding world completely, living as muggle artists in a studio apartment in Cologne. Harry didn't know anything about it either.

They had died with their secrets, and without anyone knowing Harry was a wizard, he had been returned to England to live with his muggle relatives. And what a wretched lot they seemed to be! Padlocks on the bedroom door, no formal education, and Dr. Helm found evidence of malnutrition!

It was cases like this that made Miss Marilyn proud to have supported You-Know-Who during the war and taken on a position at WYRA. Who knows what would have happened to poor Harold? Raised by abusive relatives to be an ordinary muggle, never comprehending the strange things that followed him through his life. On the off chance the former government had spotted him, he would have been thrust into society without a leg to stand on, and likely failed miserably into the dredges of society.

With WYRA hard at work though, no child was ever left hungry or floundering for guidance. They would raise all their children to be obedient, productive, proud members of society. How fortunate Harold was, how all wizarding children were, to have such a compassionate ruler as You-Know-Who!

Chapter 4: The Prince, the Knave, and the Ace of Hearts

Four days passed in a routine that was the same as the first morning Harry had arrived. He did pretty much everything the younger children did, except lessons, which he took to studying on his own (he hadn't had any formal schooling since he was eight, but he'd done a lot of Dudley's math homework at the Dursley's and knew a fair bit of Geography), and playtime he usually spent reading "Witches, Wizards, and Whatevers; a Practical Guide to Modern Culture in Wizarding Britain". Miss Marilyn had given the book to him so he would stop bugging everyone else with questions.

The book was pretty vague and its references obscure or inaccurate, but Harry got a general idea of the Wizarding World. Non-magical people were called muggles, and since he was born from muggles he was called a muggleborn. Not exactly common, but not really rare. Wizards and witches who had wizarding parents were called purebloods. Harry wondered what they called a magical person born from a muggle and a witch or wizard. There was no reference for it, so Harry assumed it just didn't occur very often.

According to his book, even though wizards lived amongst or beside muggle communities, there wasn't any real interaction. Wizards had their own government, economy, education, and culture completely separate from Muggles. As far as the Muggle world knew, there was no such thing as magic. In fact, it was apparently illegal to do business with or marry a muggle. It would explain why there weren't any muggle/wizarding children.

Otherwise, the Wizarding World ran a bit like the muggle world, only everything seemed to involve magic. They had radios (although not televisions oddly enough), newspapers (the photographs actually moved!), and all sorts of magazines (He was curious as to what *Potion's Weekly* involved). There were sporting events (Quidditch was apparently the national sport of choice), a wide selection of hobbies, festivals, and Halloween and Christmas had their own particular traditions. While none of them looked familiar, many of them did look like fun. The government was a cross between a monarchy and a bureaucracy, and a representative body called the Wizengamot that didn't really seem to have a purpose. He also

couldn't figure out who was the head of the government, and only knew that it wasn't a king or queen or some other form of royalty. They referred to this person as You-Know-Who, but since Harry really didn't know who it was very frustrating.

He was almost to the chapter that went into magical vacation spots when Saturday arrived. All the boys spent an extra long time grooming themselves and their younger friends in the bathroom. There were light hearted bets about who might get picked that day. After a particularly energetic breakfast, everyone went to lessons, but groups of four or five would routinely be called out of class. When they returned their hair was trimmed or curled or modestly styled. Harry got a turn as well, and in the shower room he was set on a stool. His barber, an elderly man with neatly trimmed mustache, took one look at his wild mop and declared it hopeless.

As soon as lunch was through, most of the boys and girls were gathered up into two lines. About a dozen remained behind, some of them marking their fellow's departure with a distinct pout, and went on to playtime and study period. Harry and the children were escorted by two nurses and two guards to a room that he had never seen before. It was a small room with plain white walls and wood flooring. The only thing there was a large cabinet standing directly in the middle of the room. It was carved of dark wood and had a small brass nob shaped like a lion, and as Harry moved closer he could make out symbols burned along the outer edges.

Miss Marilyn went to the door. She took a moment to check her pocket watch, nodded to herself and then tapped the cabinet lightly with her wand. "Aquo questo portello all'atro lato." The dark symbols turned a electric purple, flickered into light blue and then faded to dark. When the symbols had faded completely, the door fell open.

"Bloody hell," Harry muttered, looking through the door to see not a cupboard, but a the parlor of a large mansion.

"Harold!"

"Sorry, Miss Marilyn."

She let it slide, and moved out of the way so that the children could file through. As Harry moved through the door he felt the briefest moment of disorientation, as if he had just stepped off of an elevator. He quickly moved aside to allow their guardians to step through behind him, and looked back. They had all apparently stepped through someone's grandfather clock, and Harry could only shake his head at the concept. Did the cabinet and the clock connect only to each other or did they connect to other places? If wizards could do this sort of thing, why had Snape taken him to WYRA in a car?

Harry lingered close to the adults at first, but the other children quickly scattered into little clusters of friends to play games or investigate the room. It was a very lovely room with an air of antiquity Harry was coming to understand as the norm for the Wizarding world. There was an enormous white marble fireplace, engraved with dragons, a phoenix, and other fire related creatures that he couldn't identify. Elegant furniture that looked more beautiful than comfortable was scattered about the room, and a long table stood laden with an assortment of finger food.

"Where are we?" he finally asked, to no one in particular.

"Gnarlsbriar Manor," replied one of the guards offhandedly, watching closely so that none of his wards broke anything. "Summer estate of the Brimwoods Family, just south of Edinburgh."

Harry glanced up to see a enormous gold and crystal chandelier laden with plain wax candles. "Are all wizarding homes this nice?"

The older man snorted. "They certainly like to pretend they are. Run off, Harold. My job isn't answering your nosey questions."

He frowned, but did as he was told. He found himself standing by an open window, looking out over a verdant Scottish countryside. In the distance, he could make out the dark shape of horses grazing behind stone paddocks. Trying to keep his thoughts from speculating on what strange thing might happen next, he kept his attention on those horses and their strange reddish hues. The longer he looked at them the stranger they began to look. Were those wings?

The sound of doors opening and the muffled thump of many footsteps drew Harry's attention to the other end of the parlor. Approximately twenty witches and wizards entered the room, all of them in pairs. At first Harry assumed the pairs were spouses, but there was one pair of only women and two of only men. As he pondered the peculiar arrangement, the witches and wizards (for that was the only thing they could possibly be dressed in their elaborate robes and some even with pointed hats) filed into the room and without preamble began cornering children. When ever a child was cornered, they'd stop what they were doing to talk to the pair. Some of the children were better at it than others. The bolder ones smiled brightly and chatted as if to one of their friends, while others stammered or looked down shyly or nearly burst into tears. Harry had a feeling he was going to fall into the second category, and even though he was incredibly curious, he turned back towards the window and prayed no one would approach him.

For a while, it seemed to work. The adults would always pass him by, occasionally turning curious glances at him, but never stopping. With this blatant disregard, it wasn't long before Harry began overhearing conversations he was certain he shouldn't have been privy to. One of the pairs of males, both young, slender, and dressed in a way that reminded Harry of accountants and investors, stopped not two feet away from him and began gossiping between themselves.

"Not much to pick from, is there Robert?" said the darker of the two.

"Josephine did say it was to be expected. It took her two years and eight parties just to find Carolyn. It's always a gamble when dealing with Muggle-stock."

Muggle-stock? What were these men here for? Children or cattle?

"The little black haired boy might be worth looking into."

"He's a bit of a scaredy-cat."

"He's five. He can be trained."

Fetch. Speak. Sit. Stay.

"I wanted a brunette or a blond. If he doesn't look at least a little like one of us then we'll look like a rather motley family. You remember Dorsey, right? His wife's has a light complexion just like him, but they kept adopting red heads. Their family portraits look like they've been mobbed by freckled woodsprites."

They both laughed loudly to each other, and Harry felt an up-welling of resentment towards them. Suddenly, both men stopped laughing, and slowly turned around to look at him. They both seemed startled to see him there, and even more startled at the malevolent look in his brilliant green eyes.

"Oh...h-hello," the blond said first, obviously embarrassed. His partner (Harry believed they were in fact one of those 'special couples' his mother had told him about) looked startled, but recovered quickly and looked down on him with a certain smugness. It was certainly more dignified than Dudley's infantile smirk, but no where near as grating as Snape's had been. Now, Harry may not have known how to be polite and sociable to adult witches and wizards, but he certainly knew how to be rude to them. Rude was easy.

"Hallo. Mein Name ist Harry. Ihr seid unheimlich eingebildet, oberflächlich und aufgeblasen. Ich würde euch nicht einmal eine Katze adoptieren lassen, geschweige denn einen kleinen Jungen,"(1) he rambled off. The wizards both looked at him blankly for a moment, then the blond one hurriedly opened up a pamphlet he was carrying and flipped through it. At first, Harry thought he was looking up what he'd said, but was proven wrong a moment later when the blond found what it was he was looking for.

"Ah... Harold James Potter. English born, but raised in Germany. Returned to England around eight or nine. Oh look there... almost eleven already. WYRA just picked him up last week. Imagine that? You rarely see them this old."

"Kein Grund so mich anzugaffen, du Fisch."(2)

"Are you sure the German wizards didn't just throw him back?"

“Robert!”

“He’s mocking us, Kyle.”

Harry grinned, all teeth.

“Er... yes, well... he is a brunette though. And your mother’s eyes were green too.”

Both Harry and Robert turned a disbelieving look at the smaller man.

“Don’t even suggest it. Does he even speak English? Never mind, of course he does. It’s bad enough dealing with backtalk in one language, let alone two.”

“Why not? You can each have your own language of sarcasm,” Harry offered.

“Yes, now see there,” Kyle continued. “You’d get the English sarcasm. You of all people should appreciate that.”

Despite himself, the corner of Harry’s mouth twitched. He still did not like them, but they were...a cute couple? The moment Kyle saw the little slip he broke out into a full out grin.

“Oh and he’s cute! He’s almost eleven and still cute.”

Harry blushed, which only seemed to delight Kyle further.

“No,” Robert said firmly. “Absolutely not. Aside from being a brunette- and we can’t be certain that bird’s nest is his natural color or it just hasn’t been washed properly- he’s the opposite of everything we were looking for to begin with! He’s too old, he’s disrespectful, doesn’t look a thing like me, and come on... it took ten years for his magic to pop up? He’s probably a wink and a whistle from being a squib.”

“Hey, I don’t go calling you seafood...” Harry objected. “Oh, wait...”

“Squib, squib, not a squid. A muggle born from wizarding stock. God, what do they teach you all day?”

“How to make puppets out of popsicle sticks, but that doesn’t matter. I’ll be going away to a real wizarding school come September, and that will be that.”

“There! See? He’d be in the house for what? A month? And then he’d be off to some trade school to making candles from the rest of the year.”

“Aww... but Robby-”

“For the last time, no! Now I’m going to go check out that blond kid, you can join me when your common sense returns.” With that, the man stalked off, leaving Harry alone with Kyle. The man put his hands on his hips and his expression was such that Harry was suddenly, and painfully reminded of his mother. He quickly went back to staring out the window.

“I’m sorry, Harold, but he’s being quite unreasonable,” the wizard said, ignoring the fact that his young companion was ignoring him.

“He sounded perfectly reasonable to me.”

There was a silence, and he wondered if Kyle hadn’t taken the hint and left. But no, the man merely moved closer towards the window to see what he was looking at. There was a look of surprise on his face, and then understanding as he looked towards the young man.

“You can see them, can’t you?” he said.

“What? The horses? Yeah, my eyes aren’t that bad.”

“Harold, those aren’t horses. They’re thestrals. Beasts of the underworld. Only someone who has seen death up close can see them.”

“...”

“Harold-“

"Harry. My name is Harry."

"Harry, then. Why are you so against getting adopted?"

"I've been adopted before, thank you very much. I'd rather be on my own now."

"Ah..." They said nothing for a moment, Harry pondering thestrals and death and family and how they were all connected in his life. He had almost forgotten Kyle, when the man put his hand on his shoulder. "If you should ever change your mind, you can reach either Robert or me here."

He handed Harry a business card. It read:

ROBERT ALLEN REIGER

ATTORNEY AT LAW

CRIMINAL DEFENSE AND CIVIL SUITES

165 TAPERTY RD, LONDON

"I'm his personal assistant, so if you write there you'll get to me first."

Harry studied the card and then Kyle, more than a little baffled. "Thank you, sir, but... why are doing this? I'm a complete stranger and you've no benefit in befriending me."

"I've got a feeling about you, Harry. I think you're going to make something out of yourself. I've seen all sorts in my line work, and I can just tell. You've got character. It glows out through those pretty eyes of yours. Ten or fifteen years from now Robert is going to be kicking himself for missing out on the opportunity to adopt you. I'd bet my wand on it."

Harry blushed, not expecting the compliment and unsure if should believe the man. He certainly didn't feel special. He felt tired, small, and a little bit lonely. Kyle gave him an encouraging smile, a pat on the shoulder, and wandered off to find his husband? boss? Harry

gave the business card a long speculative look and then slipped it into the folds of his shirt.

For the remaining hour and a half, Harry remained undisturbed by the other wizarding couples and eventually his gaze returned to the thestrals. Gradually, the adults left, a few of them taking a child in hand as they went, but most of the children were left and started to join him by the windows.

“Hey, Harry,” began Norton, tilting his head curiously. “What are you looking at?”

“Thestrals,” Harry said automatically.

“What’s a thestral?”

Now Harry wasn’t sure what to say. Could he really explain something as sinister as a horse that only one who has seen death can see them to an eight-year old? He didn’t like the idea that he was ten and could see them.

“It’s a type of bird. Those little brown birds hopping in and out of the grass.”

“Oh...I thought those were just sparrows.”

Edgar, the smallest of the boys there, stepped close to Harry looking off towards the meadows. He looked up to the older boy and gave him a confused look, but said nothing.

It was an epiphany for Harry. The realization that death did not care where and on who it landed, and it did not care who it left behind. It was a scary, horrible truth. It made Harry feel older and more prepared for his life to come, and he was glad it had been revealed to him.

1) Hello. My name is Harry. You are conceited, shallow, and pompous. You best bet is to adopt a cat, not a little boy.

2) That’s no reason to gape, you codfish.

Author's note: Many of the people who are in this first book of the series (yes, I intend to have a series with all seven years of Harry's life at Hogwarts, just like Rowling) will seem superfluous since they don't contribute to current plot much, but almost all of them will reappear in later books, including several of the orphans and Kyle and Robert (who does regret not adopting Harry when he had the chance). Have a bit of patience.

Also, if Harry seems a little OC, well, he would be given the circumstance. Rowling's Harry was raised by the Dursleys since he was one, but my Harry lived with his parents in Germany until he was eight and then lost them. So I think of him having more self confidence having grown up with his loving parents, and he understands his circumstances with the Dursleys was abnormal and not himself. His view of the wizarding world at the moment is that his life is better than what it was at the Dursleys, but not as good as the life he had with his parents, so he might come off as a bit cynical at times and then completely enchanted at others.

Please review, I will reply if you have questions (that don't reveal plot twists or future events in the story). Sorry, though, I don't take requests in plot. I have a definite picture of how this story will flow and the events that transpire are all related so they cannot be altered.

P.S. For those people whom it bothers, yes there will be some yaoi couples like Kyle and Robert occasionally (and some lesbians every so often as well), but nothing explicit and most of the characters in my story, including Harry, are straight. There's no male pregnancy anywhere in the series. And in case you're worried, Voldemort is still his delightfully evil (albeit mellow and much less deranged) self, without resorting to pedophilia.

Chapter 5: The Maiden and the Dragon

Edgar did not return with Harry and the other boys that Saturday. Neither did one of the six year old girls, but he had never met her. When they returned to WYRA headquarters, Harry was surprised to find that the boy's bed and trunk were gone, along with all his crayon drawings. None of the other boys questioned this, and in fact seemed to think Edgar had somehow beat them in a game and cursed him good naturedly. For Harry, his disappearance was devastating. That he or anyone of the children could simply disappear and not a trace of them remain...

When everyone else had gone to sleep, Harry avoided his bed like the plague, feeling some foul sort of enchantment had been placed on it to make him forget Edgar, forget his parents, forget himself. He spent the entire night drawing sketches of the missing child with colored pencils and crayons in the blank pages of his student notebook. When he was done, he tore out the pages and hid them in his book, along with the business card Kyle had given him. The parallels between his new secret sketches and his old ones made him simultaneously nostalgic and terrified. Surely his new life could in no way resemble the drab, bitter existence he'd had at the Dursley's?

The next day proceeded as all the days previously had in a comfortable routine. At night, Harry lingered behind the other boys, pretending to stay up late reading until they all had gone to bed and were magically enchanted into sleep. He would place stuffed animals underneath his covers and hide in the bathroom until the final bed check of the evening around nine o'clock, and then spend an hour or so sketching the other boys, or the staff, or the Reigers, or anyone he could remember and then hide them away in his book. Then he'd strip his bed of the pillow and comforter and sleep on the floor. His sleep was light as it had always been at the Dursley's, and he always woke earlier than the other boys so that he might make his bed and start his bathroom routine early without anyone being the wiser.

Life continued in this strange cross of comfortable routine and intense paranoia for three weeks. There were more adoption parties. Harry went ignored and was glad for it. He never saw Kyle or Robert Reiger at any of them. He wondered sometimes if they had adopted Edgar or

perhaps the little girl he'd never met. Norton was finally adopted to a congenial pair of witches whose daughter had left for Redbridge and were looking for another child to open their home and lives to. Harry was happy for Norton, who had seemed as thrilled to be adopted as the witches had been to adopt him. At night, though, he would think the blue room had begun to look so very empty.

A boy named Alfred turned up one day shortly afterward. He was the first black boy Harry had seen at WYRA, and he was also the first child he had seen cry for his mommy. He cried all day, wouldn't touch his food or take a nap, and nothing the staff or the other boys did seemed to comfort him. When Alfred woke up the next morning, he didn't shed a single tear and ate his breakfast with as much enthusiasm as the other boys. Harry hadn't remembered feeling so alone since he was eight.

June rolled around, although Harry wasn't sure of the exact date, and Miss Marilyn pulled Harry into her office for a chat. At first, he was terrified at the possibility of her finding out he hadn't been sleeping in his bed and that she was going to take his sketches away. It didn't take long for her to alleviate his fears.

"Professor Snape is going to be dropping by tomorrow," she began, pulling out a file with his name on it. Harry frowned, thinking of the greasy bastard who had tricked him and stolen his sketchbook. "He's going to administer a magical aptitude test to determine your level of magic. Depending on how high you rank will determine which school you will be going to. Either way, things are going to get a bit hectic for you. After the test, you'll only have about a day or two before you're sent to your new home. You'll attend a school sponsored summer prep class with some other muggleborn children, and then attend proper classes with pureblood children at the start of term. Usually September first. Do you have any questions?"

Harry thought for a moment.

"Will it hurt? The test, I mean."

"No, Harold, it doesn't hurt at all," she said with a smile.

“... Can I take the book that you gave me? You know, in case I get confused about something?”

“You know you’ll get new, even better books at the school don’t you?”

“Yes... but, those will be the school’s books. I was wondering if I can have the book. You know, so it would just be mine?”

Miss Marilyn gave him a compassionate smile. “I don’t see why not. I have extras and they’re pretty out of date. Why not? You can keep your book, Harold. I don’t mind.”

Harry gave her the brightest smile he could manage. “Thank you so much!”

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All of the following morning and afternoon, Harry waited anxiously for Snape’s arrival and his subsequent test. He wished now he had asked his current guardian when the man would arrive, but now it was too late. The woman was in her office all day working on paperwork and organizing the details of the next adoption party. Now all he could do was wait and wonder what exactly his test would entail. Miss Marilyn had said it wouldn’t hurt, but that didn’t necessarily mean it wouldn’t be difficult.

Would it be a written test? Would he have to try to do some spells? Would one of the staff doctors poke and prod him until they learned what they needed to know? What if there had been a mistake? What if he wasn’t a wizard at all? What if some wizard or witch was playing a cruel joke and had caste a spell through his open window that day at the Dursley’s? What if Dudley had caste that curse by accident and not him? Would he be sent back to the Dursley’s? Would they erase his memories and abandon him in some muggle orphanage? Would they dice him up into little bits and use him for dark rituals and potions ingredients?

His mind swam with these thoughts, and any and all attempts to distract himself failed to work for over a few minutes at a time. He

paced during play and study periods, fiddled with his food during breakfast and lunch, and scanned his book from front to back in hopes of divining his future.

Finally, FINALLY, the time came and he was pulled away from dinner table by Miss Marilyn and taken to another room he had never seen before. It was large study with a giant fireplace, walls lined with enormous tomes, and set of comfortable looking chairs . A girl, no older than him, sat in one of the plush violet chairs already. She had spikey black hair with a tuft of purple running through her bangs, and wore a dark violet dress, black knee-high socks, and heavy black boots. She was the most normal looking girl he had seen in a month.

“Who are you?” she asked suspiciously, eyeing his bland clothing and wild hair critically.

“Harry Potter. And you?” He took the unoccupied seat across from her, and tried not to fidget.

“Emily White. Did they kidnap you too?”

Inside, Harry cheered. Finally, someone who thought of this entire matter as kidnapping. Really, how old did you have to be to figure this out?

“Yes, almost a month ago. Did they just pick you up?”

Emily visibly relaxed, although she looked suddenly confused.

“Yes. My family and I were going on holiday to France, and we were taking the ferry across the channel, but then... something happen. I remember going over the rail and then I remember landing in my bed at home, but I can’t remember what happened in between.”

“Sounds like you apparated by accident” Harry offered.

“Apparated? Is that a magic thing? I didn’t even have an hour to try to sort things out when these...people just burst into my house and dragged me here. They kept saying they were wizards and witches,

and they did such strange things, and they said I was a witch too but that's impossible. I can't do magic like they could."

"Apparition is a sort of magic. Have you always lived in England?"

"Magic? Me do magic? No way, no way. That's awesome! Mum and Dad are gonna flip!"

"Um... Emily..."

"Oh, no! I completely forgot about them! They probably think I'm at the bottom of the channel by now! Do you think the weird wizardy people got a hold of them? How did they even know I did magic to begin with? Hey, could my parents do magic too, do you suppose? Perhaps, they know what happened already and they called them to come pick me up?"

"No, Emily, listen..."

"Is this a sort of... I dunno... magical police station? You know, in case children accidently apparate away by accident? Is that what happened to you? Are you waiting for your parents too?"

"Emily, my parents are dead."

The gabby girl's mouth finally shut with a audible snap. She gave him a sheepish, apologetic look before saying speaking again at a more reasonable rate.

"I'm sorry, Harry. Listen to me blathering away, but it's just so exciting. This has to be the biggest adventure I've ever had, maybe the biggest one I'll ever have in my life, ya know? But, if you're parents are... you know, then what are you doing here."

Mentally, Harry cursed WYRA and the predicament they had just put him in. How was he suppose to explain all this to a girl no older than himself? He didn't even understand half of what was going on! Bloody insensitive bastards! He came here for a test, not... not... grief counseling!

"I...um... well... it's um... It's an orphanage... of sorts. Well, technically, it's an adoption center since...well... no one here's really an orphan... except me, of course, but I had relatives looking after me... so... really, it's a kidnaping center... kidnaping and adoption center... They'll never let you see your family again...Er..."

"WHAT?!"

She was on her feet in an instant, racing for the door. She tried the knob, but it held fast. She kicked at the door, lightly at first and then with full blown karate kicks but it wouldn't budge. She screamed and hissed and cried and begged. Finally, she was reduced to sobbing and turned back towards Harry who stood helplessly watching her from behind his chair.

"How can they? How can they just take me away from my mum and dad? What are they going to do with me? I can't... I can't do anything with out them..."

Harry timidly walked towards her, afraid at any moment she might lash out at him like she had the door, but he had barely reached for her when she suddenly leapt into his arms. She clung to him tightly, sobbing into his shoulder even though she was probably an inch or two taller than him. He hugged her awkwardly, unsure of what to say or do, but she didn't seem to care. Finally, she collected herself, a sniffling she pulled away to search for kleenex and trying to ignore everything else, including the boy she had cried on for ten whole minutes. Harry let her go, and just as he took his seat the study door opened.

Snape stalked in, his beaked nose and black robes making him look more like a vulture than Harry remembered. The vulpine man glanced at them both and sneered.

"Of course. A starving artist and a drama queen. I always manage to get the fun cases."

"You!" Emily began, snapping out of her distraught state in order to point an imperial finger at him. "I demand you bring me home at once! My family-"

Snape's wand came into his hand with a fluid familiarity of a maestro with his baton. He made a single gesture and Emily was suddenly silent. She kept talking, angrily by the looks of it, but Harry could not hear a thing she said. Though as she seemed to realize something had been done to her, he could guess at the rush of foul things she was spitting out at him. Snape merely regarded her with his usual smirk.

"Ms. White, your family believes you are quite drowned and will thus not be looking for you. You should mark yourself lucky. You at the very least, have a family that will remember your existence with some, no doubt exaggerated, fondness. A benefit no other muggleborn here can claim."

This silenced Emily for real, and she marked him with angry, but silent regard. Harry frowned angrily at the man, both for his insensitivity to the girl and-

"I want my book back."

Snape regarded him with a vaguely curious look. "I am surprised, Mr. Potter, that you can even recall said item after a month at WYRA. So either the memory charms are starting to weaken, you have a one track mind, or... you haven't been sleeping like you should."

Harry squirmed a bit under his dark gaze. He was unsure how the memory of his book might have exposed the avoidance of his bed. He also wasn't sure how to take the confirmation of the fact that spells were being used against him and the other children.

"I want my book," he said by way of distraction.

"Of course you do," Snape said, moving away from both children so that he might set his bag on the study's desk. He gestured towards Emily, and she let out a loud, audible gasp. "Unfortunately for you, it has already been destroyed, as per WYRA regulations. You had best forget about it and any other misguided attachments you may have formed in your previous life. It is time for you to keep focused on your future, and not your past, or you may find yourself without either. The

wizarding world is not a kind, safe place despite the impression this... facility might have given you.

"Now come," Snape continued, setting a two vials of clear blue liquid and an instrument that reminded Harry of those toy recorders they handed out in elementary music class. "We all have more important matters to attend. Miss White, you first."

Emily glowered at the dark man, but her posture was more wary than aggressive. She looked quite prepared to stay exactly where she was, and Harry pondered if she wasn't a bit spoiled.

"Now Ms. White!" the man snarled, making both children jump.

Harry, seeing that Emily was now stuck out of genuine fear and not just stubbornness, took her by the hand and walked her over to the desk. Snape sneered, and both gave him twin glowers.

"Drink this." He handed Emily one of the blue vials.

"What is it?" she asked.

"Even if I explained it to you, you would be too ignorant to understand. Now, stop wasting my time and drink it."

"It could be poison."

Snape smirked at that. "Yes, that's true. Now drink."

Emily turned to Harry, who could only shrug. Reluctantly, she uncapped the vial and took a swig. And just as quickly, spit it back into the vial.

"UGH!!! That's awful!"

"Oh for the love of Saint Francis, why do I work with children? You have to SWALLOW it, Ms. White. Imperio!"

Harry bolted out of the way as Snape lifted his wand, shouting out his spell at the girl. Emily jerked once, stiffened, and then relaxed. Her

dark brown eyes turned glassy and when she drank the potion a second time she did not even grimace. Snape nodded in approval, apparently to himself, and glanced over at Harry.

“Pay attention, Mr. Potter, this is one of the most notorious spells of the wizarding world. The Imperius curse. A spell so powerful it can subvert the will of almost any it is cast upon. I say almost any, because the ironic truth of the matter is that if a witch or wizard is powerful enough to cast it, they are powerful enough to fight it off. Ms. White, clearly is not powerful enough. Ms. White, blow into this.”

Snape handed her the recorder-like instrument, and she did as she was instructed. The instrument gave off a dull whistle, and small white peg popped out of one of the key holes. Snape took the instrument, and smirked.

“As I thought, a low 4th level ranking. Barely more than a squib. Finite incantatem!”

Emily let out loud gagging cough, and Harry rushed back to her side to see if she had been hurt. She didn't seem any worse for ware, although she seemed desperate to get that awful taste out of her mouth.

“What happened?”

“As much fun as I am sure Mr. Potter is having witnessing the assortment of spells I have been casting on you, it is his turn, and I recommend you go sit down quietly over there.”

Emily gave him a nasty look, but then she was already looking green, and did as she was told without protest. Harry looked towards her and then back at Snape, who held out another blue vial. He briefly considered refusing, but the thought of being under the other man's control- literally and not just figuratively- prompted him towards obedience. He accepted the bottle, and plugging his nose he swallowed it quickly.

It tasted like spoiled milk and kool-aid. He started to gag immediately, but nothing would come up. After a few moments, he regained control

himself. Snape handed him the instrument and he blew into it. Once again a white peg appeared, this time in a key hole farther up. Snape regarded it critically for a moment, and then turned his dark glare towards Harry. The boy felt a surge of panic, wondering what he could have possibly done wrong and what sort of curse the greasy bastard was going to throw at him because of it.

“Mr. Potter, have you ingested any potions recently? Perhaps some given to you by the medi-wizard? Or picked something up, a curious bauble or unusual plant from one of the parties?”

“...I don't think so... Why?”

“Your magical reading is unusually high.”

“So... the Imperial curse won't work on me?”

“Don't flatter yourself. And it's the Imperius curse, not the Imperial curse. The Imperial curse involves a generational contraction of very unpleasant venereal disease.”

“...”

Snape let out a frustrated sigh and threw his instruments and empty vials back into his bag with enough force that something should have broken, but didn't. He reached in and pulled out two pieces of parchment. He handed one of the letters to Harry and then thrust the other in Emily's hand. He then stalked towards the door, his black robes billowing out like a malevolent shadow. Just before he stepped out of the room he turned sharply to Harry.

“Congratulations on your acceptance letter, Mr. Potter,” he snarled, “I look forward to seeing you at the start of term!”

The door slammed shut.

The room fell into a deep silence, a calm in the wake of Hurricane Snape. With a vaguely horrified expression, he turned to Emily for some sort of sanity. She gave him a tired, sickly grin.

“Better you than me.”

Chapter 6- The Land and Its Vassals

It turned out Harry had just over a day and a half to get ready. The letter Snape had given him had been an acceptance letter to Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, and summer classes he was required to take before the start of term began that very Monday. Miss Marilyn had been ecstatic when she heard the news, and had been brimming with tears she was so proud of him. It had been really embarrassing as far as Harry was concerned.

Emily had also gotten a letter, but it was for a place called Fellshire Magical Craft and Trade school. Harry worried about her. After Snape had left she had fallen into a depressed silence. He had tried to explain to her as much as he could about WYRA and how to avoid the memory spells, but he did not think she was listening or even cared. Once one of the nurses took her off to see the medi-wizard, Harry never saw her.

As much as Harry wanted to find her, and make her feel better, he was suddenly much too busy to do anything but look after himself. While Miss Marilyn pattered away about what a prestigious school Hogwarts was, how it was every parent's dream to have their child attend there, and how proud she was of 'Harold'; Harry was dragged from corridor to corridor and room to room, gathering up familiar and strange items as they went. His usual trunk was replaced with a larger, black standard school trunk and all the usual blue toned nic-nacs he had taken for granted like his toothbrush and notebook were all replaced with brand new black versions. His clothes were replaced too, with normal- as normal as wizarding clothes got- slacks, button up shirts, belt, vests, ties, and blessedly shoes and underwear all in an assortment of mix and match colors. Additionally, he was given a set of plain black student robes, and was told he would get a school badge once he was assigned to a house. Even his awkward, thick glasses were replaced with a set of elegant gold rims.

When Harry finally got a look at himself in the mirror he barely recognized himself. Gone was the poor waif in his baggy, thread-bare clothes and paint smeared hands, sulking in his room. Gone was the disoriented boy, clean and well kept like a pet dog, pacing the night away between the rows of peaceful children. Now he stood, dignified

if a little rough around the edges, preparing to move towards an unknown future in an unknown world. Suddenly, he could see the man he wanted to be, and would become. He was terrified, but couldn't even fathom returning to what he once was.

When he returned to his room for the night, all the other boys were fast asleep. He wandered up and down the room, memorizing each of their cherubic faces and offering silent prayers that they would leave WYRA and find memories worth keeping and futures with families as loving, if not more so, than their old ones.

He woke in a chair at the work table before the other boys, startled out of dreams of life in Cologne with his parents and wizards and Emily and Snape. Miss Marilyn stood at the door, eyeing him with an unreadable expression.

"Harold, did you sleep there all night?"

Silently, Harry berated himself. He had fooled everyone for almost a month, why was everyone finding him out now? "Er... sorry, I-I-I was just ...so excited and nervous. I couldn't bring myself to lay down, ya know?"

She nodded, but her expression was just as unreadable as before.

"We'll be leaving in a few minutes, Harold. Your first summer class at Hogwarts starts at eight-thirty sharp and you'll need to meet with Headmistress Lestrage and get your books before that. Go wash your face and brush your teeth, and try your best to tame that wild mop of yours."

Harry did as he was told, thankful that she had apparently dismissed her suspicions in favor of staying on schedule. When he left the bathroom, his bed was gone and only his new black trunk remained.

"Can't I say goodbye to the others?" he asked.

"It would be better if you just let them sleep. They're so used to goodbyes they don't mean much anymore," she said dismissively, leading him out into the hall.

Harry knew she was probably right, but only because of those blasted memory spells. He prayed that the school beds weren't similarly cursed or that he would soon learn the counter spell to override it. What was it Snape had used to end his silencing spell? Finite Incatem? Incantatemum?

She caste a few more spells on his trunk, making it as small and light as a deck of cards, which he then placed in his pocket. She caste another spell on the clothes he was wearing, smoothing out the wrinkles he had gained from sleeping in them, and then they were off. They passed through the corridors, offices, dining room, and into the lobby Harry hadn't seen since he had first arrived. It seemed smaller than he remembered, but he didn't get to ponder what that might mean as they continued at a fast clip out the large marble doors and to the black familiar car waiting for them outside.

They climbed into the back, and this time Harry kept his attention glued to the outside, determined to see if they would be magic away like he had from Surrey. In the early morning, it was less crowded with people, and those present were hurriedly on their way to work. However, they were much more unusual in the light of day than they had been in the cover of night. The old-fashion cut of their clothes did not inhibit their sense of color, and by all accounts some of their outfits were quite garish. Bright pinks, purples, lime greens, canary yellows, pin stripes and polka dots, stars and moons, hieroglyphs, and peacock feathers were as common as black, whites, beiges, blues, pocket watches, and flowers. Occasionally, the car would stop at a crosswalk, and a pedestrian or shopkeeper would smile and wave at him. They all seemed so kind and friendly that Harry wondered why Snape had been so cynical about it.

Maybe the man had just wanted to scare him.

Maybe he was just paranoid.

Maybe he was scared of nice people?

The car passed through an alley, and once it had ended, they found themselves in the middle of the Scottish countryside. The land was

rich green and partitioned into acreage by short stone walls. There were flocks of grazing sheep and cows here and there, and as far as Harry could tell they weren't in anyway magical. When he looked back in the direction they'd come from, it appeared they had merely passed under a small stone bridge.

"What just happened?"

"It's the same sort of magic we use to take you all to the adoption parties. It's rather complicated, but I'm sure you'll learn all about it in school. Speaking of which, Hogsmeade should be just over this next hill and it's only a short walk from there to Hogwarts."

Sure enough, not a minute later they passed over a hill and found themselves in a small wizarding village. The shops and business here were more quaint than those he had seen in the wizarding city, with mostly specialty shops, an inn, and a tavern. There were a few horse drawn carts and even some people walking around with broomsticks, but no other cars. They parked between The Hogshead and Honeydukes, and started the rest of the way on foot.

As they made their way towards an earthen road out of town, Harry could see what looked like an enormous castle off in the distance.

"Oh wow," he said, staring awestruck at the beautiful monolith. There was no way anything so large and beautiful could have ever been made by means other than magic.

"Wait until you see the inside," his guide said, off-handedly. Harry turned towards her, startled.

"Inside? You mean...that's Hogwarts?"

When he had thought of Hogwarts he had thought of all those fancy boarding schools from TV shows and movies. Wide, two-story buildings with tall windows, wrought iron gates, and expansive grounds. He had not thought of centuries old castles sitting at the top of a large hills, massive lakes, or thick primeval forests. If he'd had a horse, he would have felt very much like a knight on errand to the king of the land.

Or perhaps a squire tagging along.

It was half a mile walk to the castle, and the closer they got the more in awe Harry felt himself become. Not only was the castle rich in detailed statues and structure, but also in exceptionally good shape without a trace of wearing by weather or time. There was also additional structures coming off the castle, including a large green house, an impressive little stadium, a boat house, and stables. A quaint little cottage stood between the stables and the border of the thick forest, and he could just make out the shape of a gaunt looking man and an exceptionally short woman working around the garden surrounding it.

They were met near the castle gates by a witch with a stern look and a streak of silver in her black hair. Harry thought she looked very much like a headmistress at an all girl school should look like. Miss Marilyn, who had been going at a brisk pace, smiled as soon she saw the other woman and spoke rather breathlessly.

“Headmaster Lestrangle, I presume?”

The old witch gave her a wry smile.

“Unfortunately, no. Professor Lestrangle is very busy at the moment, as is the deputy headmaster. I am Professor McGonagall, Head of Gryffindor house and transfiguration professor here at Hogwarts. I will handle things from here. You have the paperwork?”

“Oh- oh, yes, just a moment.” Miss Marilyn checked her person, pockets, and hat before finally removing a full sized folder from her billowy sleeves. The transfiguration teacher accepted the file, and examined its contents. She suddenly grew pale. Looking up, she resolutely marched around Miss Marilyn and right up to Harry who had been looking out at the lake. He turned to look up at her, and felt concerned by her stricken countenance.

“The resemblance is uncanny,” she said, almost too softly for him to hear. Then she smiled at him, and Harry couldn’t think of last time he

had seen a smile so sad or so genuine. "Welcome to Hogwarts, Harry."

He blinked owlshly at her. No adult had called him Harry since his parent's death. He had always been 'Harold' or 'Mr. Potter' or bloody 'Heinrich'. Could she know him? That would be impossible, of course. She was a witch and wouldn't have known his muggle parents, and he didn't think she was the type to who would ever go visit little art studios in Cologne in any event. It was just coincidence and rather undue familiarity. Nothing more.

"Thank you, professor," he replied politely.

"You may go, Madam McLaury. I will handle things from here. You will have your paperwork by Wednesday evening at the latest."

Once again, Miss Marilyn looked flustered, apparently not used to being dismissed so readily. McGonagall took no notice, and with a gentle touch on Harry's shoulder, she began leading him down towards the little cottage. As they walked, the professor seemed to recollect herself and began to lecture him.

"Mr. Potter, as you probably overheard, I am Professor Minerva McGonagall, Head of Gryffindor and your soon-to-be transfiguration's teacher. After today, you probably won't see me until the start of term. Most of the Hogwarts staff is either away enjoying their vacation or busy re-warding the school or making lesson's plans in preparation for the start of term. As such, the school itself is off-limits to the public, that includes you, until September."

"But...where will I be living? And where are the summer classes held, then?"

"You will be living with Mr. and , our resident ground keepers. They are both very busy year around, so if they should ask you for some assistance keeping house or on the grounds, I expect you to mind them as you would your own parents, is that understood?"

"Yes, ma'am."

“Good. We will get you settled first, then I will take you to where your summer lessons will be held. Ah, here we are. Mr. Sleuw! Mrs. Sleuw!”

Up close the pair looked even more ridiculously disproportionate than before. Mr. Sleuw was a good six and a half feet, sun-darkened, and almost handsome except that his expression was slack and bland. His wife on the other hand barely reached his navel, had wild honey colored curls, and bounced about like a filly in spring. They were both tending the garden, but dropped what they were doing when McGonagall called them over.

“Oy, now. Is this the lad, then? A strapping young man, tisn’t he, although a wee bit thin. Don’t you think so Bert?” Mrs. Sleuw gushed, smiling from ear to ear at him. Harry blushed and made a thorough study of his shoes.

“Uhnennn...” Mr. Sleuw replied, expression as dead as his response.

“Yes, yes, Maggie. His name is Harold James Potter. You can all get better acquainted after his morning classes. Is his room ready?” McGonagall asked.

“Of course, just leave his things there and hurry along. We wouldn’t want him late for his first day of class, now would we?”

“No, we wouldn’t want that.”

McGonagall lead him to the little cottage, and opened the door for him. Harry walked in and his jaw dropped. From the outside the cottage didn’t look like could hold more than a small kitchen and an even smaller bedroom, but the inside was a different matter altogether. The interior was the size of a large farm house, with a full sized kitchen, sitting area, dining room, and a set of stairs leading up to a second floor that could not possible have been there. It was all very cozy and rustic, with hand made quilts over the sofa’s and chairs, rough wooden furniture, and dried flower decorations scattered about.

They went upstairs and entered one of four rooms there. It was clearly a guest bedroom, and only sparsely furnished. The brass

framed bed had a light blue and yellow quilt, the wardrobe matched although the paint was starting to peel, and blue table with an oil lamp stood in the corner. A quick peek out the window revealed the Mr. Sleuw pulling up a particularly tenacious weed and confirmed to Harry he had not been transported through one of those magic portals.

“Do you have your trunk, Mr. Potter?” asked McGonagall. Harry nodded and removed it from his pocket. He set it at the foot of the bed, and with a flick of her wand the trunk resized itself. “Gather up your notebook and pen, Mr. Potter. You can unpack the rest of it after class.”

He did as he was told, and they left the little cottage. Harry did a double take once they were outside, still baffled by the dimensional disparity. They headed back towards the castle, but instead of returning the way they came, she lead him around the back. The castle turned out to have been built partially in the lake, but a tunnel and bridge allowed them to pass without resorting to a boat. Once on the other side, Harry could see a large tent had been set up, similar to those he and his parents had dined in during German festivals or weddings. His guide stopped him just outside the tent.

She pulled two books, one dark red and the other black, literally out of thin air and handed them to him.

“These are your textbooks. Lessons will be held here, Monday through Saturday at 8:30 am til 11:30 am. You may return to the house for lunch or eat with your classmates in the classroom. Classes resume at 12:30 pm and continue until 2:30. You may remain in study period until 4:00pm, during which time your professor will be available for questions. After that you will be expected to return to the house immediately, and under no conditions are you to ever wander into forest without Mr. or Mrs. Sleuw. Again, stay out of the castle. You are not permitted to swim, fish, or boat in the lake without an adult present, but I’m sure if you help the Sleuws with their chores they might spare some time to take you. Do you have any questions?”

Harry gave her a weak smile. “Only a million and one.”

She smiled back at him, her expression softening considerably. "Don't worry Mr. Potter, that's what these summer lessons are for. Now, I have to go talk to the professor about your sudden admittance before class starts, so why don't you go in and find a seat? Class is going to start in five minutes."

He nodded to her, and taking a deep breath he entered the tent, prepared to start his first day as a wizard-in-training.

[illegible]

McGonagal left Harry Potter feeling shaken. It had been many years since her self control had been tested so strongly. But to see him... to see the ghost of two dear friends made singular and whole in one frail, nervous little boy...

She didn't know if she wanted to weep or sing.

The entire situation seemed so utterly right and so utterly wrong. Lily and James' son at Hogwarts? Perfectly natural. Lily and James' son right under Voldemort's nose? She'd sooner see Snape cuddle a werewolf. Of course, Snape cuddling a werewolf wouldn't necessarily have been a bad thing to see in her opinion...

But by Merlin, how had Harry ended up here?

The Gryffindor professor took a brief detour on her way to the Headmistress's office to look through the papers she had been given. Lestrage wouldn't miss them for few hours. She probably wouldn't have missed them for a few days.

She considered holding onto the file for awhile yet, but when Snape's name came up as Harry's sponsor she quickly thought better of it. If that man knew Harry was coming, had actually sent him, than he doubtlessly be double checking or even triple checking his own reports. Since Lestrage had one up-ed him into becoming Headmistress, he'd been obsessive about crossing every 't' and dotting every 'i'.

Lestrangle was exactly the opposite. Since her promotion, she'd been increasingly lackadaisical in her duties. Although her sense of competition with Snape had hardly dimmed. If the crazy hag didn't manage to off the other man or humiliate him completely in Voldemort's eyes, than she doubted she'd be calling Lestrangle 'Headmistress' for long. As much as she despised Snape at times, she despised Lestrangle even more and at all times.

Merlin's beard, she hoped she could keep her Gryffindors out of that mess. Both Slytherins were notorious for taking their frustrations out on her house, for which she had little defense. They were favored by the Dark Lord, and she, well, wasn't. Sure he had let her remain on as Gryffindor's head of house without persecution for supporting Dumbledore during the war, but that had been a political maneuvering in her favor. The students and parents were familiar with her, trusted her, and her no-nonsense demeanor lead most to respect her. She had been spared, not out of kindness, but to grease the wheels for the new regime.

And that's how it all made her feel.

Greasy.

But if she could protect the children, ones like Harry who had no one left to protect them, to fight for them, to face this degradation for them... She could live with being a little greasy.

With a quick glance around the hallway, she ducked into a little nook and began to read.

Chapter 7- The Prince's Lady

Once inside the school tent, Harry was once again introduced to the same wizarding trick that had been done on the Sleuw's cottage. Although the tent's yellow cloth walls remained, they were lined with a series of shuttered windows that remained open to allow in light and fresh air. The floor was not grass or dirt, but wood and tables were arranged three by five with a mobile chalk board and a teacher's desk stationed at the front. At the very back of the class were three large book shelves packed with books.

Most importantly, the room was filled with students. Like him, they all wore their black student robes, but that was where the similarities ended. Where Harry was little more than an orphan, these children were obviously from good families. They all had an air of health and confidence about them, and mingled with each other in a sort of familiarity Harry envied. It seemed impossible to him that they could be muggleborns, ever questioned the strange nature of their world, or walked the halls of WYRA headquarters. They huddled about in small groups, playing games with small magical objects or showing off some magical nic-nac they had gotten for their birthday or with their allowance money. It seemed so unfair that they should have gotten such a large head start on him. Bloody hell, why couldn't he have cursed Dudley when he was eight?

Realizing he was just standing at the door stupidly, and people were beginning to notice, he searched the room for a place to sit. He spotted a single empty seat at the front left corner nearest the board, right next to girl absorbed in an impressive looking tome.

"Is this seat taken?"

The girl, rather pretty with wavy auburn hair held back with a french braid, looked up at him as if startled. She looked around the room, and seeing it quite full, she turned back to him.

"Help yourself," she said dismissively. He took the empty seat, setting his notebook and pencil down. He caught her looking curiously at his supplies, and felt embarrassed when he noticed her much nicer leather bound notebook and calligraphy pen. "I haven't seen a

notebook like that since I left WYRA,” she said, regarding him with a bit more interest and then introduced herself. “I am Hermione Granger of the Malfoy family, by the way.”

“Harry Potter. Nice to meet you,” he said, shaking her hand. Again she looked at him curiously, and then much to his despair she closed her book in favor of studying him.

“Have you gotten your wand yet, Potter?” she asked.

“Hm? No, not yet. I don’t turn eleven until August 1st. Have you?”

“No. I turned eleven last April but my foster father won’t let me get one until just before term starts. I wouldn’t be allowed to use it yet anyway, of course, but I can’t wait. I’ve been reading up on so many spells, and it’s so hard not to be able to try them out. I’ve got an entire notebook just filled with spells I’m going to try once term starts. What about you? Do you have any spells you’d like to try?”

Harry shifted uncomfortably under her intense scrutiny. Now here was a witch who knew what she was doing. She already had lists of spells at her disposal. How could he even begin to think he was ready for this?

“Er... I dunno... I haven’t exactly seen a lot of magics really. I’d like to learn that trick where you can get from one place to another just by passing through a door or a clock or tunnel or something.”

For a moment, he thought she was going to start asking him more questions about himself, but then her expression became vaguely dreamy.

“I believe that’s called ‘warping’, and I don’t think they teach that until seventh year... although you could look it up on your own, you know? Hogwarts has one of the finest libraries in Britain. They’ve got books up there that date back to the Founders. I heard there are even plans to add an extra wing for the extremely rare books and then another wing for experimental spells. Can you imagine-”

Her little lecture was interrupted by the loud, mocking snores of a black-haired boy sitting next to them. The others sitting around him broke up into laughter, and the 'sleeping' boy opened a greenish-blue eye and grinned over at them.

"Bloody hell, Granger, can you talk about anything other than books?"

"I don't know, Houghton. Can you say anything and not have people laugh at you?"

Everyone chuckled and 'ooohhhed' at that, except for Harry who just wasn't sure enough of himself to join them. He was spared having to respond by the teacher walking through the door. He was a middle-aged man with barely any hair and coke-bottle glasses. He wore a magenta colored robe over his beige slacks and plaid sweater vest, and despite looking utterly ridiculous he held a dark scowl that rivaled Snape's. The only difference was this man didn't have a sense of humor, not even a sarcastic one.

"My name is Professor Timbal," he began without preamble, flicking his wand so that the chalk began writing his name. "I will be your professor until the start of term- September first. I will be preparing you for Entry Level Fundamentals or E.L.F. tests."

The board wrote the short hand of everything the professor said, and feeling nervous, Harry started writing it all down. It couldn't possibly hurt to remember the teacher's name or look up something later. He was vaguely surprised to see Hermione was taking notes as well.

"Should you fail your E.L.F. you will not be permitted to enter Hogwarts, and shall be held back a year or until you are capable of passing it, at which point you will assigned to a trade school of my choosing. So if you don't want to spend the rest of your life making candles and polishing broomsticks I recommend you pay attention."

Yes, Harry thought, that was definitely a good motivation to pay attention. Inside, Harry despaired his future. How could he possible keep up with the others in this class, when they all had at least three years more experience with the wizarding world than him?

“While some of you may think yourself already prepared for these tests, think again. As you are spontaneous wizards, you are held under a stigma of ignorance that must be dispelled before you ever enter the most prestigious academy of wizardry in Great Britain. Much of what you learn here is not even common knowledge for your pureblooded siblings or commonwealth adopted parents. If you wish not to make fools of yourself, and more importantly of your country, then I expect you to study. Alone, in groups, with your parents, tutors, and yes, even with me.”

Well... perhaps he was on more even ground than he thought? Glancing to his right he could see Thomas and his friends looking green. Glancing to his left he saw Hermione leaning forward in her chair, eagerly awaiting the man's every word. He wasn't sure whose reaction worried him more, but it all had him feeling vaguely ill.

“Now, for formality's sake, we will begin by introducing ourselves in the proper wizarding fashion. Who here can tell me the proper way to introduce yourself in a formal gathering?”

Hermione's hand shot up so fast, Harry flinched away on instinct to dodge it. Professor Timbal pointed at her and she stood.

“First one gives their birth name, followed by their family association, and then any formal positions starting from active government positions and leading down to honorary titles.”

“Correct. Now please introduce yourself to the class in the proper manner.”

Hermione turned sharply to face them all, her head held high and eyes defiant.

“Hermione Louise Granger of the Malfoy family.”

“Very good, now you young man,” the professor said, pointing to Harry. Harry blanched. What was he suppose to say? He knew his own name, but he didn't think he had a family association. What the hell was a family association? Reluctantly, he stood anyway and faced the class.

“Harold James Potter,” he said evenly, and then sat down quickly.

“Hey, he didn’t finish it!” protested a girl in the back.

“If Mr. Potter was somehow lacking in his answer, I assure you I would be the first to point it out!” Mr. Timbal snapped, and the chalk on the board flew across the board, creating an ear-splitting screech. The entire class cringed and fell into dead silence, and Harry thanked god that it was not his error that had brought it on. “Now, shall we continue. You, sir.”

The black haired boy stood up, looking almost as timid as Harry felt. “Clyde Houghton of the Stone family.” The next fifteen minutes went on similarly, until everyone had named themselves. Harry doodled a little diagram of their names, family associations, and basic description determined to memorize it later, perhaps even makes some sketches so he would remember them better. After that was through, Timbal handed out their work books. They were heavy, bound in brown leather with the title ‘The Ways of Wizards; Practical Exercises for Young Wizards’ by Antonia Majora’ printed in gold letters. This was followed by a syllabus and lecture on the general structure of the class.

Every morning would start out with a quiz of what was learned the day before, this would be followed by lecture, and practical demonstrations if necessary. They would break for lunch, and then return in groups of threes, fours, or fives to research the topic of the day and write a brief summary of their findings. The last part of the day would be dedicated to group discussion and off-topic questions. Fridays were for tests and reviews and Saturdays were for field trips- of which there would apparently be many.

Through it all Harry felt a mixture of trepidation and elation. He was becoming a wizard, a wizard for love of king and country! If only he had any idea what that meant!

Their first topic of study was wizarding government, which was of personal interest to Harry since he wanted to know more about WYRA and who exactly ran wizarding Britain. Unfortunately,

Professor Timbal had only just begun on the history of the Wizengamot when it was time to break for lunch. The Professor instructed everyone to push their chairs together to form a single long table. Harry and the rest had no sooner tucked in their chairs when their giant table was suddenly laden with food that appeared out of thin air.

“Why can’t they warn us before they do this sort of thing?” Harry lamented quietly to himself. Lunch with his class was similar and yet different than that at WYRA. Everyone was certainly lively and chatty as they filled their plates, but their topics of discussions were more real. The jokes were dirtier or more clever, the emotions varied between ecstatic and deeply depressed, and they spoke of their past, their families, and their future plans in ways the WYRA children had been unable to.

“I know most of the people here,” began Clyde who had sat across from him, loading up his plate with more sweets than nourishment. “Or at least recognize their family associations. But I don’t recognize you... and you didn’t have a family association, which is a bit odd, eh? So what’s your story?”

At this several of the other kids, including Hermione who pretended (rather badly) not to care, leaned closer for his answer. Harry shrugged, and tried to ignore them.

“I was never adopted. I don’t have a family association... That’s the family that adopts you right?”

“What do you mean you weren’t adopted? Everyone gets adopted eventually,” Clyde protested. “Did you get sick or something?”

“Clyde Houghton, really!” Hermione objected. “Could you be anymore rude?”

“Oh, like Ms. Know-it-all isn’t dying to know it all too!” remarked a blonde girl, smirking. Harry hoped they would start a fight and he would be forgotten, but he had no such luck. “So what’s the deal? Sickness, runaway, reject? Come on, we’ll find out sooner or later.”

Harry threw her a dark scowl. "Weißt du was, du Wichtigtuer. Ob ich adoptiert bin oder nicht, geht dich einen Scheißdreck an."

The blond looked at him with some alarm. "Did you just put a curse on me?"

Hermione broke out into a laugh, covering her mouth with her napkin as if it could possibly hide her amusement. "It's German, Natalie. I thought he had a little bit of an accent when he introduced himself."

"Oh, wow! A German wizard! How on earth did you get here?" asked Clyde.

"How can he be German with a name like Harry Potter? It's obviously an English name," griped Natalie.

"I'm an English citizen, but I was raised in Germany until I was eight," Harry said finally, realizing things could get out of hand if he didn't offer some answers. "I was only picked up by WYRA about a month ago."

"You're kidding? Your that green and they still had you sent to Hogwarts? How did you pull that off?"

Harry shrugged and tried to focus on his sandwich.

"Aw come on, fess up Potter. Inquiring minds want to know!"

"Will you all just leave him alone?" snapped Hermione. "Isn't it obvious he doesn't want to talk about it?" Reluctantly, the rest of class backed off and went to talking other things, all though they glanced at him often. Harry gave her a thankful smile.

"You know, I think sitting next to you was a stroke of good luck on my part?" he said. The smile Hermione gave him was bright and beautiful, and so much different from the cool curve of lips she had been wearing before. It was gone a moment later, replaced by a neutral expression and she nodded to him in acknowledgment and returned to her own meal.

Harry finished before the others and left the tent to get some fresh air, taking his new school books with him. He found a quiet spot beside the lake, only a short ways from the classroom. He spent the lunch hour skimming his books for answers to his thousand and one questions. Though the new books were much more detailed and informative than his first one, Harry still felt like he was missing a large piece of common knowledge that prevented him from truly understanding what the wizarding world was like. Frustrated, Harry returned to the class without any definitive answers.

The tables had all been moved back into place and people were already starting to form into clusters for their group assignment. Harry automatically went to stand by Hermione who once again had her nose buried in her book. Natalie, who had been at the far end of the class to begin with, moved all the way to the front to join them. The same sly smile was still on her face, and Harry couldn't help but suspect she was up to no good.

"Mind if I join you?" she asked. Hermione stiffened beside him, but did not look up from her book. Harry, having no real reason to object, merely shrugged.

"Get into six groups of four and two groups of three!" Professor Timbal ordered. It took less than a minute as most groups were already formed, and Harry, Hermione, and Natalie remained where they were. "Most of you come from families with members in the Wizengamot. I want you all to look up one person of your family in the Wizengamot, find their term of office, any laws or bills they proposed, and cite the source of your information. If you or one of your group members doesn't have an associated family member in the Wizengamot, you will look up a law that was passed by the Wizengamot but overturned by You-Know-Who. You have an hour and a half. Begin."

"I'll get the books," Hermione said, jumping to her feet and heading for the book case.

"I'll help." Harry got up to follow, but was stopped when Natalie took his elbow.

"Why don't you let her be? Let her be alone with her books. That's all she cares about anyway."

Harry removed her hand from his arm and frowned at her. "Don't be spiteful."

Natalie's eyes grew wide, and Harry stalked away from her to help Hermione who already struggling with two large tomes. He took the books from her so she could continue her search.

"I'm surprised you didn't stay to talk with Natalie," Hermione remarked. "She's the prettiest girl in class, you know." Harry shrugged.

"Her personality is kind of ugly though," he said, recalling her callous disregard for other's feelings, his and Hermione's both. Hermione smiled a bit at him.

"And I'm so much better?"

"You're nice enough, I think. It's not like you're ugly either. I mean, not that I would care if you were! But you're not, so you shouldn't think that way about yourself! Not that you were, but you know- Er...Nevermind!"

She smiled and rolled her eyes at him. Harry shifted from foot to foot, growing tired for holding the heavy books.

"So who was he talking about when he said 'You-Know-Who'? Because, frankly, I don't know who."

"Oh! Him. I don't suppose they would have mentioned him at WYRA, would they? Well, he's..." Hermione took a look around the class and once determining no one was standing too close to them, she leaned over to talk softly in his ear. "He's the dictator of Wizarding Britain. His name is Voldemort, but everyone calls him 'You-Know-Who'."

"If everyone calls him 'You-Know-Who', then how does anyone know his name?"

"When ever he passes a new law or a issues a personal statements, he always signs with his name and the government documents all use his name. My foster father works in the Court directly under him, so I've seen him a couple times. Everyone calls him Lord Voldemort when they address him personally."

"Wow, so your family knows the ruler of the wizarding world? What's he like?"

Hermione paused in her collection of books, her expression thoughtful.

"He's... amazing, really. Scary, terrifying... but fascinating. You know he's almost sixty and doesn't look a day over twenty-five? Handsome enough, medium height, black hair. His eyes are red, bright red and I've heard they glow when he's angry. I've also heard you can see fangs when he smiles, but I'm not sure I believe it. And he's a parselmouth, so he always seems to be in the company of snakes. His familiar is a giant cobra named Nagini."

Harry shivered at the description she gave, barley able to believe that such a person could possibly exist. He sounded more like the devil in human form than any of the wizards he had seen before.

"What's a parselmouth?" he asked, despite himself.

"It means he can talk to snakes and understand them. It's a really rare talent and only people said to be descended from Salazar Slytherin, the first parselmouth, are said to be able to do it. He's the only person who is capable of it in the world at the moment."

They made their way back to their table, where Natalie was lounging and looking rather peeved. "Did you two have fun? You looked like you were getting awfully cozy with each other."

"We were having a blast. You really should have joined us," Hermione quipped, handing her particularly heavy book. Grimacing under the weight of the book, Natalie, nevertheless opened it and began searching for her family name. Harry accepted a much newer book on wizarding law and began picking through it. For almost an

hour they worked together, exchanging books occasionally and pointing out pieces of information relevant to the others. By the time Professor Timbal started collect their papers, Natalie had found a great uncle Thadeus Phelps, who had proposed legalizing blood prostitution for vampires. Hermione had found six Malfoys, all with particularly radical legislative ideas regarding muggles and muggleborns.

Harry had found out that wizards had mingled with muggles before Voldemort's regime, but that had been one of the first things the wizard had outlawed when he came to power a mere ten years ago. It was a piece of information he felt was the key to everything he had seen and experienced up until that moment. It explained why he had been kidnaped, why muggleborns weren't allowed to stay were their families, and why Snape had warned him about the wizarding world being a dangerous place.

Hermione finished her part of the essay within only a few minutes, but kept herself busy by leafing through her book.

"Potter."

Harry turned to Hermione, who had whispered very softly and was pretending she hadn't. She pulled the tome she had been looking through discretely in her lap, glanced at Natalie to make sure she hadn't noticed, and pointed to a section of her book. Scanning the small writing, something about acknowledging the territorial rights of centaurs, he couldn't figure out what she was expecting him to see when his own name appeared suddenly before him. He glanced around, making sure no one else was watching them, and pulled the book into his lap to get a better look.

After the death of his father-in-law, Andreas Maximilian Hartwell, Harold Jeremy Potter, inherited the additional votes necessary to overturn the new clause to the Sentient Magical Creature's Rights and Responsibilities doctrine. He went on to oppose three other similar amendments, maintaining the rights of woodland elves, centaurs, and other sentient creatures to refuse leasing or selling their land to wizarding folk or from paying property taxes to wizarding government. His family carried on his legacy three more generations

until the rise of Grindlewald made it necessary for the Ministry of Magic to find additional sources of taxes to pay for increased national defense. Whether the action of the former Ministry of Magic was entirely legal is still debated, but has yet to be overturned...

Harry blinked. He reread the paragraph. He read before the paragraph. He read after it. The name didn't appear a second time, but it didn't disappear either.

There was a Potter on the Wizengamot, or at least had been. A Potter with the same first name as his. Could it possibly be coincidence?

He turned to Hermione, hoping for some sort of explanation, hoping she wouldn't think him crazy for thinking what he was. She leapt far ahead of him from crazy into sheer genius.

"You know, Harry. A lot of wizarding families fled to Europe during the war."

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1. You know, you are a snob? My adoption or lack of adoption is none of your damn business.

Author's note: Yes, Harry finally learns his parents were wizards, maybe, sort of, assumes so! He'll learn more as he goes along. And so will you all. Sit back and enjoy.

Chapter 8: Lords, Ladies, and Lessons

Harry's first summer as a wizard was an introduction in how magic could make even the mundane exciting. Living with the Sleuw's was nothing like living with the Dursley's. For one, they were actually pretty nice. For another, they were odd. Mr. Sleuw, who had not formed a single word in the entire time Harry was in his company, turned out to be something of a gentle, albeit dim, giant. He took all his instructions from Mrs. Sleuw, who while bubbly and energetic, wasn't that bright either. She was always forgetting what they needed to do that day, or where she left their wands, or if it was the right time of year to start planting a particular plant. Yet somehow they filled their days with endless toil, and dragged Harry into it whenever they could.

He didn't mind so much. The work was hard and often dirty, but unlike with the Dursley's, he always had proper tools, food, rest, and instruction to get the task done. And, like McGonagall had said, when he worked hard enough he spared up enough of their time that they would take him down to the lake or into Hogsmeade. He could not say whether or not they felt any fondness for him, but they certainly gave him a level of respect and consideration, which he was grateful for.

Professor Timbal, while a very strict man, was also very knowledgeable and never begrudged a question as long as you waited to be called on. Woe to those who spoke out of term, however. Detentions were spent clapping chalk dust out of erasers for an entire hour

Classes were not as bad as he thought they would be either. There was certainly a lot of material covered and there always seemed to be more they didn't have time to get into, but with Hermione there to patiently fill in the details to matters that confused him, he felt on par with most of the class and scored fairly well on all his quizzes. He paired with Hermione on most days, and while the vast sum of her knowledge and long convoluted lectures were a bit irritating occasionally, she was a good study partner and generally patient with him. Natalie, who tended to group with them once or twice a week was a bit less reliable. Some days she was perfectly sweet tempered

and helpful, and other days she was a spoiled brat. On all days she seemed intent on distracting Harry from working with Hermione. Dean Thomas, who grouped with them when a subject particularly baffled him (and thus required Hermione's expertise), would tease Harry for being a 'player'. Harry was more convinced that Hermione simply liked having someone actually listen to her lectures and Natalie just wanted to use him to annoy Hermione.

That they both happened to be the prettiest girls in the class was entirely beside the point.

Perhaps the hardest lesson Harry had to learn was one Hermione could not help him with. Apparently, it was still standard practice to use a quill and ink rather than a pen or pencil. Harry struggled time and again to keep from dripping ink all over the place and smudging his fingers. He wasn't the only one either. Everyone except for Hermione usually had charmed quills that didn't drip and to suddenly be without said charms was proving a bit of a frustration. Gradually, Harry got better at it, but was dismayed how much his handwriting suffered.

As the class became more comfortable together, lunch time grew shorter and play time grew longer. Harry and the other boys enjoyed short games of Ground Quidditch, which was similar to regular Quidditch except there were no brooms, the balls always traveled four feet above the ground, and the bludgers were a lot softer. Harry had a knack for the Seeker position and was often the first picked for a team. When it rained they would break out checkerboards and card sets, some of them already magicked to perform little tricks. Hermione would just roll her eyes at their antics and return to her book, while the other girls stood off to the side cheering them on or gossiping with each other.

By far the best part of his lessons were the field trips on Saturdays. They seemed to go everywhere, from court houses and museums, to workshops and sporting events, and even to a wildlife reserve for endangered magical creatures. Many of these places the others had already been too, but to Harry it was all a wonderfully new and peculiar. It earned him a fair bit of teasing, but he didn't care.

Aside from that first day, there were no further discoveries regarding any wizards or witches named Potter, but Hermione pointed out that there really weren't that many books in their psuedo-library and once term started they could make more definitive search. Harry was torn between longing and dread at the thought that he had wizards in his family. What if his father had been a squib and he'd been cast out of the family? If there were still a wizarding family of Potters would they one day learn of him and try and claim him as their own? What they be like? Like his father? Brave, playful, a bit immature at times? Would they be like the Dursleys? Arrogant, selfish, and prejudice? Had they aligned with Voldemort or killed during the war?

Sometimes he would stay up at night thinking about, a network of different paths leading down paths to different futures, too many to calculate. And sometimes it all seemed so trivial. Harry Potter was Harry Potter, and he was a wizard. The past couldn't change it, and the present didn't want to. .

He was enjoying himself so much that when August 1st arrived, he had completely overlooked the fact that he was now eleven. Hermione, however, proved once again she had a mind like a steel trap and presented him a small, neatly wrapped package during lunch.

"Happy Birthday, Harry," she said, placing her gift beside his sandwich.

Harry blinked at her owlishly. "I completely forgot. How could I have forgotten that? Wait, how on earth did you know today was my birthday?"

"You told me the first day we met, remember? When I asked if you had your wand yet you said you didn't because you wouldn't be eleven until the first of August."

"Yikes...no, I don't remember it all. I think the discussion about Voldemort kinda shoved the rest of it aside."

There was a loud clanking of dropped silverware and several students turned dark glares at him. "Potter! Don't say his name so nonchalantly!" snapped one of Thomas' friends.

Harry just shrugged and muttered a sorry, then turned back to Hermione.

“You didn’t have to get me anything, Hermione. I mean, we haven’t known each other that long and all.”

“If I had known you thirty years I would not have had to get you anything either. Just open it.”

Timidly, he followed her instruction. It turned out to be a gold plated pocket watch with the Hogwarts emblem on the exterior. He opened it, and inside was engraved ‘To Harry, Hope this keeps you on time and on track. Hermione.’

“Hermione, this is much too nice for me to accept!”

She merely waved off his concerns. “Don’t concern yourself with that. It’s just a transfigured stopwatch. My adoptive mother, Narcissa, helped me make it. It’s charmed to grow warm if you start running late for something.”

He smiled at her shyly, still rather awed by the gift. He hadn’t been expecting anything, and despite her dismissive attitude it was a beautiful gift. As he stared at it a sudden memory came to him. Years ago when he was only five or six, he had been sitting in the living room as his parents got ready to go out for the evening. He remembered his father standing in the hall, dressed in a tux and holding a gold pocket watch as he told his mother to hurry up. She had come rushing down the stairs in her high heels and red dress, her hair up in cascading red curls. His father had smiled at her wryly, showing her the time, and she had grabbed his arm and rushed him towards the door, kissing Harry goodbye as she went.

Feeling his eyes suddenly damp, he quickly got up and left the table, heading for the privacy outside. He was three steps out the door before Hermione caught up with.

“Harry, what is it? Did I do something wrong?”

"What? No! No, of course not." Harry turned away from her a moment to dry his eyes and try to calm himself. He felt a fool for getting all weepy over something that wasn't even sad. Not really.

"Harry, please talk to me. I promise I won't tell anyone else, but please tell me what's upset you?" she pleaded.

"It's not you. Really, it's silly. It's just... while I was looking at the watch, I suddenly remembered my father had a watch like this. I mean, not like this watch, but you know, a gold pocket watch," he began, and inexplicably his gaze found its way to bearer of his memories, the gold Hogwarts seal gleaming in the sunlight. "I remembered how he used to carry it around, and my mom never wore a watch so she was always asking him for the time or pulling it out of his pocket herself. It's merely old memories. They just caught me off guard is all."

When he looked up, Hermione was looking at him with such a sad look.

"I must be nice," she said, "... to remember something like that about your parents."

"Don't you remember your parents?" As soon as he asked it, he regretted it. He knew the answer already. He knew she could not possibly remember them the way he remembered his. No child of WYRA could possibly have left with the memory of their muggle life intact.

"I remember one or two things. I remember they were both dentists. I remember that my room was blue and there were white lace curtains on my window. But I can't remember what my life was like back then anymore. I don't know if I have my mother's or my father's eyes, or how they sounded when they laughed, or if I had any siblings or not. I don't remember much of anything. I was five when they took me away, but you'd think I would remember something more than curtains."

They stood there silently, sharing something unspoken, an understanding Harry was afraid no one would ever share with him

again. She was like him. She might not have remembered her parents or her life from before, but she felt the loss. WYRA and memory spells and time hadn't stolen that primeval instinct that desired the connection of kin. They may have both hid their grief from the world, but it was clear as day to each other in this moment.

It was a startling realization, that she was now his very best friend.

She was his only real friend.

And he had to give her gift as well, even if it hurt her to accept it.

"It's not your fault," he said, "WYRA...they put spells on our beds to make us forget. They took our lives from us, Hermione. In more ways than one."

Her eyes widen, suddenly shiny and wet.

"How do you know-"

"Snape. He mentioned it the day before I was brought here, but I suspected it before then. There was a little boy who came in about a week after I arrived. He kicked up such a fuss all day, but when he woke up the next morning he was... different. Like he had never lived another life or had family before. I never slept in my bed after that. I've probably lost some memories because of the week I did, but I like to think they're ones that involved the Dursley's."

"The Dursley's?"

"My relatives. They looked after me...er, let me live with them... after my parents died."

Hermione let out a little gasp.

"I'm sorry, Harry, I didn't know. That's why you came back from Germany, isn't it?"

Harry shrugged it off. Hermione paced back and forth, a habit she often adopted when puzzling through unexpected information.

"I wondered sometimes," she said, "If something hadn't been done to me... but then I just dismissed it as me making excuses for myself. I can't believe it. That they would... It's awful. It's immoral."

"It's the world Voldemort made for us," Harry said bitterly.

"Harry! Be careful what you say!"

"I'm tired of being careful of what I bloody say!"

"For both our sakes, be careful what you say!"

That shut him up fast, and he gave her a pained, apologetic look. Harry looked off towards the lake and wondered where his treasonous thought had come from. Certainly, he couldn't remember entertaining it before, at least not with any feeling behind it. Yet now that he said it, it rang with a certain truth. How badly had Voldemort damaged wizarding society? How many families had it destroyed and lives it ended? Finally, Hermione, who had been pacing again turned back to him.

"We should go back. Natalie has probably started all sorts of gossip already."

Harry nodded and quietly followed her back. There was some initial teasing when they entered the tent, but it quickly died off under their somber demeanor. The rest of the day was spent in quiet retrospect. Hermione lost in thoughts of the parents she couldn't remember, and Harry pondering how it could possibly be made right again.

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Hermione returned home an hour earlier than usual. Normally, she would stay at the school until four, studying or talking with Harry or both. Today, however, neither had felt like company or studying the trade ban with Europe and the U.S. So now she found herself portkeyed to the back of the Malfoy estate just in time to see her adoptive brother Draco fall off his broom.

“Bloody sonofa-”

“Language, brother-dear,” she chided from across the lawn. Draco looked up, clearly surprised to see her there, and then grinned. He brushed himself off and made his way over to her.

“Well isn’t this a surprise,” he said, hugging her by way of greeting. She returned the affection, a bit longer and harder than usual. He pulled back and studied her more closely. “Are you alright? Did that boyfriend of yours do something mean to you? If he did, I swear I’ll curse him til Christmas when I see him next.”

She smiled and rolled her eyes over his protectiveness.

“Draco, you know as well as I do, that Harry Potter is not my boyfriend and I am not interested in making him my boyfriend. And no, he didn’t do anything mean.”

“Then what’s the matter? He didn’t like your gift?”

“No, he loved the gift,” she assured him, then let out a sigh. “It just brought up some unexpected issues.”

Draco quirked an eyebrow at her. “You’re eleven, Hermione. How many issues could you have?”

“Apparently, one pretty big one.”

“Hey,” he said, drawing her out of her depressing cycle of thoughts. “Whose your brother?”

She smiled a bit. “Draco Narcissus Malfoy.”

“And whose the most clever, most wicked, and most influential family in all of Britain?”

“The Malfoy family,” she said, dutifully.

“So who could possibly hurt the favorite little sister of the heir of the Malfoy family?”

“Absolutely no one,” they said together in unison.

“See now,” Draco said, “Don’t you feel better?”

Despite the fact that his little proclamation resolved absolutely nothing, she did feel better. Her parents and any siblings she may have had in her muggle life were lost to her, and she to them. But she had Draco. Her arrogant, devious, charming, over-protective brother. He had never made her feel like anything less than a magical princess.

“Yes, I do feel better,” she said, “In fact, I feel so much better I want to go swimming.”

“Now you’re talking.” Draco grinned at her victoriously, reaffirmed in his own perceived perfection as an older (by two months) brother. He took her hand, as he always had since she had first arrived on the Malfoy estates and been too timid to go anywhere outside of her room alone, and led her home.

Chapter 9: The First Quest

"I think I did alright, but there was that one question about the Founders. Perhaps I should have written a little more on Slytherin, rather than Gryffindor. I mean there wasn't a lot of space left, but I could have fit in a sentence or two about his-

"Hermione, give it a rest!" lamented Clyde. "You did fine. I'd bet my wand you did the best in the class. So just stop!"

Harry nodded in agreement. While he had been stressing the last two weeks as much as she had been, once it was all over he was feeling much more confident. The questions had been fairly basic, considering all the research and reading they had done, and he wasn't absolutely dreading his future.

"Sorry," she said, "It's just-

"Important that we get into Hogwarts-" Clyde continued.

"So that we can prove we are real wizards-" Natalie muttered.

"Despite our muggle heritage," finished Harry. "We know Hermione."

"Sorry."

They were spared further worrying by Professor Timbal stalking into the classroom, tossing down envelopes with their names on them.

"These are your test scores. You will open them at home. For those of you who may have failed, I don't want to witness the utter defeat of your self-worth. It's usually a big, loud mess and the rest of us still have more important things to do," he stated coldly. Reluctantly, they all set their letters aside, although they drew many longing and dreading stares.

It was Friday and normally they would have a test, but since they had already taken the most important test of the summer and the start of term was next week, their lesson plan took another route. Instead, Mr. Timbal went ahead and outlined the final field trip on Saturday.

“You will arrive here at the usual time, with your permissions slips in hand as usual. You should have on you at least forty galleons to purchase your wand and other school supplies, but I recommend ten or twenty more just in case.”

The class broke out into excited murmurings, but their professors dark look quickly silenced them all.

“You will be divided into five groups, and escorted by a Hogwarts professor via floo to each shop. I recommend being on your best behavior, as this will give your future teachers their first impression of you. And no wandering off! These are Hogwarts professors, so they can and will assign you real detentions even before term starts if you make yourself a nuisance. Afterwards, you will all return here. You may do what ever you want after that. Any questions?”

Harry reluctantly raised his hand, but didn’t need to speak a word before Professor Timbal pre-empted him.

“You are a ward of the school, Mr. Potter. Unless the headmistress, and later your head of house, forbids it, you automatically have permission to attend school related programs. You are also given a generous line of credit through the school to pay for your supplies and personal affects, but you will be expected to pay it off within ten years after you graduate. Does that answer your question?”

“Yes, sir. Thank you, sir.”

“Any other questions? Then we are done here.”

With that, Professor Timbal disappeared through the door. All of the students turned to one another, rather perplexed. No one got a chance to speak the questions they were all thinking when all of sudden their classroom disappeared. Everyone was suddenly on the dusty ground, staring up at the clear summer sky. Groaning, they all climbed to their feet.

“Rude, much?” griped Natalie, brushing herself off.

Everyone grumbled their agreement, even Hermione who was notorious for being over generous with teachers. Of course, her inkwell had landed all over her. As everyone began to recollect themselves, many of them started to take notice of their letters, scattered about. Several of them started opening their letters right away, Harry included.

"You know you're not suppose to open that yet, don't you Harry?" Hermion said.

"No, he said we weren't to open them until we got home. Technically, the school is my home so..." Grinning he opened his envelope and pulled three pieces of paper out. The first piece was his E.L.F. score. "Huh, I got an excellent. Oh wait, there's a note at the bottom."

Harry read it to himself and let out a rueful laugh, handing it off to Hermione who read it and gave him an equally rueful expression. "You would have gotten an 'Outstanding' if your handwriting wasn't so atrocious. Keep practicing'? Harry."

"It's not my fault I don't have enough practice with a quill," Harry pointed out. "Open yours. I want to see if they gave you a little note."

Despite her earlier protests, Hermione opened hers eagerly. She scanned it smiling at first, then frowning as she reached the bottom of the page. Harry leaned over to read the note at the bottom of hers.

"You are a wealth of information, and I am certain you will do well at Hogwarts. However, please learn to write more concisely.' Yeah, that sounds about right."

She smacked him on the shoulder. "I was just being thorough!"

"Hermione, given unlimited paper space and time, you would turn a test question into a textbook," Natalie said, coming up to stand beside them.

"How did you do?" Harry asked. She smiled slyly at them.

"Outstanding, of course."

“Any comments?”

“It’s Salazar Slytherin, not Salazar Slyverian and Rowena Ravenclaw, not Rowanda Ravenclaw. Please learn to spell people’s names properly.’ Oops!” Harry laughed at that, and Hermione scowled, probably on the sheer principle of the thing. “What about you, Clyde? Destined for candle wax and broom straw?”

“I passed!” Clyde said, grinning broadly, showing off his ‘Average’.
“Barely, but I passed.”

“Clyde!” All three said in unison.

The other boy just grinned more broadly. “I’ll see you all tomorrow! I’m going to go celebrate!”

Gradually, they all departed, Harry making plans with the two girls to have a butterbeer at Hogsmeade after their shopping trip the next day.

Saturday morning arrived gloomy and overcast, but it did little to thwart Harry or his friend’s good moods. Everyone arrived early to their usual meeting place, now completely devoid of their classroom tent. They didn’t wear their students robes either. In fact, many of them were dressed particularly nice that day.

Natalie was looking a bit like a French princess in her white velvet dress and hair tied up in blue ribbons. Hermione, while more practically dressed in a lavender cotton sun dress, was looking equally elegant with her hair tied up in elaborate braids and held in place by an ornate silver and opal hair pin and matching bracelet. Harry and Clyde (both similarly dressed in nice slacks, button-up shirts, and vests) could only stand there and gape at how pretty all their female classmates had made themselves for some simple shopping.

“Egad, I forgot they were girls,” Clyde said, watching a girl dressed in a pink silk blouse black skirt pass by him with a wink and a smile.

“The robes kinda do that,” Harry said.

“Boys!” Hermione said, rolling her eyes. Natalie merely smirked and threw them both a kiss.

“Hey! The teachers are coming!”

They all turned towards the castle to see a group of five wizards and witches making their way towards them. Harry scowled as he recognized the distinct profile of Professor Snape, who lead the procession along with Professor McGonagal. The other professors he didn't recognize, and he was certain he would have remembered them if he had. One of them was a middle-aged gentleman in a pointed cap, who had so much trouble keeping his eyes open that Harry wasn't certain how he hadn't fallen on his face. Another was a very short elderly man with pointed ears, and Harry couldn't help but wonder if he wasn't a dwarf. The third was a woman so dark, she had an almost purplish hue, and walked with the grace of a stalking panther with the golden eyes to match. When the teachers had reached the cluster of students, McGonagal stepped forward to address them.

“I am Professor McGonagal, this is Professor Snape, Professor Flitwick, Professor Quirrel, and Professor Toure,” she said, pointing to each professor as she introduced them. “We will be escorting you all on this venture. We expect you all to behave yourselves like mature ladies and gentlemen, and any behavior that reflects badly on the school will be disciplined most harshly.”

There was a great deal of discomfort at her stern warning. She did not look like a woman to be crossed, nor did Snape or Toure. Harry crossed his fingers and hoped he got placed with either Quirrel or Flitwick, or at the very least not Snape.

“There are some simple rules we expect you to adhere to. First and foremost, do not wander out of sight of your escort. If you wish to go to a particular store or a back room, you must first ask their permission. There will be absolutely no fighting, stealing, or mischief. You will be held responsible for your own money, so be sure to keep it in a safe place on your person at all times and make sure you buy all your supplies before you spend it all on non-essential items.

Additionally, you are not permitted to purchase any pets. While Hogwarts does permit owls, rats, toads, non-venomous snakes, and cats, your parents will be the ultimate authority on whether or not you may have one. Now, as each professor calls your name, please gather into a line in front of them and then we can be on our way."

With that, she pulled out a list from her pocket and began to read off names. Hermione went to stand with her, along with Clyde. Each teacher began calling on their intended wards, and as each teacher finished, Harry was filled with increasing dread as he stood, the last of four other students before the only teacher who hadn't bothered calling anyone. Snape sneered down at them, sparing the largest portion of his vitriol for Harry.

"If you know what's good for you, you will not make a sound through the entirety of this excursion. Is that clear?"

The other four nodded quickly, and Harry just glowered at him. Snape seemed to consider him a moment, debating if he should cause trouble for Harry's lack of response or not. He apparently decided against it, and turning about he stalked after the other departing professors towards Hogsmeade. From Hogsmead they took the floo (the very least favorite form of travel Harry had encountered by far) in the fire place of The Three Broomsticks, and exited in a bustling floo station. Without a word, Snape exited the station, and he and his group scrambled after him to keep up.

They first stopped at a potions supply store called Potions and Powders, where they were given ten minutes to gather their cauldrons, scales, dragon-hide gloves, crystal vials, and some basic potions ingredients. Harry just barely managed to collect his intended items. He was perpetually distracted by the many strange objects. Jars of preserved animal specimens, vials of strangely colored sands or dirt, a particularly vicious set of instruments.

They were then hurried to Banikey's Books. Again they were given a mere ten minutes to gather their supplies. Luckily, Harry ran into Hermione there, who merely handed him all of her supplies.

“At this rate, we’ll be done in less than an hour,” Harry said. “I was looking forward to looking around.”

“Yes, he is being a bit inconsiderate,” Hermione agreed. “He’s usually not this bad, but he never did like large crowds.”

“What?”

Hermione gave him a smirk. “Didn’t I tell you Professor Snape is my brother’s and my Godfather?”

“What?!”

“Potter! You have two minutes to purchase your supplies or your walking back to Hogwarts!”

Harry turned a disbelieving look towards the older man and then an even more disbelieving look towards Hermione. His thoughts whirling with the potential implications and sheer ludicrousness of the situation, he was barely aware when Hermione dragged him over to the register to purchase his items, and only came back to himself when Snape grabbed him by the collar and dragged him out the door.

“Get your hands off me!” Harry snarled, jerking out of the man’s hold, barely keeping his balance or hold on his supplies.

“Watch your tone, Potter,” Snape snarled right back. “I’ll tolerate none of your juvenile sass, is that understood?”

“Perfectly, Professor.” Although his tone was far from commiserating, the man let it go once again in favor of stalking off. With the man’s back turned, Harry rolled his eyes and jogged after him with the rest of his troupe. They passed several shops along the way, and Harry casted longing glances at the strange items proudly displayed through the storefront windows. But Snape did not stop or slow his pace, and soon they were standing before a rather shabby and narrow little shop. The sign read ‘Ollivander’s: Maker of Fine Wands since 382 B.C.’.

Harry felt a sudden, giddy rush. This was it. This was where he would obtain the defining tool of all wizards and the means to find that innate power buried somewhere inside himself.

Snape, amazingly, seemed to share his opinion of the importance of the event and regarded the little shop with a certain degree of reverence. He turned to his wards, glaring at them darkly.

“Pay attention,” he commanded, “This will be one of the most significant moments of your lives. A moment when you pass from being latent magical entities into actively magical ones. Your wand will become an extension of yourself, of your magic, and no other wand will work as well your first. With that thought in mind, Mr. Ollivander, the man who makes all this possible, will be given the utmost respect. Any delinquent or rude behavior and you will be sent home without a wand, and explain to your parents why that is so.”

Snape looked directly towards Harry. “And don’t think that gives you free reign to behave however you like, Mr. Potter. As a ward of the school you will answer directly to me.”

Harry clenched his fists, but said nothing, meeting that oppressive stare straight on.

“You will enter the shop one at a time, in order to prevent any accidents. Once you have obtained your wand, there will be absolutely NO careless wand waving. Your wand will come with a case, and you will not remove it until September first. Am I absolutely clear?”

“Yes, professor,” Harry sighed, and the rest quickly followed.

“Ms. Westfield, you’re first!”

With that Snape and the tow-headed girl disappeared into the shop. Harry and the others fidgeted for a while, before forming into a little cluster to talk amongst themselves. Harry pulled out his pocket watch frequently. Every time he did, he would be suddenly reminded that Snape was Hermione’s godfather. Ugh.

About fifteen minutes after Westfield nervously entered the shop, she came out practically glowing. She gripped her wand case tightly to her chest and was grinning like a lunatic.

“10 inches white oak, and griffin feather,” she said proudly. “It’s your turn Jacob.”

And so it went, and much to Harry’s frustration and very little to his surprise, he was the last to be called on. It was nerve racking. Although they would only be gone for ten to fifteen minutes each, he felt like he was on some invisible timer. As if Snape would leave after exactly one hour, regardless of whether Harry had his wand or not.

He tried to occupy himself by looking through his textbooks, looking for spells he wanted to learn, but it only reminded him that he needed his wand to cast any of them. He finally settled on his potions book, which very rarely required a wand. He read the first chapter on the first fundamental principles of potion making for the next hour, still checking his watch often, when the last of the other students exited the shop.

“Your turn,” they said, going over to gossip with the others. Eagerly, Harry left his supplies with the others and entered the shop. It was gloomy inside as it was out, with an air of antiquity that rivaled all else he had seen before. The walls were lined with open cubby holes, each containing long narrow boxes. There was a single wing-backed chair, inhabited by Snape who regarded him coolly, and beside him stood the most unnerving individuals Harry had ever seen. He was elderly, sort of frail looking, but his eyes were ice blue and sharp as knives. The air around him seemed thicker, wavering yet not. Harry felt the air reach out and touch him, and shivered.

“You are Mr. Potter?”

“Yes, Mr. Ollivander,” he said, thoroughly unnerved. The man’s gaze lingered for a long moment before he turned away and headed for the shelves.

“Stand on the stool there,” he said. No sooner had Harry done as he was told, than a miniature tape measure came zipping up to him. On

its own it began to take measurement, none of which the wand-maker seemed to be paying any attention to. It measure his height, the width of his shoulders, the size of his feet, the circumference of his head, and strangely the distance between his nostrils. "Which is your wand hand?"

"Er... I'm right handed." The measuring tape then went to work measuring the length of his fingers, distance from wrist to elbow, armpit to floor, and so many other random distances Ollivander continued to ignore.

"Right then, that's enough," the tape measure crumpled lifeless to floor. "Try this one. Beechwood and dragon heartstrings. Nine inches. Nice and flexible. Just take it and give it a wave."

Harry accepted the wand, and feeling extremely foolish under Snape's ominous regard, and waved it around a bit. Immediately the wand was snatch out of his hand.

"Maple and phoenix feather. Seven inches. Quite whippy. Try-"

Harry tried, but that too was snatched from him even faster than the first. And that was how it went. He tried all sorts of wands. Unicorn hair, phoenix feather, dragon heartstrings. Hard woods, soft woods, and woods from distant lands. He tried short, long, flexible, and rigid. Yet no matter what he tried, nothing was quite right. As they started approaching half an hour, a sort of despair settled around Harry. For every wand that rejected him began to feel like a personal failure. His only consolation was that Ollivander only seemed to become more enthused with the hunt, and not the least bit discouraged.

"Tricky customer, eh? Not to worry, we'll find the perfect match here somewhere- I wonder, now. Why not try this one? Holly and phoenix feather, eleven inches, nice and supple. Here-"

Harry took the wand. He felt a sudden warmth in his fingers. His arm lifted, almost of its own accord, and came down in a powerful swish. Gold and red sparks flew out of the end like fireworks, sending the whole store dancing with light and shadows. In his chair, Snape's grip on the armrests tightened. Mr. Ollivander smiled in pure bliss and

cried, "Bravo! Yes, indeed, very good. I've waited a long time to find the owner of that wand! I made this wand almost seventy-five years ago. The phoenix that donated the feather only gave two. I knew then those wands would be something special. And I was right. Within twenty years, its brother had risen in infamy along with its master. That fifty years should pass before its equal could be found. How remarkable!"

"Ollivander, you overstep your bounds," Snape suddenly hissed, jumping to his feet. "To even suggest this...boy might somehow be His equal."

Harry, his insides feeling as light as air, and his fingers tingling felt suddenly invincible and turned to both men. "And who's the owner of the other wand?"

Snape did not reply, and amazingly he even looked away from Harry. Ollivander, on the other hand, grinned and fixed him with a pale stare.

"I remember every wand I've ever sold, Mr. Potter. Every single wand. Your wand's brother- Yew, phoenix feather, thirteen-and-a-half inches- just so happens to belong to the most powerful wizard in Britain. Curious, indeed, how these things happen. The wand chooses the wizard, you know... I think we must expect great things from you, Mr. Potter... After all, You-Know-Who did great things- terrible, but great."

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Harry sat in the Three Broomsticks at Hogsmeade, looking into his butterbeer and wishing there was actual alcohol in it. His wand was tucked into its thin leather case under his shirt. There was a strange feeling emanating from it, luring Harry to take it into his bare hands again. It was a feeling that promised magic. He could do anything once that bit of wood and feather was in his hand... just like Voldemort had.

"Jeez, Harry, you're not still sulking are you?" Natalie mocked, interrupting his dark thoughts. "I know Snape was an utter prat, but

you'll have other opportunities to go shopping in Daigon Alley. I didn't think boys even liked shopping."

Hermione, of course, was quick to come to his defense... or argue with Natalie. One of the two.

"Don't be sexist, Natalie. Besides, Harry's never been to Daigon Alley, remember?"

Natalie waved off the logic with her usual feminine grace.

"Don't worry about it," Harry said, smiling weakly. "There's always next year."

"Hey," Clyde said, wiping away his foamy mustache, "We won't need our teachers as escort next year. We should all go out together and show Harry around. It'll be a riot."

Natalie grinned and lifted her mug. "I'll drink to that. What do you say, Harry? Hermione? Shall we all go together next time?"

This time his smile was a bit more real, and he lifted his mug. Hermione and Clyde lifted theirs, and they clinked them together and took a drink... and kept drinking. Whether they'd planned it that way or not, once they'd started Natalie and Hermione had somehow turned it into a contest, one which Clyde seemed more than willing to compete in and Harry wasn't going to be left out of. There was few seconds of silence and they gulped down the sticky liquid, and then...

"Ha!" Clyde cried, slapping his mug down, "I wi- BLEEEELCH."

Hermione choked on her glass. The boy winced, patting his chest. "Crikey, that actually hurt!"

The rest of them burst out laughing, causing Natalie to let a considerably smaller belch of her own, sending them all into even harder laughter. As Harry sat there in the little pub, sitting between his friends and trying not to shoot butterbeer through his nose, he felt the uncertainty of the day fade away. Harry Potter, he knew, was no Voldemort. Voldemort more than likely had never sat amongst

muggleborns and halfbloods in a pub, belching and laughing like a loon. Surely, the Dark Lord had never felt this feeling Harry felt now. The feeling that he was in one of those perfect moments of time, ones he hoped he would always remember, because everything was so vivid and warm and beautiful.

Which was why he could never tell them. Not about his wand or what Ollivander had said about it. If there was ever to be perfect moments like this again, then he could never reveal to them that some part of him echoed of the British wizarding dictator. Natalie probably wouldn't have cared, may have even found it cool, but Hermione would pry and poke and worry and doubt. He didn't know what Clyde would do, but their friendship was still tentative and their bond easily broken even without this bit of knowledge.

It would just be a secret between him and Snape, who didn't look like he wanted to admit it to himself let alone anyone else, and Ollivander, who didn't seem the type to gossip. No one else would ever have to know.

Ever.

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This was the sort of thing that may potentially get a man killed or have no consequence whatsoever.

That was what Snape thought as he made his way to the dungeons to begin his report on that day's visit to Ollivander. The visit had gone as smoothly as it always did, each of his young charges to petrified of him to cause trouble, as they procured all they would need for the coming school year. He would never admit it to anyone, but he did take some enjoyment from his yearly appointments with Ollivander. There was something strangely exhilarating about seeing a child obtaining their first wand, the first conscious flush of power streaming through their small bodies, that look of epiphany on their innocent faces. Yes, child, that is magic. And you thought you knew, didn't you?

And of course, Potter just had to go and ruin it.

Well, perhaps not ruined it. His reaction had been just as exhilarating as everyone else's, perhaps more so when the sparks illuminated those brilliant green eyes and memories of another overlaid the reality of the moment. Lily's joy of her magic had never faded in all the time he had known her, and he briefly wondered if Harry would be like her or if that joy wouldn't fade into the arrogance of his father?

So, Ollivander had to go and ruin it.

Telling an eleven year old boy and him, one of Voldemort's own henchmen, that he may be the magical counterpart in the Dark Lord. Of all the stupid...

Now Snape had to deal with it, and it all broke down into two choices. One, he kept it a secret. There were two eventual outcomes of this decision, the most optimistic being that no one found out and nothing happened, and the other (and more likely outcome) was some one finding out and his possibly being accused of treason and dying horribly. Two, he could tell the Dark Lord. Option two had two outcomes as well. Optimistically, the Dark Lord wouldn't care and at most have the child observed for undue ambition. Realistically, he would care and have the child either killed as a potential competitor or brought into the fold of his dark court to be used as the wizard saw fit.

Snape wasn't sure what was worse. Lily's child being killed, Lily's child working beside him as Voldemort's pawn, or himself being dead.

Decisions, decisions.

Unless...

Snape smiled wickedly. Perhaps, he was looking at this the wrong way. After all, it's only a secret if he doesn't tell anyone, and it's only dangerous if Voldemort is the one to learn about it. All he had to do was tell the right person and Lord Voldemort might never find out.

He it just so happened he knew the perfect person.

Chapter 10: The Pilgrimage

Harry stood on platform 9 3/4 and wondered why. He had flooed from Hogsmeade to King's Cross, to wait for a train that would take him right back to Hogsmeade. Mrs. Sleuw, while she had been fluttering about the kitchen making him a particularly large breakfast, had said it was a tradition. He personally thought it was a tradition he could do without.

The train station was thick with families and cats. A meaningless roar of voices punctuated by shouting and baby cries and owl shrieks and mewling. While Harry did have the benefit of leaving his luggage at Hogwarts, he had to remain constantly alert unless he was knocked by someone else's. He had intended to stay outside the train until he could meet up with Hermione, but the ruckus was getting bad enough that he started to worrying about injury. He squeezed passed a cluster of redheads and managed to board the train with only a bruised knee and a banged elbow.

Inside was chaotic, but not nearly as much as outside. The hallway was jammed with students dragging their trunks, broomsticks, and animal carriers as they searched for empty compartments or friends. Harry ducked into the first empty compartment he could find and kept the door open incase some of his friends should pass by. He made himself comfortable and stared out the windows at the menagerie of people talking, crying, hugging, and kissing. For a while Harry could imagine his mother and father out there, waving at him in the window.

"Harry!"

He turned to the door to see Hermione smiling at him. Behind her stood a boy with the palest blond hair he had ever seen. He recognized him immediately as Hermione's foster brother, Draco.

"Hermione, I was wondering when you would show up. I would have thought you would be the very first person to arrive."

"And I likely would have, but Draco kept dragging his feet this morning," she said, glaring half heartedly at her non-repentant sibling.

"You woke me up at 5 o'clock in the morning. Five," was all he said to that. He turned his cool, grey eyes towards Harry, taking in his modest clothes and wild hair. Harry could just barely detect the hint of a sneer he had no doubt learned from his godfather. After a moment, he held out his hand. "Draco Malfoy of the Malfoy family."

"Harry Potter." They shook, both perhaps a little tighter than was polite.

"Hermione!" someone called, distracting the girl. As she turned away, Draco stepped into the compartment and up close to Harry so he could speak softly into his ear.

"I don't know what impression my sister gave you over the summer, but don't think for a moment you have a chance with her. She's a Malfoy, and I won't have her name dragged through the mud by hanging out with muggleborn riff-raff. So you either turn out very impressive or don't turn up at all. Do we understand each other?"

Before he could respond, Draco moved away and took Hermione by the arm. "Come on, sister-dear. You can catch up with Harry later. You have other friends you haven't seen all summer on board."

Hermione threw him an apologetic look, but dutifully followed her brother down the hall. Harry just watched them disappear, blinking stupidly. Had he just been threatened by Hermione's 'sweet and charming' older brother? She had mentioned that he was a little over protective, but egad! He felt inexplicable torn from wanting to throttle the other boy to admiring him. Certainly, Harry didn't think he had enough confidence to go around threatening people for the sake of Hermione's honor.

Had he learned that from Snape too? Bloody hell, what had Hermione learned from the overgrown bat?

"Harry!" Clyde stood in the doorway grinning at him. He was flanked by twin red heads, who were looking more than a little mischievous. "Mind if we sit with you? The rest of the compartments are getting full."

"Sure, I could use the company."

"Oh, now, this-" started one of the twins, sliding inside.

"Must be, the illustrious-" continued the other.

"The infamous-"

"The indomitable-"

"Harry Potter," they finished in unison. Harry smiled.

"What have you been telling them about me, Clyde?"

The twins grinned at each other, and Clyde turned pink around the ears.

"Oh, we've heard quite a bit. Heard you were a real ladies' man."

"The two prettiest girls in the class are after you."

"And one a Malfoy, no less!"

"You player!" they said again in unison. At this Harry turned pink and turned a glare at Clyde, who was looking a bit sheepish.

"Ignore them!" he said, "They just like to tease everyone!"

It wasn't long before the train whistle blew and the train began to move, pulling away from the station and the horde of people waving goodbye. The twins and Clyde both waved to some people in the crowd.

"And if you don't mind me asking," Harry said, as they all settled in. "Who are you two?"

Both twins shared a sad sigh, as they gave mock disappointed looks at Clyde.

"You mean Clydiekins hasn't mentioned us?"

"I was trying to forget about your entire existence."

"I am Fred-"

"And I am George-"

"Don't believe them! It's probably the other way around!"

"Weasley of the Houghton family. We're Clydiekin's uncles."

"Uncles?" Frankly, Harry wasn't sure how that was possible. The twins only look a year or two older than Clyde.

"Yes, his uncles. It's a rather interesting story," said the boy who introduced himself as Fred (and probably lied).

"You see, our sweet nephew here has a muggle mummy-"

"And a wizard daddy, who alas-"

"Didn't make it through the war. So his mummy hid him away-"

"Until he was six-"

"And did a bit of accidental magic. Then in swoops WYRA. But it's learned that our dear sweet nephew, has living wizarding grandparents-"

"Who quickly take custody of their grandson, but not before adopting George and I-"

"I thought you said you were George," Harry pointed out.

"Semantics. Hush! Anyway, since we're the Houghton's adopted kids, and Clyde is their grandson..."

"You're his uncles. I get it," Harry said and sighed. "Jeesh. And I thought I had family drama issues."

"There you two are!" Another redhead entered the compartment. While Harry could easily see the family resemblances, the boy's demeanor couldn't have been more different from the others. He looked rather prim and proper, without a hint of humor.

"Percival! You old dog. What have you been up to?" asked Fred- or George- as they both rose to wrap him in their arms. 'Percival' tensed up and, as soon as they released him, checked his persons for any tricks they may have played. He was rather quick to find the sign on his back and the exploding ink cap in his pocket.

"Yes, yes. Nice to see you too," he muttered, then looked back, "I found them, Ronald."

Yet another redhead appeared in the doorway, the same age as Harry, and looking a bit timid. This was not helped by the fact that his much taller brothers, immediately began cooing over him like he was an adorable infant.

"Oh, I remember when you were just this tall! You used to take off your clothes and run around the house naked! Mum and dad would run after you, picking up your nappies as they went!"

"I was three!"

"Oh, but look at how tall you've grown! The photographs just don't do you justice! Did you see mum when you came on?"

Here the other boy smiled a bit.

"Yeah. Ginny too."

"Little nymph, isn't she? We'll be beating the boys off her next year!"

It suddenly occurred to Harry that not only were there a lot of Weasley's, but none of them apparently lived together. Harry, who had never had siblings, had a hard time imagining that many children in a single home (WYRA didn't count. They cheated with spells) and yet even more problems imagining so many related children in different homes.

"Oh now, Ronniekins, this is your nephew Clydiekins and his friend Harry Potter. They took those wretched wizarding culture classes this summer. If you have any questions, you can ask them!"

"Yeah, if you want to know about the outside of the castle," Clyde groused. "The entire school is closed off during the summer. Something to do with re-warding the castle."

"You're muggleborns?" Ron asked, looking suddenly hesitant.

"Technically, I'm half and half," Clyde said. "Harry on the other hand, is a muggleborn, I think. German raised too. Go ahead, spout something off in German!"

"Das ist kein Taschenspielertrick, du Idiot!" he said, rolling his eyes.

"Oooooohhhh..." the twins said in unison. "Brilliant!"

Ron, however, didn't look like he agreed. His expression darkened, his jaw set. Harry, who was becoming well versed in spontaneous animosity being directed at him, didn't even bother wondering why. He met the other boy's gaze openly, daring him to spit out exactly what he was thinking. When the boy said nothing, Harry stood. Ron moved back abruptly, posturing as if he was expecting a fight.

"There's not a lot of room in here," Harry said. "You guys are family, and should sit together. I'll go find another compartment."

"Ah! Don't let Ron's attitude scare you off! He's just got family issues of a different kind!" George said.

"Yeah! You can sit in my lap!" offered Fred, patting his leg in invitation.

"Was that suppose to encourage him so stay?" Clyde asked.

Shaking his head, he shuffled passed Ron, who made it a point to avoid touching him and glared as he walked away. Once he was outside, the door was slammed behind him and Harry flashed the door a rather uncouth gesture. He wandered up and down the hall,

but it seemed all the compartments were either filled with strangers or older students. He was almost ready to give up and return to the Weasley's compartment, when one opened and he was pulled inside.

"Natalie! I didn't even see you get on," Harry said, smiling at her. She gave him her patented wry smile. The compartment was even more full than the Weasley's, this time with people he recognized from summer school. Someone had left a trunk on the floor for extra seating and he perched himself there..

"I'm surprised you're even on board. Isn't it kind of silly making you take the train?"

Harry just shrugged.

"And why isn't Hermione with you? You're normally inseparable," the blonde girl said, not without a little bitterness.

"She's sitting with her brother and their friends. Clyde's sitting with the Weasley brothers. Did you know there were so many?"

"Ha! They've got two more brothers out of school and a little sister who starts next year. They're a family of bloody rabbits."

Everyone laughed at that, and Harry smiled weakly.

"What is the deal with that anyway? I got the impression that they don't live together, but I know they're not muggleborns or halfblood or Ron would have been in summer lessons, right?"

"Oh, now that's a bit of a scandal," said Westfield, grinning. Natalie nodded in agreement.

"I used to go to primary school with Ron. He was ok when I first met him," began Natalie. "But then there was this big scandal with his father. Something about muggle contraband. You know, nothing that would be that big of a deal except it was like his fiftieth violation or something. Apparently, he'd pissed off some of the Wizengamot, and they complained to You-Know-Who, who had him thrown in Azkaban."

Harry shivered at the thought. They had learned about Azkaban in summer school. A miserably stormy isle, designated a maximum security prison, with soul-sucking wraiths known as Dementors set as guards. That anyone, for any reason, should be sent there had struck him as beyond cruel.

“After that, Ron turned into an utter bigot. Their mother, poor thing, was a house wife- what else could she be with that many children needing her?- and couldn’t find work with enough pay to support them all and still take care of the baby girl’s needs. WYRA ended up stepping in and taking all her kids except the daughter, and had them divided up and sent to other homes. I guess I can understand him being bitter, but he’s turned into such a rotter. One day he’s going to start a fight with the wrong muggleborn, and I can’t wait to see it happen.”

Now Harry could see the twisted logic in hating muggleborns. After all, since they were all completely isolated from muggles, muggleborns were the next best thing. However, he couldn't condone it and wouldn't tolerate it. His father used to say the men who bow to injustice and cruelty only welcome more of it onto themselves. His mother used to say no one had the right to make anyone feel like they were born inferior. If Ron came after him or Hermione or any of his friends, then he was determined Natalie would see that prophesied fight.

They went on to talk about the coming school year, about the past summer, of birthdays, and holidays, Quidditch and fashion, traveling and weather. They played exploding snaps, poker, and wizarding chess. They ate too much junk food, and they all started Harry his first collection of chocolate frog cards. He got Helga Hufflepuff, Bellatrix Lestrange, Bartolome Suiqi, Horace Slugworth, and Hedwig Vance.

By the time their arrival at Hogsmeade was announced, Harry was glad he had taken the train after all.

[illegible]

1. 'It's not a parlor trick, you idiot!' Actually, 'Traschenspielertrick' means prestidigitation, an uncommon word in America (can't speak for other English-speaking countries) but according to Ashere a fairly common word in German.

Author's note:

No, I'm not a Ron-basher. Like his brothers said, he's got issues, which unfortunately manifest themselves in bigotry. Will he be Harry's new arch nemesis in place of Draco? No, frankly I don't think he's savvy enough for that. Besides, Draco's just showed us a bit of arrogance and animosity we all know and love from Rowling's books. You'll just have to wait and see how it goes.

Chapter 11: The King and the Serpent

Harry sat in a boat, staring up at the castle set aglow in the storm. His eyes were as wide and enchanted as everyone else's. As if it were his first time seeing Hogwarts. As if he hadn't lived in its shadow for the better part of the summer. Staring out his window at night, it always seemed more like the dark silhouette of a hulking mountain than an enchanted castle. But now that dark silhouette was alight with a hundred thousand torches, glowing like a torch itself in the gloomy rain. His insides twisted with a hopeful longing as they drew across the inky lake, holding the castle's wavering reflection, everything enveloped in a sacred silence.

At last they passed under a low tunnel, curtained with ivy, and entered into an underground harbor dimly lit with torches. They scrambled out of the boats and onto the stone steps, aided and directed by the Sleuw's. Professor McGonagall was at the top of the steps waiting for them, and quickly ushered them into the school itself. The corridors were huge and echoed with their muffled footsteps. The first years were huddled closer together than usual, all feeling a bit overwhelmed as they passed endless rows of moving portraits, armors, and display cases. They followed the witch up a large staircase to the upper floors, and suddenly the distant sound of many voices could be heard.

Yet there was one voice much closer that drew Harry's attention.

"Run, run, run, little mousey. Nagini knows every tunnel. Nagini knows every hole. Run, run, run, because you can not hide..."

Harry looked around, seeing if anyone else was wondering about it. By all accounts it did not appear as if anyone had heard. Which seemed impossible since they were silent enough that Harry could hear the faint ticking of his pocket watch.

And hadn't he heard the name Nagini somewhere before?

"Crunch, crunch, crunch, grinding bones on which to munch. Come, come, come, little mousey," it continued to sing in a syllabant hiss.

He fell back from the others, taking a moment to peek down a hallway the voice seemed to be coming from. At first he saw nothing. Then he spotted a little brown rat turning a corner and scampering towards him. It was followed soon after by the largest snake he had ever seen. It was at least nine feet long and almost as thick around as he was. The rat was obviously running from it, but when it finally took notice of Harry, it stood up on its hind legs and froze.

"Look out!" Harry cried as the snake came up on the little creature.

The rat jumped out of the way, barely missing the snake's enormous fangs. It hopped about in a blind panic for a moment, unsure of which way to flee, before heading back towards Harry. He stood frozen, watching transfixed as both creatures made their way towards him. The rat reached him first, and amazingly dived beneath his robes, where he felt it climb up his leg and into his pocket.

This must be someone's pet rat, Harry concluded. He didn't get past that thought before he found himself staring face to face with the snake, who reared up to stand taller than Harry. They stared at one another, wide emerald eyes to glowing slitted yellow.

"Give it here, boy," the snake commanded. "Give it to Nagini."

Oh. So that's where the voice was coming from. A talking snake. Sure. Why not? Was it any stranger than the bathroom mirror that told him his hair looked silly in the Sleuw's house?

"Er... what?"

The snake looked startled- how he could tell, Harry wasn't sure- then, angry again.

"The mousey. Give Nagini her little mousey. It is Nagini's to play with. Master gave it to Nagini. It is Master's present! Give it here or Nagini will play with you instead!"

Harry didn't even consider giving the rat over. Not that he thought the rat's life was worth more than his own (he'd killed several over the summer to feed to the school's owls), he just couldn't stand in its

presence a moment longer. He leapt out of Nagini's strike range, then bolted down the corridor. He heard her indignant cry, but she couldn't follow nearly as quickly.

Only now, Harry had lost sight of the other first years. Cursing himself for his own stupidity, he started his search. But the castle was a maze, and every corridor led to dozens of others. He tried to call for help, but no one came and he didn't dare stay anywhere too long lest Nagini find him.

Finally he started to hear voices. He followed the sound until he came to a narrow hallway, that led to a small antechamber. There was a small wooden door, and he pressed his ear to it to see if he could hear anything. The general roar was quiet now, but he could hear some one making a speech. He pressed harder to the wood, hoping to make out the words.

The door fell open. Caught off balance, Harry stumbled forward, through a curtain and onto a platform, tripped on a rug, and pitched passed a man standing at the podium and off the edge. He fell feet over head, and landed awkwardly on his side. Dazed he sat up, and through his spinning vision he could make out many people in black robes staring at him. His sight somehow ended upwards, and the people disappeared to reveal a starry night sky. He rubbed his eyes, not believing what he was seeing, and when he opened them again he found himself staring at a man. He was a young, pale man and his eyes were a the most vivid...crimson?

"Er..."

The hall suddenly burst out into raucous laughter. Harry's face burned. Looking over at the platform, he could see two tables on either side of the small platform with several familiar faces. Professors Toure, Flitwick, Quirell, and of course, Snape. They, however, were not laughing. His embarrassment was replaced with something else, and his burning embarassment gave way to a cold fear.

"Silence!" Voldemort commanded.

Instantly, the laughing horde fell into a tense quiet. The Dark Lord turned his cold crimson gaze to the boy still sprawled on the floor beneath him, letting his expression clearly show his irritation. Strangely, Harry couldn't turn away. His eyes were wide and frightened, but he couldn't look away. It was like being caught in Nagini's eyes, only...

"And you are?" the man said. His voice sounded vaguely serpentine. Harry made a conscious effort to climb to his feet, although they felt as if they would collapse at any moment.

"I-I'm Harry Potter."

"Oh. You."

He flinched, but didn't turn away.

"Crucio!"

A sudden, excruciating pain flared through his entire body. It was like nothing he had ever felt. Not the localized pain of a broken bone nor the weak pain of a sunburn. This was something else. It was like every fiber of body, from skin to the internal muscles was being stabbed with wicked needles. There was screaming, and Harry couldn't tell if it was him or not. As suddenly as it was inflicted, the curse was removed. He found himself on all fours, trembling uncontrollably.

"In the future, Mr. Potter, it would be wise to remember I do not like to be interrupted while speaking. Especially by fools. McGonagall, you are responsible for escorting first years to the Great Hall. We will discuss your failure later."

Someone grabbed his arm, and he flinched from the contact expecting it to hurt, but the pain was an empty echo. He was dragged to his feet by McGonagall, looking very pale and tightlipped, and led to the line of other first years. Hermione and Clyde were immediately by his side, supporting him. Yet he couldn't help but notice that in addition to looking worried, they both looked very angry with him as well.

It's not my fault! he wanted to scream at them. But all he could do was try to regain his strength and stand on his own, hiding his embarrassment and shame. Voldemort continued his speech, and at some point Harry thought he saw an ugly hat singing a rather ridiculous song about houses.

It took him a minute to realize it was singing about Houses. They learned about them in summer school, of course, and Hermione even had a book called *Hogwarts: A History* that she was constantly referencing. When names started to be called, Harry made an extra effort to pay attention.

"Abbott, Hannah!" A rather plump girl with blond pigtails climbed onto the provided stool and McGonagall placed the singing hat on her head. It was barely there for two seconds before it shouted out "Hufflepuff!"

The girl quickly skipped off to join a table of cheering students. It followed that routine for all the gathered students. Some went to Hufflepuff, others Ravenclaw, Gryffindor, or Slytherin. Usually it only took a second or two for the hat to decide, other times it took almost a minute. Clyde was called and by then Harry was able to stand on his own, and watched as his friend was sorted into Gryffindor under the thunderous applause of the Weasley twins. Natalie was sorted into Slytherin, and looked perfectly pleased with the result. Hermione, amazingly was not sorted into either Slytherian or Ravenclaw, but Gryffindor.

Harry didn't really see it. She had always been more smarts than anything, and the timid way she looked away from her brother's shocked face wasn't exactly the bravest front she could have given. Draco went to Slytherin like all the Malfoy's before him, of course. And then it was his turn.

The hall got dead quiet, and Harry felt vaguely nauseous. But he remembered his father and his mother, thought of how proud they would be that he had gotten here at all, and held his head high as he marched towards the stool. McGonagall looked decidedly worried as

she placed the hat on his head. The hat fell over his eyes and in the darkness he could hear the whispers of the other students.

"Hhhmmm..." said the hat. "What have we here. Oh this is going to be a difficult choice. You've got a decent mind... loyal... hard working... there's definitely a lot of...unique talent in here. The most obvious choice would of course be Slytherin, but..."

"Please, not there," Harry whispered. "I don't want anything else in common with..."

He shut his mouth tight after that. He hadn't told anyone about his wand being the brother's of Voldemort. Not Hermione, not the Weasleys, and certainly not to a gossipy hat. Even if it read his mind and already knew.

"Oh, not Slytherin then? Well, then we might as well keep things interesting. I think I'll put you in GRIFFINDOR!"

Most of the Gryffindors didn't clap when Harry made his way over to his new house. Most of them didn't. Percy clapped politely along with a few others. Clyde and Hermione both clapped more honestly. The Weasley twins made enough of a racket to embarrass him all over again. He took his seat between Clyde and Hermione, and struggled to sit up tall under the disgruntled looks his own house was giving him.

The sorting continued and Ron Weasley, the youngest son of a long line of brothers surprised everyone, including himself when the sorting hat sent him off to Slytherin. Although he felt sorry for Ron's flabbergasted brothers, Harry wasn't sorry he wouldn't be sharing his House with the other boy. The redhead sat himself next to Draco, who didn't look as though he was sure he wanted the other boy there.

Finally, the sorting concluded with Blaise Zabini being sorted into Slytherin. Voldemort gave another brief speech about pride and honor, fealty, and discipline. It would have been extremely boring if the threat of excruciating pain and death hadn't lingered between each sentence should the man's wisdom be ignored.

Then an enormous feast suddenly appeared before them all. It was more food than Harry had ever seen, and very impressively displayed. But watching all the other students suddenly scarfing it all down, made him feel even more nauseous and he pushed most of it away.

"Aren't you going to eat?" asked Clyde, looking worried.

"He probably doesn't feel very well after the Cruciatus curse. Do you, Harry?"

"No, I don't" he agreed. "The Cruciatus curse, huh?"

"Yes. It's also known as the pain curse, and I'm sure you can appreciate why. It's a very dark curse. Only those with particularly high magical ability can perform it effectively."

"Well, at least I know people won't be throwing it around in the halls then," he said.

"No worries there mate," said one of the twins, coming up to stand behind. "You'll only have to worry about tickle curses-"

"Jelly-legs-" suggested the other twin.

"The pinching curse-"

"Boils and blisters curse-"

"Lycanthropy during the full moon-"

"Vampire bites if you walk around after curfew-"

"Yes, yes, yes! We get it! Can't you go embarrass someone else? You have an entire House to annoy!" Clyde said.

"Yeah, I suppose you're right. Harry's too easy a target right now."

"Gee, thanks."

"Come on, George-"

"I'm Fred, George,"

"Semantics, brother."

The two wandered off to make mayhem for a cluster of Gryffindor girls gossiping at the end of the table. No sooner had the boys gotten them to start screaming at the sight of their wart infested hands, then real screams started over at the Hufflepuff table. The Hufflepuffs students all clambered from their seats and a way from their table. This was followed by the Ravenclaws shouting in surprise and scrambling from theirs.

Through the din of panicked voices, Harry could hear another softer voice.

"Where is my little mousey? Bring it to me, now, now, now!"

"Oh, bloody hell, not her again," he moaned.

"Harry, what's going on?" Hermione asked. But there was no time for explanations. The crowds had parted to reveal Nagini, who had spotted him in an instant.

"You!"

"Geh."

The serpent rushed for him, and Harry made a split second decision. Leaping from his chair he sprinted towards Nagini as well. She reared up, expected an attack and prepared to face it with one of her own, but Harry turned sharply and just barely avoided her fangs. He ran for a side door, keeping Nagini as far from the other students as he could manage. She followed, slipping under tables and benches, brushing ankles as she slithered towards her intended prey.

He led her into a corridor. He could see students flooding out of the Great Hall further down and turned in the opposite direction. He jogged along, keeping Nagini in sight and just out of range. Once the

other students were out of sight, he tried to lose her, but soon found himself out done.

Stairs and doors did nothing to keep her at bay. She followed him at a steady pace singing along the way 'Run, run, run, little man-child. Nagini knows every tunnel. Nagini knows every hole. Run, run, run, little man-child, because you can not hide'.

It didn't take long for Harry to become utterly lost. He had gotten stuck at the dead end of a corridor, and somehow managed to find a secret passageway. It had wound up and down narrow staircases, lefts, rights, forks and crossroads. When he had finally stumbled out of the dusty space he found himself in an empty classroom and no idea where he was. At least it appeared he had lost Nagini.

"Hello?!" he called, as he entered the hallway. "I'm really, really lost and could use some help"

It was dark here, with no torches lit. Harry wished he hadn't left his wand in his trunk. He didn't know if he could perform any spells, but a few sparks might have gone a long way helping him find his way back to the Great Hall.

He kept calling for help, staying close to the wall so he didn't get disoriented. He wasn't certain how long he groped blindly in the darkness, but he was starting to lose hope in a rescue. Frankly, he wasn't sure he wanted to be rescued. He was already in enough trouble as it was. Just as he had resolved to spend a long, uncomfortable night curled on the floor, he saw a pale white glow.

"Hello? Is anyone there?" he called, a bit nervously.

"Hello?" came a reply. "What have we here? Oh, my, you're that Potter boy. Everyone is looking for you. What are you doing all the way over here?"

Harry couldn't reply. As the white glow got closer, he could see that what he thought was a wand light was a man... or had been a man. Wearing a collar and tights, and literally transparent, he suddenly realized he was meeting his first ghost.

“You alright there, lad? Nagini didn’t get a bite out of you, did she? While we ghosts wouldn’t mind some new blood, it would put a bit of a damper on the festivities for the rest of the students.”

“I-I’m sorry, yes, I’m fine. But...um... who are you?”

“How terribly rude of me! I am Sir Nicholas de Mimsy, at your service! Just follow me! I’ll get you back to civilization!” he chuckled.

Relieved, Harry did follow Sir Nicholas. But they did not return to the Great Hall. Instead, he was led up several sets of staircases and through many corridors, until at last they stopped at a statue of a gargoyle.

“Er... where am I now, Sir Nicholas?”

“The headmistress’s office, of course. Have to sort all of this nonsense out, don’t we? Oh, don’t look so green. You’ll survive! Now up you go! Cecrops!”

A winding staircase appeared behind the gargoyle. Taking a deep breath, he lifted his head, and made his way up. He stepped off the stairs and found himself in a rather crowded circular office. All the Heads of House were present, McGonagal, Snape (Hermione later told him her godfather taught potions and was head of Slytherin), Flitwick, a dumpy looking woman he didn’t know, one he recognized from a chocolate frog card as Headmistress Bellatrix Lestrange, and of course to make his day complete- Lord Voldemort with Nagini curled quite happily around his armchair. The giant serpent looked at him, and Harry got the impression she was smirking.

The headmistress, staring over her locked fingers at him, was not looking pleased.

“I should expel you, Mr. Potter,” was the first thing out of her lips.

Harry felt his heart drop into his stomach.

“Couldn’t you just expel Nagini?” he said, and then slapped his hand over his mouth.

“Mr. Potter! This is not a joke! This is the first time in centuries the Welcoming Feast has been disturbed. Perhaps the very first time that it has been disturbed twice by the very same person!”

“Hey, I had nothing to do with the second one! They weren’t running and screaming from me!”

“Just keep talking, silly man-child. It will only make your punishment that much more amusing to watch,” hissed Nagini.

“Go choke on your rat!” he snarled back at her.

Suddenly, everyone was looking at him with even more interest. Even Voldemort, who had been ignoring him in favor of stroking the portion of Nagini’s tail resting in his lap, looked straight at him.

“What did you say?”

Harry froze. Oh, Bloody hell, he was such an idiot! As if he wasn’t in enough trouble with the most dangerous man in the entirety of Wizarding Britain, he had to go off an insult his familiar too!

“Er...”

“What you said, Mr. Potter, was most definitely not ‘er’.”

“Um...”

“Mr. Potter!”

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry! I didn’t mean it!”

A dead silence followed. And Harry who had been cringing, expecting to be cursed at any moment, opened his eyes to peek at what had stopped the man. The most dangerous man in all of Britain was regarding him with a clearly perplexed and -dare he even think it?-

awed expression. He glanced around at the other Hogwarts staff. They too looked completely stunned.

"Um... what did I say?"

Snape let out an amused huff of air, and muttered 'idiot boy'. This seemed to snap everyone else out of their surprise as well.

"Mr. Potter... Harry, are you telling me it has never come to your attention that you are a Parselmouth?" Voldemort asked.

Harry just blinked at him and then frowned. "That's impossible. Only a descendant of Slytherin can speak Parseltongue. You're the only one in known existence right now."

"It would seem I am the second one in existence now. You silly child. Don't tell me you didn't think it odd when my familiar began talking to you?"

Harry shrugged. "Until this spring a talking bathroom mirror was odd. Frankly, I just thought she was a talking snake, which was odd, and why I got distracted and separated from the other first years."

"Hn."

They held each other's gaze, and Harry felt the other man searching him for the truth of the matter. It was an almost physical sensation and he abruptly turned away from the man on sheer instinct.

"Perhaps he should be sent to Slytherin, after all," the headmistress suggested. "He must, as he pointed out, have descended from Salazar Slytherin."

"And he just as likely has ancestry rooted with Gryffindor, Ravenclaw, or Hufflepuff. No, we will hold to tradition, and allow the sorting hat to determine the House he belongs to. If we do not uphold tradition, who will?"

"Of course, you're right," the headmistress conceded, and Harry realized despite her title it was Lord Voldemort who ran the school.

“Speaking of Houses, perhaps it is time for Harry to return to his? It has been a very trying evening, and classes start tomorrow,” said McGonagall.

“Yes, I suppose we can forego any further punishment, given the circumstances. Harry, one last word of advice?”

“Yes, sir-er, I mean, My Lord?”

“Break this bad habit of misplacing yourself?”

“Er... yes, My Lord.”

“Oh, yes. And leave the rat.”

Harry hesitated, but then reluctantly opened his robe and pulled his partner in crime for the evening out of his pocket. Impossibly, the little creature was curled up and was fast asleep. He shook his head and dutifully-gratefully- followed his Head of House out of the office and towards his new home.

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Once Harry and most of the staff had left, Voldemort, Snape, Lestrage, and Nagini turned their attention to the perceived culprit of that evening’s events. The headmistress poked the furry lump with the end of her wand. It merely curled up tighter. Irritated, she emptied her cup of hot tea on it. It let out a pained squeak.

“Pettigrew, you idiot,” she hissed.

A moment later, where there was only a rat, now sat a very frightened and very damp man.

“Ouch! W-what was th-that f-for?” he sniveled, finding himself suddenly surrounded by three of the most frightening people he knew.

"You were suppose to keep Nagini entertained away from the feast, not in the middle of it!" Voldemort hissed. "There are half a dozen students sleeping in the infirmary because of your stupidity, you brainless twit!"

"I-I'm s-s-sorry, Master, but I-I-I w-was getting t-tired a-and she-she is so en-energetic! I'm n-not as-as y-young as I use-used t-to b-be."

"And I suppose hiding in the pocket of the James Potter-look-alike was an attempt to bring back your more youthful days?" Snape said.

At that Pettigrew's rat-like face became haunted as well as fearful. Oh, what would his old friend say now? Seeing him so reduced? And yet there he had been, appearing there to rescue him... eleven years too late.

"I should crucio you until your mind breaks and then hand you over to Knott for experimentation," Voldemort said. Pettigrew knew he would too, but he didn't think he could get anymore afraid without dropping over dead. "But since your bungling has brought forth some valuable information, I am feeling generous tonight. Check on McGonagall's office to make sure she's behaving herself, then return to your post in Gryffindor tower."

"Y-yes, M-master!" He bowed, unable to believe his good fortune.

"Nagini will accompany you along the way to make sure you don't find your way into anyone else's pocket tonight."

Pettigrew let out a little squeak as the serpent turned her shining yellow eyes towards him. He was a rat a second later, and flying down the staircase as fast as his little legs could carry him. Nagini slithered out of her master's lap and pursued at a leisurely pace, singing her silly hunting song as she went.

With the three Slytherins alone in the office, the atmosphere became a bit more relaxed. LeStrange refilled her empty tea cup with sherry and offered the other two brandy. Snape declined, as was his custom during the school year. Voldemort accepted a glass and further

relaxed into his chair. A slight smile found its way onto his face as he considered the events of that evening.

"This is... magnificently ironic," Voldemort said. "To have a child of two of my more persistent enemies, and a Gryffindor on top of that, become my counterpart in magic."

"Counterpart, my lord? I think you give him too much credit," Snape said. "He may simply be an example of how your policies have allowed for a greater level of magical ability within the nation. I wouldn't be surprised if other Parselmouths started showing up in the next fifty years."

"I would have to agree with Severus on this one, my Lord. He's a Gryffindor. His temperament and morality," she said the second word as if it were a curse, "prevent him from being on par with you. He's merely a curiosity."

"Convenient logic," he chided them both, smiling to let them know he wasn't angered with them, "I don't know if Severus told you, Bella, that in addition to speaking Parseltongue, young Harry also possesses the brother wand to my own? That is not the byproduct of increased magical ability."

Bellatrix looked stunned all over again. Snape also looked surprised, and then quickly disguised it as outrage, turning to glare at the headmistress.

"You didn't know? I put that information in my report for you to give to our lord."

She turned an equally venomous glare back at him.

"That's was Sunday. I was busy finalizing castle security. I haven't gotten to them yet!"

"I have, though," Voldemort admitted, surprising them both. Suddenly, Snape thought his plan to slip the information right under Bellatrix's nose didn't seem so clever. She was horribly neglectful of her paperwork, and she rarely checked his reports unless prompted. It

would have been easy. He had done similar things several times before. Should anyone have learned of the truth, Snape would have had...did have his proof of loyalty and competency.

He hadn't taken into account that his Master ran the school like it were his own household. The man held little love for reports and paperwork, and delegated such tasks to trusty servants like himself and LeStrange. But Voldemort apparently hadn't trusted LeStrange to do her work, and Snape hadn't seen that coming. He was torn between feeling dread over his blunder and exhilaration over the waning faith he held in his nemesis.

Neither thought would have met with Voldemort's approval, so he merely continued to direct his accusing eyes on Bellatrix, hoping the other wizard didn't suspect anything.

Meanwhile, Voldemort was making a mental note to remind his faithful servant to stop being so obvious in her ignorance. It was an unSlytherin trait, and lately she hadn't been at the top of her game. All the teachers had made a very clear and professional report on all the muggleborn's excursion to Daigon Alley, and though Snape was perhaps a bit dismissive of Potter's wand as a product of chance (fifty years! Some one had to pick that wand eventually), it was curious enough that she should have been made aware of it. This sort of thing was why the muggleborns were all sent with their teachers after all.

"Regardless," Voldemort continued, "We share a gift, an ancestry. I feel it makes him partially my responsibility. I am certain I can make this turn of events work in my favor."

"Surely you're not suggesting adopting the boy?" Bellatrix exclaimed. Severus barely managed to keep from rolling his eyes. Voldemort fixed her with an irritated look, and she shrank back in her chair like a scolded first year.

"No. Not yet anyway. I will have to see if he shows any true potential first. But I was just thinking... the Wizarding World has its king... perhaps its time it had its prince, as well?"

So what did you all think? Please leave a review or comment or opinion! I do so enjoy them.

I know some of you had your hearts set on Harry ending up in Slytherin, but to be honest I could never really picture Harry as one. So for kicks (not really, it's all part of constantly plotting mind) I threw the even less likely character, Ron, in there instead. Bwa ha ha.

Chapter 12: The Most Noble of Houses

McGonagall escorted Harry to Gryffindor Tower in utter silence. He got the distinct impression she was angry with him. But, he figured, everyone was angry at him, except probably the Weasley twins. They were probably laughing their asses off at him. They stopped before a portrait of a very fat woman sleeping in her chair.

“Wake up,” his Head of House commanded, and the fat woman stirred. She rubbed her eyes sleepily and watched them blearily.

“Bit late, isn’t it Professor?”

“I am aware of that,” McGonagall said primly, she turned back to Harry for the first time since leaving the headmistress’ office. “The password is Devil’s Snare.”

The portrait swung open to reveal a circular portal.

“I leave you here, Mr. Potter. The boy’s dorm is on the right, your room is in the highest part of the tower.” She turned to leave, but Harry called out to her.

“Professor!”

She paused, not looking back at him.

“I am really, really sorry that I got you in trouble,” he said, trying to convey how badly he felt about it. She stiffened, and he thought for a moment she would ignore him and walk away. She surprised him by turning around, her expression softened.

“I am sorry too. Lord Voldemort was right. You were my responsibility. I should have known immediately that you had fallen behind when everyone was lined up for the sorting, before that even... A great deal of trouble, and pain, might have been spared otherwise. We will both have to tread more carefully from now on. Well, it’s late Mr. Potter. I bid you goodnight.”

“Wait! One more thing!”

Now McGonagall looked curious. "Yes?"

"Um... could you... could you not mention my being a parselmouth to anyone?"

"I suppose. Why? Most would be rather proud to have such a gift."

"Well... I'd rather not have people making comparisons between me and... Him. Especially since I'm Gryffindor. They're mad enough with me as it is."

She gave him a wry smile. "Him and me, Harry. And I see where that might make some uncomfortable. On the bright side, you caused just enough chaos that no one remembered to dock Gryffindor points. That will go a long way in earning your House's forgiveness. I dare say by Christmas they'll be recalling it as something of an adventure."

"Thank you, Professor."

"You are welcome. Now off to bed with you."

She strode away, a little more spring to her step, and Harry climbed in through the portal. He was greeted by four very curious Gryffindors.

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McGonagall went immediately to her rooms and prepared for bed, completely exhausted. What an evening it had been! She couldn't remember a Welcoming Feast this chaotic since James Potter and Sirius Black put blast-ended skrewts in the Slytherin's breadbaskets. She could just imagine James laughing hysterically when his son enticed a very large and venomous Nagini into the Great Hall and then left said Great Hall to lead the entirety of the teaching staff on a mad search through the castle.

She entertained the possibility of writing to Sirius and Remus about the night's events. She imagined they would be ecstatic to know James' legacy was turning out to be just as much of a troublemaker

as the original. She dismissed the idea quickly. Who knew what those two would do if they learned their godson was in Britain? The one thing Harry James Potter did not need was his godparents violating probation to visit him right under Voldemort's nose.

Voldemort.

She shuddered. She didn't think she would ever forget the sight of him casting that awful curse on Lily's child. There had been instances before, much less often nowadays, where she had been called into his or the headmistress' office to collect a similarly punished child, but that was always after the fact. For a moment, she thought her heart had stopped when the boy had screamed.

To make matters worse Harry turned out to be a Parselmouth. A rare and coveted talent... for Slytherins. Not so much in Gryffindor. She thought it very prudent of him to want to keep it a secret, and she would help him keep it as best she could. However, this was Hogwarts. Secrets, especially the magical kind, rarely remained secrets for long. Most of the teaching staff knew already, and all it would take was a bit of overheard gossip for everyone of the student body to know as well.

Worst of all, Voldemort knew. And now the man had reason to take interest in the boy. No doubt he would find someday to take advantage of Harry's talent if given the chance. The only thing McGonagall could do was keep her young charge as sheltered from his attentions as possible. Given recent events, she wondered if she was up for the job.

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Severus returned to his quarters just after midnight. He left Bellatrix slightly tipsy and alone with their Lord. He had no doubt by the time the dictator left, he would be questioning his previous judgement in allowing the woman to become headmistress. Perhaps the dark wizard was already doing so.

He grinned wickedly at the thought of the arrogant woman being brought to heel. She might have been a fine general during the war, but it took more than clever sadism and blind loyalty to run a school. What children lacked in ambition and viciousness, they more than made up for in free time and creativity.

The Weasley twins were a perfect example. Leave them alone in a room for an hour with only their wands, and the resulting mayhem would likely be recorded in legend. Hell, leave them alone in a room with only a pack of gum and the result would be the same.

Add to that the strange political nature of the separate Houses, bloodlines, the point system, and Quidditch matches and you have a recipe for adolescent intrigue. The castle's many secrets and curiosities only magnified the possibilities and dangers. It took constant vigilance, a keen intelligence, and a firm hand to maintain order at Hogwarts. Lestrangle might have been suited to take on the position as she grew older, after several years of teaching and learning what to expect from students. However, she had taken the position and the lofty title immediately after the war as a reward, not as a job. She didn't seem to understand that running Hogwarts required a great deal of work on her part.

McGonagall would have been much better suited. He'd never say it to anyone, especially not the woman herself, but she was really the only logical choice. She had the dignity, discipline, and experience. Most of all she loved the school. She had loved it so much that even when her adored mentor and former headmaster Albus Dumbledore had fled, she remained behind.

And miraculously, she had been spared and her loyalty to the school, if not Voldemort himself, was rewarded with her continued position as Head of Gryffindor.

But she would never be headmistress. He doubted that any Gryffindor would as long as Voldemort ruled. Which left himself as the next best candidate. And he didn't think he would do that bad of a job either. He might not have Minerva's experience, but he shared her

love for the school. To a certain extent, that extended to the students as well. Empty-headed imbeciles though they were.

Potter might just present the opportunities he needed to topple Bellatrix from her pedestal and place himself in the forefront of Voldemort's positive regard. He already had a leg up on her with their Master's newest orders to gather information on Potter. No one knew more about Harry Potter in the wizarding world than himself. He was there when the boy was taken from his relatives' home, he had all his muggle records, he has his magical aptitude results, and was there when he received his wand. Add to that his goddaughter was apparently his best friend, and there was no way Bellatrix could gather more intel than him.

On the off chance that Potter should gather Voldemort's favor (a very slim possibility, but his Master was often as unpredictable as the Hogwarts staircases), then a bit of placating on his part would put him in Potter's. After all, the only real point of contention between them was that silly sketchbook.

Returning it should settle things between them rather nicely.

Severus smirked, pulling said sketchbook from the bookshelf as he made his way to his private laboratory. He opened it at random and found himself looking at James leaning over a potter's wheel. Potter the potter. How deliciously absurd. He flipped it to another page, this time featuring an infant Harry sleeping in his mother's arms as she dozed in her rocking chair.

It was filled with drawings, mostly incomplete sketches, but they outlined his life as easily a diary would have. Harry loved his parents. Harry liked football (not American football, but football), animals, and art. There weren't many pictures of other people, and no one aside from the Potters ever appeared more than once, suggesting he didn't have friends. Either the boy was very shy or his parents were over protective... which means he might be shy as a result. A weakness he could so easily exploit to gain his confidence or tear him down.

There were a lot of possibilities here. He was likely getting ahead of himself. He needed some trusted advice on how to proceed.

Summoning a quill and parchment, he sat down at his work station and started to compose a letter.

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"You appear to have all your parts," said Clyde, surveying Harry critically. "But I don't think I would be able to tell if you were missing your spleen."

"What?"

"Oh, Harry, are you alright?" Hermione asked.

"He looks pretty good to me," said Fred. "In fact, he looks bloody brilliant."

"We do have to applaud you, old chap. Fred and I haven't had this much fun since a Hufflepuff exploded the potion's classroom."

"For goodness' sake, you both are incorrigible!" she sniffed.

Harry stared at the four other Gryffindors, and smiled tiredly.

"I'm fine. I kept well out of Nagini's reach. What happened after I left? Was anyone hurt?"

They all settled into some comfortable armchairs in front of the fireplace and explained all that had happened. There had been some accidents, nothing more serious than a bump on the head, when everyone panicked and tried to leave the hall at once. After Harry led the snake away though, Voldemort and the teachers were quick to take the situation in hand. Injured students were escorted to the hospital wing for the night, and prefects escorted their own houses to their common rooms. Most of the House had waited up for a while to see if Harry turned up, but eventually went to bed.

Harry told them all about his first encounter with Nagini, about the second chase through the halls and into the secret corridors, his run in with Sir Nicholas, and visit to the headmistress' office. He didn't tell

them about being a parselmouth or about Voldemort's pardon, but said after he explained things he had been let off with a scolding. Gryffindor, amazingly, hadn't lost a single point through the entire fiasco.

Everyone was quite entertained, except for Hermione who kept exclaiming 'you could have been killed!'. They all suffered a very long lecture on 'foolish risk-taking' until even she was yawning. Finally, they all made their way to their dormitories for sleep.

It was dark as Clyde and Harry entered their bedroom, and all the other boys were fast asleep. Clyde collapsed in the nearest empty bed, and Harry did likewise in the single one remaining.

What a way to start an education, he thought to himself. Despite all that had happened that night, he couldn't help but smile a bit. Aside from the embarrassing himself in the Great Hall and the consequent cursing immediately after, it had been rather magnificent day. His best friend and he turned out to be in the same house, made friends with the Weasley twins, met his first ghost, discovered a secret passageway (if he could only find it again!), outsmarted a giant cobra, and turned out to be a parselmouth!

Although whether being a parselmouth was a good thing or not was still up for debate. One day he might tell Hermione, and he was sure she could ramble off a list of good and bad things associated with that gift.

In the meantime, he just wanted to sleep.

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Harry woke up late the next morning to a burning sensation on his hip. He bolted out of bed and pulled out his charmed pocket watch. He was already late for breakfast. All the other beds were empty, including Clyde's and he wondered why no one had bothered to wake him. Tiredly, he set about changing out of his sleep rumpled clothes, cleaned himself up, gathered his supplies for the day, and marched down to the Great Hall.

He yawned the entire way, feeling as if he hadn't slept at all the night before. His dreams had been restless, filled with secret corridors and snakes.

The Great Hall was full as he entered, but there was a distinct lessening of chatter as he walked through the door and a great deal of staring. He hesitated for a moment, then strode purposefully towards his table, forcing himself to keep his head high. But even his house's table wasn't very welcoming. Although already crowded, the few spaces left miraculously found themselves taken up when ever he drew near. Frustrated and a little hurt, he searched for some possible opening.

"Wot'cher there, Harry!" someone said. Harry turned to see the Weasley twins on either side of him. They quickly grabbed him by the arms and led him a section of the table particularly crowded with first years. Completely disregarding everyone else sitting, they made a bit of mayhem shoving everyone aside to make space for all three of them. Not a few students fell clean off their benches. Harry would have felt bad for them if they hadn't been able to so easily find new seats where he himself hadn't.

Harry found himself sitting across from Hermione and Clyde. Hermione had her nose buried in a book and hadn't noticed a thing (which Harry was glad for, as he didn't want her pity or for the twins to be lectured). Clyde was just about to fall asleep in his eggs.

"It's about time you got up," Hermione said, barely glancing up.

"Well, if someone had bothered to wake me..." he muttered, then gave Hermione a smile. "The watch works by the way. Although you might have gone a bit overboard on the heating charm."

"It's suppose to give you an incentive not to be late."

She didn't look up when she said it, but her wicked smile was a little hard to miss. Clyde's head finally slipped off his hand and landed in his eggs. They all had a good laugh at him, and Hermione gave him a strong cup of tea. Then she got out their schedules (all schedules

were the same for first years in the same house), and gave them an outline of what their week would be like.

The twins quickly got involved, and started telling them about the teachers and each of their little quirks and who assigned the most homework and who was the most generous with points and whose detentions were the worst. How much of their information was reliable, Harry didn't know. While he could easily see McGonagall handing out the most homework, he couldn't see Snape handing out the most points (especially when the twins gave each other a rather curious look when they said it).

Hermione eventually dragged them off to History of Magic, Clyde's face flecked with eggs. Professor Toure was their teacher, and Harry got the impression she was a bit of a fanatic. She had a strange philosophy regarding the necessity of dark wizards and war and violence for the progress of wizarding culture. Anyone caught criticizing Grindlewald or Morgana got a week sitting in the corner. Anyone caught criticizing Voldemort got the corner, a week's worth of detention, and had to write a letter to the man apologizing for whatever they said (this was probably the most effective deterrent). She seemed to pay extra close attention to Harry, who made it a point to say nothing through her entire class lest he let something slip.

"I sort of wish they had kept the previous professor. Professor Toure is competent and all, but I think it would have been interesting to have been taught by a ghost!" Hermione said on the way to Charms.

Professor Flitwick taught Charms and had the greatest sense of humor of all their professors. He regaled the first years by levitating all sorts of things across the room, sometimes bouncing off people's heads as they went. This was the first class where wand-work was required, and the first time Harry had the opportunity to touch his wand since he bought it. Removing it from its case, he felt an instant surge of power. Clyde, who had been dozing next to him, started and turned to him as if he'd been poked.

They were asked to levitate a feather as an exercise. Hermione and a Hufflepuff boy were the only ones to really succeed. Dean Thomas, another Gryffindor, set his on fire. Clyde split his feather in two (not

even Professor Flitwick could figure out how). Harry came close, causing his feather to skim the top of his desk but never take flight.

Next was Dark Arts and Defense, taught by Professor Quirrel. Everyone who had been looking forward to it, Harry in particular, was soon disappointed. While Quirrel seemed to know his material, the man was prone to stopping in the middle of what he was saying to sigh in the most depressing way. Clyde was caught sleeping in the middle of an explanation of the difference between hereditary curses and bloodline curses, and the only thing the other man did was look at him longingly, sigh, and continue with his lecture.

By the time lunch rolled around, Clyde finally woke up enough to ask what he had missed. Hermione proceeded to lecture him on the missed material, adding a great deal more information than was actually talked about, and scaring the poor boy rigid. She was just getting past the class material and getting into lecture mode over his irresponsibility when she spotted Draco waiting for her at the entryway to the Great Hall.

“Oh, I better got talk to him now,” she said. “I don’t want to have this conversation right in the middle of potion’s class.”

“Good luck,” said Harry. “Don’t let him make you feel bad about ending up in Gryffindor, either.”

She smiled weakly and left.

“Think he’ll eat her?” asked Clyde.

Harry shrugged and went to find a seat. This time no one attempted to crowd him out, although no one spoke to him either. The Weasley twins hadn’t arrived yet, and they both took the moment of peace to eat without fear of poisoning.

“Well, Potter, I’m surprised to see you here. I thought You-Know-Who would cursed you brain dead. Of course, no one would be able to tell the difference really.”

Harry glanced over his shoulder at Ron Weasley, sneering at him. He took a long measuring look, found the spiteful boy to not be worth risking house points over, and turned back to his soup.

"What's the matter, Potter? No witty come back? I guess your brain really did turn to mush."

Clyde was reaching for his wand, but Harry looked at him and shook his head.

"Don't bother," Harry said. "It's not like his opinion matters."

"What did you say, idiot?" snarled the boy.

"Harry, he's drawn his wand."

He didn't even bother turning to the redhead. He didn't even stop eating. Clyde was looking increasingly frantic. He kept reaching for his wand, but hesitated when he saw his friend's complete nonchalance. By now, much of Gryffindor table were turning to watch. Harry took a sip of his pumpkin juice.

"Put your wand away!" came a new voice, hissing angrily. "Do you want to lose Slytherin points on your very first day?"

"But he-"

"Is obviously above your juvenile behavior," Hermione said imperiously. Harry looked over his shoulder this time to see Draco holding Ron's wand hand down and Hermione hovering just behind them, looking furious.

"Who asked you, you filthy- ow!"

"For your sake, you better not finish that sentence," Draco snarled, his hand now crushing the redhead's wrist. "Now come on. I think you and I should have a discussion about the difference between Slytherin and Gryffindor conduct. Because right now, Potter is being more Slytherin than you."

At this the youngest Weasley brother turned pink around his freckles. Reluctantly, he put his wand away and settled for shooting Harry (who had already turned away) a venomous look.

"We'll settle this later," he said, and stormed off towards his own house' table. Harry waved goodbye without looking. He could just imagine the redhead turning purple like his uncle used to. Draco let out an exasperated sigh.

"Are you going to join us?"

"No," said Hermione. "I prefer more civilized company. Thank you."

"Suite yourself. After classes?"

"You're welcome to join me in the library."

"I'll see you then."

"Good luck, Draco."

A moment later Hermione settled in beside Harry.

"You handled that really well," she complimented. "I don't think I could have ignored someone pointing a wand at my back."

"What was he going to do? I doubt he knows many, if any more curses than I do. And definitely not something that would hurt me. A Finite Incantatem later and I would be fine, he'd have detention at the least and have lost his house points."

"Bloody hell, Malfoy was right, you are more Slytherin than Ron."

Harry frowned darkly at Clyde, but inside he was more than a little uncomfortable with the comparison. He was Gryffindor. The hat had put him in Gryffindor. So what if it had suggested Voldemort's house first?

Transfiguration turned out to be as difficult as Harry thought it would be. While the transfiguration of a desk into a pig was pretty funny, it

was followed by copious amounts of note taking, and then a practice exercise. They were trying to turn matches into needles. Several matches simply caught fire. Harry's sprouted a silver leaf. Hermione came closest by making it silvery and pointy at the end.

Lunch and then Potions with Slytherins immediately afterwards. It was... interesting. Apparently, the Weasley twins hadn't lied. Snape really did hand out the most points... to his own house. He kept giving simple questions to his house and then impossible questions to Gryffindor (although Hermione managed to get hers right) and then railed at their stupidity. Harry wasn't sure if he was angry with the bias or amused by the ridiculously immature behavior. At least the man ignored him- much to Ron's disappointment. It wasn't until class was dismissed for the day that the man finally graced him with his unpleasant attention.

"Potter, stay behind."

Clyde gave him a sorrowful wave goodbye and Hermione rolled her eyes.

"He's talking to the teacher, not the grim reaper! We'll be in the library, Harry! Come join us when your done."

He said nothing, his attention on Snape. He hoped the man would reveal some sort of clue as to why he had been held, but his expression was completely passive as he looked over his lesson plans. Soon, they were alone, but neither said anything. When Snape looked him straight at him, Harry avoided his eyes. Snape smirked.

"I see you're not hopeless, Potter. You're obviously capable of learning from past experiences. Did my goddaughter inform you I was a legilimens?"

"No. But she said Voldemort was. He did it to me last night, and it felt sort of like what you did at the Dursley's."

Snape smirked. "Your memory is really rather remarkable. I bet you can still remember their first names as well. What they looked like, the sound of their voices, their habits, their many and varied abuses.

Most children who spend longer than a week at WYRA can't recall anything more than a few vague impressions."

“Er...well... I don’t either, it’s just... you left something of an impression.”

“You flatter me... or you lie horribly. Can you guess which one I’m leaning more towards?”

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“Now, Potter, I have the authority to send you back to WYRA until your past is appropriately meaningless. However, since I do not wish to erase the knowledge you have gained from your summer lessons or upset my goddaughter I am willing to overlook this little anomaly in exchange for your cooperation... and honesty.”

Emerald eyes flashed, coming dangerously direct with ebony.

“What do you want?”

[illegible]

Chapter 13: The Gathering of Serpents

"Let's move somewhere a little more private, shall we?"

Snape rose from his chair and made his way to a door that none of the other students were allowed to enter. Hermione had told him that it was her godfather's private laboratory, and filled with all his experiments.

"Are you coming, Potter?"

"... No way. You could be a child molester."

The look on the man's face was decidedly unamused. In fact, he looked downright livid at the suggestion.

"Ten points from Gryffindor for insulting a professor. Potter, I would thank you not to have such torrid thoughts about my character."

"That's not fair! How could I possibly trust you? Your blackmailing me! And so what if you're not going to molest me? You could do anything else you wanted, like cut me open and drain my blood for your potion experiments."

"You have a rather sick imagination, you know that?"

"This is kind of a sick world."

"I beg your pardon?"

Harry said nothing, shuffling his feet and looking off at nothing. Snape made an irritated sound.

"You realize that teachers take an Unbreakable Vow not to intentionally harm their students upon accepting a Hogwarts position?"

It was the first Harry had heard of it, but it did sound like the sort of thing the school would require. He merely shook his head.

“Well, they do. Now will you come or do you wish to further insult me and risk twenty more house points?”

“Why do we need to do this privately anyway,” Harry muttered, reluctantly following the man into his personal domain. The lab was even larger than the classroom, and several intricate pieces of equipment were set here and there. There were rows of locked cabinets. No doubt they stored the man’s many rare and expensive potions ingredients. It all made Harry feel very out of place. The doors slammed shut, making him jump.

“Because this is in regards to the events of last night. I believe since my goddaughter isn’t shooting a hundred questions at you a minute regarding your recently discovered talent and Draco isn’t pursuing your friendship like the politician he is, you have kept it to yourself? Look me in the eye when you answer.”

Moving to the other side of a work table, Harry finally looked straight at him. In the dark gloom of the laboratory, his black eyes looked unnatural and eerie.

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“What do you mean ‘why’?”

“Why have you not told them? It is a rare and precious gift. Anyone would be honored to have it.”

Harry snorted. “Anyone who doesn’t mind being compared with Voldemort, you mean.”

“That’s Lord Voldemort, and I suggest you not forget it. Are you suggesting being compared with the most powerful wizard in Britain is somehow a bad thing? Please help me here, Gryffindor logic escapes me.”

“Exactly. You’re a Slytherin. Voldemort’s a Slytherin. I’m a Gryffindor. I don’t want to spend my life with everyone saying I should have been

put in Slytherin. I'm not in Slytherin. I'm never going to be in Slytherin. I don't want to be in Slytherin. I am where I'm suppose to be, and no one has the right to suggest otherwise. Would you want people saying you should have been in Ravenclaw because you're smart with potions?"

Snape seemed to consider that. While it irked him that the boy should be so completely ungrateful for his gift, he couldn't argue that the resulting attention might not be all positive. But that was not all Potter was thinking when he decided to keep his talent to himself. No, there was a definite sense of insecurity and self-loathing at the thought of being compared to Voldemort, if not Slytherins in general.

So the boy didn't like Voldemort. He certainly wouldn't be the first, but if his Master wished to use the boy in the future that information could prove invaluable. If Potter ever learned exactly what his parent's role in the war was before they fled Britain, that might further complicate matters.

"You do have a point, but you can not hope to keep this secret long. You seemed to have no control over when you speak parselmouth, and I dare say the school is riddled with snakes. Magical statues, care of magical creature's class, personal pets, and a very wild forest not a stones throw from the castle... it will only take one encounter. One slip of the tongue..."

"But until then..." Harry said, shrugging.

"Yes, until then you get to play the good little Gryffindor. You may go."

Harry quickly made his way to the door.

"But be prepared for additional questions later," Snape said, smirking. "My Master and I will likely have more."

A shiver ran up his spine as he walked away, his thoughts now clutching at dreadful images of Snape and Voldemort snickering over their afternoon tea while they discussed his downfall. His stomach lurched, and he rushed into the nearest bathroom. It was, unfortunately, the girl's lavatory. He didn't mind so much with his

head half way in the toilet, but once his stomach was empty he was glad it appeared to be empty.

"I'm starting to hate my life," he mumbled to himself.

"Welcome to the club."

He let out a startled cry and stumbled out of the stall until he smack into one of the sinks. Floating above the stalls was a ghost of a rather geeky looking girl, her arms crossed as she looked imperiously down at him.

"You know this is the girl's bathroom."

"Er... yes, well... It was kind of an emergency."

"Of course it was. No one ever comes in to my bathroom unless they absolutely have to. No one wants to be bothered by plain, moping, Moaning Myrtle."

Seeing the ghost looked as if she were about to cry, he rushed to come up with words to placate her.

"Well-well, I don't usually make it a habit to visit girls' bathrooms, b-but I'm glad I did this time. I haven't met very many interesting ghosts, you know."

Immediately, her watery eyes seemed to dry and she threw him a rather odd looking smile. Much to Harry's horror, he realized she was trying to be coy.

"You think I'm interesting?"

"Er... oh, yeah, definitely. I mean, the only ghost I've met is Sir Nicholas. I've seen a few other ghosts from afar, but they're all... you know... old."

She let out a mousey little giggle.

"It's true... I'm the youngest, newest ghost in Hogwarts. Myrtle Tetherwood. Eleven years old, died 1948 in this very bathroom. And you are?"

"Harry Potter, at your service."

"Hee hee, nice to meet you. What brings you to my little purgatory? I hope you aren't seriously sick, but if something should happen you are welcome to share my toilet."

"Er... that's very...um, generous of you, but I'm not that sick. I just had a little chat with Snape is all."

"Oh him. Well, I guess that explains it. Every so often I get girls coming in here crying about 'that greasy, wretched man'. As if they know the meaning of wretched. If they had to put up with half of what I had to with Emily Hornby, then they wouldn't be such babies! I mean she the reason I died after all. But I got her back! I made sure her Hogwarts years were the most miserable seven years of her life. Hee hee hee..."

"Er... that's...um... Good for you. If you don't mind my asking, how did you die? Did Emily Hornby kill you?"

"Oh, no. I could beat her down in a real fight," she said. Harry frankly didn't think she looked like she could fight off a determined toddler. "No, I ran to the bathroom after she made fun of my glasses. When I finally stepped out I ran into a set of big yellow eyes, and then... I died."

He couldn't help but gape. There were things in the school that could kill you like that? Actually, now that he thought about it, it wasn't that odd. Voldemort was said to have office in one of the towers after all.

"Oh, that's awful."

"Isn't it? Hee hee. You better clean yourself up and go. Snape patrols the corridors for stray students after he finishes grading papers. He likes to give Gryffindors and Hufflepuffs detentions for lolly-gagging."

Taking her advice, he went to the set of sinks to wash out his mouth and cleanse his hands. He was curious to note that one of the sinks had a faucet designed to look like a snake. Remembering what Snape had said about magic statues, Harry whispered a little hello to it while Myrtle was busy rambling on about how awful it was being dead. To his amusement, the faucet hissed back:

“Could you please shut her up? Hee hee?”

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Saturday afternoon found Professor Snape climbing the stairs to the far Eastern tower. The first week of term, always one of the most stressful, had long worn away at his nerves. There would be so many detentions this week the Sleuw’s wouldn’t have to lifted a finger until the Monday after next.

He paused at one of the tower windows, looking out across the grounds to see a few of those students who had escaped punishment. Draco and Hermione were headed towards the lake, hand in hand. Following a ways behind was Potter. He was carrying a large basket with the help of one his new Slytherin girls, Natalie Cypher. Bringing up the rear was Clyde Houghton, sandwiched uncomfortable between Crabbe and Goyle, and Ron Weasley with a blanket under his arm trailing behind.

Gryffindors and Slytherins out having a picnic together. If violence didn’t break out, then Hogwarts would have one more miracle added to a long list of them. Shaking his head, Snape climbed the rest of the way up the tower until he came to a blank wall.

“Verdania,” he said, tapping on of the stones. Nothing seemed to happen, but he moved forward anyway, passing through the wall with all the ease of a ghost.

“Cutting it close, aren’t you, Professor?” Bellatrix chided, lounging comfortably on a chaise. Pettigew had pinioned himself almost out of view between a set of bookcases and tried to pretend he was invisible.

Their master sat behind a magnificent mahogany desk, scanning files while a quill hovered off to the side, making notes on the man's unspoken thoughts. He looked very much at ease in the school tower, and Snape couldn't help but think for the thousandth time that perhaps Voldemort had chosen Lestrangle as headmistress because he knew he'd end up running the school anyway.

"The dungeons are a bit further away than your office, Headmistress," he said dismissively, taking a seat in one of the reading chairs. "Besides, I saw something interesting on the way here that I thought relevant to our meeting."

Voldemort looked up from his papers, to show the man he had his attention.

"Potter is out on by the lake having a picnic..."

Bellatrix let out a rude snort.

"...with some Slytherins."

Now the woman looked stunned. She stood from her seat and stalked over to a telescope by the open window. She looked through it silently for a long time.

"Is that Draco?" she asked finally.

"Yes, and your niece Hermione Granger. She is Potter's best friend since they met in summer lessons. They're quite close I hear, and since Hermione is inseparable from Draco..."

"Interesting," said Voldemort, and the quill beside him was suddenly writing very quickly. "So he has not been taken in by Gryffindor's anti-Slytherin sentiment?"

"I don't think Potter realizes he's supposed to dislike Slytherins," Pettigrew spoke, able to control his stutter with Nagini gone and Voldemort currently in a pleasant mood. "No one dares say anything

bad about Slytherins in front of Granger, and even fewer talk to Potter... if he knows, he doesn't care."

"He's more interested with keeping peace with my goddaughter than proving he's another Gryffindor neophyte," Snape concluded.

"Draco encourages this?" Bellatrix asked, sounding disappointed.

"Draco is like Potter, he's only interested in keeping Hermione happy. He's already a Slytherin prince, he doesn't feel the need to prove it to anyone. He keeps the other first years in line and off both Gryffindor's backs. Whether they will become friends or not is anyone's guess. Again it probably depends on Hermione."

"When did that little mudblood become such a player?" she grumbled, stalking back to her spot on the chaise. Snape turned an icy glare at her.

"Your niece is not a player. Potter and her have a genuine friendship, and Draco and her have always been close. You, 'Cissa, and Lucius were the same way."

Bellatrix sneered at him, but said nothing more. Voldemort looked amused with them both.

"I want you to talk with Draco, Severus," he said, "Encourage him to get along with Potter. Keeping an eye on him will be easier if he has friends in Slytherin."

"I will, my Lord."

"Now, all of you, tell me what you have gathered on the boy."

Pettigrew went first, as he had the least to say. He confirmed mostly what they already knew. Potter's best friend was Granger. His second closest friend was Clyde Houghton. He was on the outs with most of his house because of the negative attention he'd brought to Gryffindor during the welcoming feast, but that was starting to die down. There were a few tidbits about his habits- the boy was almost miserly with his school supplies (although he spared up enough scrap

paper to doodle rather unflattering pictures of Snape and Ronald Weasley), was usually quiet and reserved, and was the object of some affection for the Weasley twins (he suspected Fred had a thing for the younger boy). Nothing fantastical had happened in the first week, and any anti-Voldemort sentiments never went beyond vague grumblings. Once Pettigrew was done, he was allowed to leave, but with a newly assigned task and small bundle under his arm.

Bellatrix went next. Her information was limited to official documents, most of it involving Potter's life before he moved to England. He attended a German muggle primary school in Cologne, and received fair marks. He was not part of any teams, but there were several awards for art, including first place for a city wide competition. The Potters had settled as artists in a small studio apartment, and did fairly well for themselves. James Potter dealt mostly with clay sculpture and dabbled in glass and metalwork. Lily Potter was interested mostly in watercolors. There was no evidence of magic being used or even talked about in their house, although without access to German Wizarding records there was no way to be certain. There was nothing to suggest that Harry knew his parents were anything other than eccentric muggles. They were shot to death in their studio by a robber, who overdosed on heroine before he was ever caught. Their work had been auctioned off, and placed in their son's trust fund. It was all muggle money, but it put Harry in fairly good standing.

Or would have if the relatives he was living with hadn't been bleeding it out as fast as they could. Potter's relatives were as muggle as they came. His aunt was a housewife, his uncle sold drills, and his cousin was likely the biggest, stupidest boy in the county. There was no sign of a British education, although WYRA reports said he was fluent in English and competent in math and science.

"He was either home schooled, self-taught, or years ahead before he came to England. Despite his parents withholding his wizarding heritage, he did well in Timbal's summer lessons. He'll be no more handicapped than the other muggleborns, perhaps less with my niece lecturing in his ear twenty-four-seven."

“And how does Mr. Potter feel regarding his parent’s death? Is he angry? Depressed? Does he still grieve?” Voldemort asked, schemes and manipulations flying across the parchment beside him.

“I don’t know. There’s no psychological records. He never went to a counselor, WYRA never reported any behavioral abnormalities, and he seems well adjusted.”

“But one can’t forget coming home to find their parents with their brains splattered across the living room,” Snape said, his finger following the lip of his tea cup.

“What? Where did you find that information. It’s not in the reports.”

“I don’t put much faith in second hand information,” he said, looking up her with a rather wicked expression. “Neither should you. Your records are woefully incomplete and misleading.”

“Really, Severus?” asked the Dark Lord, looking intrigued and amused at once. “Why don’t you fill us in?”

Snape’s report was definitely more interesting. He had samples of Harry’s art work from WYRA, no masterpieces by any stretch of the imagination, but the talent was clearly there. He had his own first hand accounts of the boy’s relatives, his living conditions, the extent of his first outburst of accidental magic, his magical aptitude test, the presentation of his wand, glimpses and impressions from their brief connection through occlumency, and a myriad of other pieces of information with the promise of more to come.

“He may not be anti-Slytherin, but he holds no love for you, my Lord. He still retains his memories of his parents and his former life, and though he doesn’t object to being removed from the Dursely’s, he does seem to resent your policy of removing muggleborns from their families. He has a rather naive belief that muggles should be given a chance to care for their wizarding children.”

“Do you think removing these memories would help endear him to me?”

Snape thought for a moment, and was surprised at how quickly the answer came to him.

"No. He's a Gryffindor. If he believes you or anyone has acted against him in such a manner, he'll mark you as an enemy for the rest of his life. It's better to work around his stigma, unsettle the foundations of his grudge. Show him a kindness and he will loath himself for having thought you incapable of it."

"More flies with honey, is it? And how precisely would I show this... kindness?"

"As an opportunity presents itself. Doing it now would only make him wary."

"So sit and wait. You know I am not a patient man, Severus."

"He is not going anywhere, my Lord."

Voldemort chuckled darkly. His grin was definitely predatory when he looked back at his servants. Lestrage had come up short. No surprise really. Her position allowed her access to many records, but limited her exposure to the students themselves. Severus, on the other hand, had exceeded his expectations. His duties as both a Hogwarts teacher and a WYRA official had placed him in a very convenient position to gather intelligence on his target. That the man was on good terms with some of Potter's closest associates was just icing on the cake.

Plans were starting to take shape in his mind, possibilities unraveling. The quill beside him went about like maddened humming bird, flicking spots of green ink as it went. He could imagine his enemies rolling in their graves as Harry fell into his grasp, molded into something dark and beautiful and owned.

"You have done well, both of you," he said, mostly to ease the headmistress' obvious resentment at having been so clearly outdone. "But as Severus is in the best position to watch Potter, I will charge him with keeping me informed of his activities. I'll expect a report at least once every two weeks. You may both go."

Severus hesitated a moment, and Voldemort gestured for him to speak his mind.

“Potter doesn’t know about his parents yet, but it’s only a matter of time before someone lets the truth slip despite the Taboo on their names. How do you wish to handle the matter when it arises?”

Voldemort thought for a moment.

"I will trust your judgement and cunning in this matter, Severus. Handle it in a matter that curve in rebellious actions on his part," he said, then paused as another thought came to him. "Restrict access to his family vault. The financial hold Hogwarts has over him may prove useful in the future. You have my permission to use whatever means you deem necessary."

Severus bowed in acknowledgment. The two servants exited the room together..

On the stairs, Bellatrix whirled around to snarl at the other man.

“Who do you think you are, showing me up like that? Know your place.”

Severus merely smirked.

“My place, dear Bella, has always been by our master’s side, serving him in every capacity I can... Even those that you can not.”

She hissed at him like a savage cat, whirling around to stalk down the stairs. He watched her go, pondering his own foolishness for provoking her. She was still the headmistress after all and in a position to make his life... difficult. He gave a mental shrug. Oh well. Even potion masters needed to find a little fun where they could.

[illegible]

Sorry, not a lot happened in this chapter. More happens next chapter and I hoped to have it posted earlier next week.

Chapter 14: The Prince's Choice of Steed

The week past as a flurry of exciting new experiences and unrealized fears.

His first experiences with spell casting had been discouraging, but he soon got over it when it became apparent that he was still doing better than a lot of his classmates, even the Pure Blooded ones. Professor Flitwick had even commented that he seemed to have a rather high magic level (this after he tried to charm a tea cup to keep tea warm and melted the cup).

Homework was an unpleasant necessity, but it usually went quickly with Hermione's guidance. They spent their afternoons just after class in the library with Draco and his three little goons (who remained blessedly quiet- even if Ron gave everyone dirty looks), Natalie, and Clyde. If they got done early enough they'd find an empty classroom and work in secret on spell casting- mostly charms and transfigurations. There the boys let their competitive sides come out, and levitation practice quickly turned into a game of keep away of Crabbe's quill.

Harry wasn't sure still if he liked Hermione's brother. He always seemed to be testing Harry to see if he was good enough to hang out with. Draco's friends, with the exception of Natalie, were a bit dim in his opinion as well. The blond only seemed to tolerate them for his own benefit. But occasionally, Draco would do or say something clever or playful or daring, and he could see what Hermione admired in him.

It wasn't as if he had a lot of alternatives in friends either. While Gryffindor's hostility had definitely mellowed through the week, his association with Slytherin seemed to ruffle a few feathers. Hermione had an excuse, since Draco was her brother, but Clyde and he were seen as conspiring with the enemy it seemed. No one was blatantly rude about it (yet) but no one seemed inclined to invite either boys in some house activities. That some of these people were friends with Clyde during summer lessons, seemed to really hurt the boy but he said nothing about it.

Fred and George Weasley had tried and failed to get Harry to accompany them on some pranking excursions. They seemed to think he'd derive some satisfaction from turning people's hair green for their less than fair treatment of him. Harry didn't give a damn. As far as he was concerned he had at least two good friends who stood by him and enough to do to occupy his time.

Although, the offer to help hex Snape was tempting.

Aside from the absurd deduction of points from Snape (he had to do two extra credit assignments and stay after in Charms to help clean up the piles of charmed feathers floating about to earn back said points), Snape had returned to ignoring him in class and had asked no more questions. But every so often he'd get this strange feeling the man was watching him.

Things had started to settle into a routine, until the following Thursday when Clyde woke him up ridiculously early by stampeding around the room.

"Clyde, what are you doing?" he grumbled, rubbing his eyes sleepily.

"Oh, sorry, Harry," the other boy said, but continued to run around in circles. "I've lost my other sock."

"Then wear a different pair," he suggested, and tried to lay back down for another hour's worth of sleep.

"No, I've lost my lucky pair of socks. I'm going to need them today."

"Hm? Why?" he asked, without opening his eyes.

"Harry, don't you remember? It's Thursday. Flying lessons!"

Now that woke him up. How could he have forgotten? It had been the only thing the first years had been able to talk about since they were announced on Monday.

Not that he wasn't excited either, of course.

The only one who didn't seem to be looking forward to it all was Hermione. From the manner Draco smirked and Hermione blushed when the topic was brought up, he rather thought Hermione must have finally found a subject she couldn't learn from a book.

Reluctantly, Harry got out of bed and prepared for the day. He found Clyde's sock under his bed, where Bilgerat (as he was dubbed by Clyde) had dragged it to insulate his rat nest. The rodent had popped up shortly after the first day of classes, and seemed quite intent on keeping close to his rescuer. Harry wasn't certain if he was flattered or irritated.

"Hey, what's that?"

Harry turned to see what had Clyde's attention. Sitting on Harry's trunk was a small leather bound book. He couldn't recall ever seeing it before, and it certainly hadn't been there the night before.

"I don't know. Someone must have forgotten it or put it there thinking it was mine."

Vaguely curious, he picked up the book. There was no title on the cover, and when he opened it to the cover page, it read "Diary of-". Where a name should have been was a water damaged smear of red ink. He could just make out an 'o' and an 'R', but the rest was illegible.

"Ooohhh! Let's take a peek," Clyde said, reaching for the book. Harry immediately moved it out of his friend's reach.

"No. It's someone's private thoughts. If it were me, I would kill anyone who made fun at them."

"If it such a big deal, then he shouldn't have left it out where anyone could find it."

"No."

Clyde pouted and glared and whined, and Harry thoroughly ignored him. As the other boys rose misty eyed from their beds, he asked if any of them owned a journal. No one fessed up to it, and seemed

rather irritated with him for thinking they'd have something so 'girly'. Mystified and now suspecting someone was playing a prank on him, Harry resolved to give the journal to McGonagall. There was probably some sort of spell she knew that would reveal the owner and if anyone had tried to prank him then they would soon regret it.

He stuck the book in his pocket and headed down with Clyde to breakfast. Hermione was also up early, her nose buried in 'Quidditch Through the Ages', trying to find any tips she could. Just watching her stress gave Harry a headache. The constant, nervous babble about brooms and Quidditch and magical travel she poured out didn't make him feel any better. In fact, his headache only grew worse as classes began, and he began to wonder if he hadn't caught a cold. When it was finally time for flying lessons, Harry emptied his pockets and set them on his bag so they wouldn't be damaged in case he fell off a broom and then went to line up with the rest of the first year Gryffindors and Slytherins. With fresh air in his lungs and sun warm on his skin, Harry felt his headache recede a bit, but he still wanted to go and take a nap somewhere.

Professor Gimms regarded them all with piercing blue eyes, looking with a practiced gaze for the troublemakers and the slackers. In addition to being their flying coach and official referee for Hogwarts Quidditch matches, Gimms coordinated several clubs including a Riding Club (which usually involved a lot more than just horses) and Fencing club, and assisted Quirrell in some of his more 'physical' lessons. There were rumors running around the school that he had once been an Auror, and others that he had been a Death Eater. Harry thought about asking Hermione about him, but settling his curiosity wasn't worth the rambling monologue she'd end up spewing at him.

"Now," Professor Gimms began, "before we get started, let me set down some ground rules. Firstly, I don't care how good of a flyer you think you are. You will not ride your broom any higher or faster than I allow, and you will certainly never ride your broom when I am not present. If you're stupid enough to disobey me, then you will suffer the greatest degree of punishment I am able to legally inflict upon you... if you don't break your stupid neck first."

Harry wondered why all the teachers here were so grouchy. Only Flitwick seemed to have any sense of humor. They lived in an enchanted castle for goodness sake, not an orc fortress. While he was busy thinking these morose thoughts and ignoring his throbbing head, Gimms was rearranging the students. He suddenly found himself surrounded by Draco's goons, the surliest of them being Ron who was directly to his right. The redhead gave him a mutinous look.

"Careful," Harry said, sounding bored, "Your face might stick like that."

If anything the look grew even angrier.

"Now, hold out your wand hand towards your broom- like so, and command your broom firmly and confidently. Up!" Immediately, the professor's broom leapt into his hand. "Well, what are you waiting for?"

Harry watched as the other students commanded their brooms. He was vaguely amused to see Hermione's merely rolled over and seemed to fall asleep. Draco's broom found his hand immediately, but his was about the only one that did. The rest of the brooms hobbled or bounced a bit, but didn't rise. Harry, after seeing there was no way he could actually embarrass himself, held out his hand.

"Up," he said evenly. The broom sprung immediately into his grasp. A strange sensation ran through him, very similar to the one he felt the day he received his wand. It was a sense of rightness. A spontaneous understanding that no ill could ever find him when it was in his hands.

"Impossible," Ron muttered, "You cheated somehow. No way a filthy mudblood-

"Could ever succeed where a pureblood failed?"

"Why you son of a-

"Malfoy, Potter, well done," called Gimms, looking suddenly in a much better mood. "Five points to Slytherin and Gryffindor each. The rest of

you, don't get discouraged. Confidence is key. If you don't believe the broom will come to you, then it won't. Continue practicing, and then I'll show you all how to mount your brooms."

While Harry waited for the others to catch up, he repeated the same exercise until he was quickly bored. Soon he began testing to see if he could make the broom rise part of the way or make it hover. Meanwhile, Ron grew increasingly red as his broom simply flopped about, until with a particularly frustrated 'UP!' his broom leapt up- and missed his hand altogether to conk him in the nose.

Harry pretended he hadn't noticed, but it was hard to keep a straight face with everyone else snickering. Ron didn't remain the center of their amusement for long. Just as everyone was starting to get the hand of summoning their brooms, the class was interrupted by a sixth year Ravenclaw in Quidditch robes running up to Professor Gimms.

"Sir! Someone's bewitched the quidditch equipment! The snitch is smashing into people like a bludger and the quaffles are flying all over the place," the boy exclaimed, looking very unsettled. "It's those Weasley twins, I know it! Who else would pull such a ridiculous prank? And on school property no less!"

Harry felt his lips twitch into a smile, but quickly hid it when he saw Professor Grimms good mood vanish as quickly as it had come.

"You all remain where you are! Under no circumstances are you to attempt to fly. I will be back momentarily."

With that, Professor Gimms disappeared with the Ravenclaw boy to the other side of the castle. No sooner than the man was out of sight, did Draco mount his broom and hover comfortably just above the ground. Hermione told him to get down, but the more she complain the higher he seemed to go until she decided to completely ignore him.

"What about you, Potter? You seem to have some talent with a broom. Care to come up and enjoy the view?"

If his head wasn't throbbing and he were in a better mood, Harry would have been very tempted. Instead he favored Draco a bored glance and merely shrugged.

"I'll wait."

Draco gave a mocking pout, but quickly returned to hovering in slow circles around the other students, preening under their fascinated stares. Hermione grew considerably more huffy, but said nothing. Gradually, even Draco seemed to grow bored (or perhaps he was beginning to worry about Gimmis catching him) and began to descend when something behind Harry and Hermione caught his attention. Harry followed the other boy's gaze and found Ron standing next to his book bag, holding the mysterious journal.

"Hey! What are you doing in my bag?"

When the redhead looked towards him, he felt his insides squirm as he was stared at with such a twisted look of glee.

"You know," Ron said, "this isn't the sort of thing you should just leave lying around. You're just begging to have someone read it."

Harry began stalking towards Ron.

"It's not mine. I'm turning it in to McGonagall. Now hand it over."

"Why? If it's not yours, then I'm sure you won't mind me borrowing it. I promise I'll hand it over to a teacher later. You know...like Snape."

"Ron," snapped Natalie, "Don't be such a dick. Just give it back to him."

"You had no right snooping in Harry's bag! If we told a teacher, you'd really get it! Even your Head of House wouldn't approve of you stealing!"

"Who asked you, you mudblood harpies?!"

“That’s it!” Harry snarled, rushing at the redhead who panicked and started to run away. “Come back here, you little weasel.”

Ron spun around, wand in hand. His broom still clutched in his hand, Harry swung it and knocked the wand from his hand and into the lake. Ron stumbled back, nearly falling over, and snatched up a broom. Despite his miserable performance thus far, the redhead managed to mount his broom and lift himself shakily into the air. He wobbled a bit and looked extremely uncomfortable without his feet on the ground, but still managed to keep his hold on the diary and sneer down mockingly at Harry.

But only for a moment.

Harry was on his broom and hovering right beside him, staring him dead even in the eye. The broom rested calmly under his grip, neither wobbling nor wavering. Harry took it all for granted, trusting his broom and his body to know how to keep him levitating. His opponent looked barely able to hold onto his broom and remain aloft at the same time. Yet their brooms continue to hover, and as Ron instinctively moved away from Harry they were soon almost fifty feet up and over the lake.

“Give me the book and apologize to Hermione and Natalie,” he said, “Or I’ll knock you off your broom and you can swim back to Hogwarts.”

“Harry, get down from there! It’s dangerous and the professor will catch you any minute! Hurry up or you’re going to get expelled,” Hermione pleaded.

Draco, who had been silently watching the conflict unravel, also spoke up.

“You heard her, Weasley. Fight it out if you want, but do it on the ground.”

Ron looked decidedly unsure. Harry thought him even dimmer than before. It should have been obvious that he couldn’t win this fight... at least not in the air. Ron finally seemed to come to that conclusion as well. He glowered at Harry.

“We’ll continue this later,” he snarled.

In a final act of vindictiveness, he hurled the diary in his hand as hard as he could out onto the lake. Harry watched it arch through the air and time seemed to slow. In his hands, his broom suddenly felt alive, and he could feel its will and desire like a physical sensation. And he was suddenly streaking past a startled Ron.

The diary began to fall and Harry instinctively angled the broom towards the water. He could see his own dark shadow grow as he reached the water’s surface, halloed in the glittering reflection of the sun. Her drew closer and closer, until he could see beyond his shadow to the strange shapes of plant life and giant fish (mermaids?) and then leveled out. He clung tight to his broom, tucking in his arms and legs to increase his control. So close the water’s surface he was, that if he had unwrapped his leg from the wood it would surely have hit the water and sent him crashing. But his leg didn’t drop down. Instead his arm reached out, and with perfect ease he snatched the falling diary right out of the air.

His goal achieved, he felt himself slow and carefully rose a little higher and made a slow turn back towards the shore. The sight that met him nearly made him loose hold of his broom. Professor Gimms stood stony faced with Ron’s ear twisted in his grip, but he had eyes only for Harry. He hovered for a long moment, uncertainty and the first inklings of fear seeping into his psyche. Finally, knowing that prolonging the inevitable wouldn’t make it any better, he steadily flew to eventually stand beside the professor.

“The both of you will return to your dormitories immediately, while I finish the rest of the lesson. I will have a word with both of your Heads of House to work out a thorough and suitable punishment for your stupidity,” Professor Gimms said, scowling darkly at both of them.

Both boys stared guiltily at the ground and said nothing. He released Ron, who immediately went to collect his things and disappeared into the castle. Harry shuffled passed, but not before the man snatched up the diary and gave his hearty slap upside the head with it.

“Dunderhead!”

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The wait for Professor Gimms punishment was perhaps the second most nerve-wracking wait of his young life. The first had been his trip to the Headmistress’ office, but the longer the time dragged on the more intense his nervousness became. His imagination provided all sorts of cruel acts and bizarre punishments that might be inflicted on him.

Perhaps they would forbid him from flying ever again. Or lock him in the dungeons for a month. With the Nagini incident not even two weeks old, they might decide he was too much of a troublemaker and expel him.

These were the tamer punishments.

The more severe ones involved Voldemort and the cruciatus curse. Professor Snape and a cane or whip or a potion so vile it couldn’t be taught in school. And worse of all was the thought that they might snap his wand. He didn’t know if he’d be able to survive that.

To make matters worse, it would all be for nothing.

His irritation so great for the blasted journal had motivated him to opening it and discerning its owner so he could wail at him or even her. It was empty. Aside from the ruined cover page there wasn’t even a smidgen of ink or pencil anywhere inside it. One of the other boys probably got it as gift from a relative and decided they didn’t want it, tossing it on his trunk and refusing to claim it. He was so tempted to throw it in the fireplace.

However, he decided to hold onto it when he finally made his case to McGonagall. He doubt he’d get out of punishment, but proof that he hadn’t actually started the trouble might go a long way. He could just imagine Ron attempting to explain himself to Snape, and result was rather amusing in his own head. Of course, Snape wouldn’t deduct

points like McGonagall might. Everyone new the man would sooner assign a detention than deduct a single point from his own House.

"Hey, Harry," came a voice behind him, followed by a another very similar.

"We heard that you-"

Fred and George were suddenly sitting on either side of him.

"Our bright and shining hero-"

"Had a delightful adventure-"

"With our prat of a younger brother-"

"And are now awaiting your execution."

Harry ignored them, in no mood to be teased. Instead of being dissuaded, they crowded in closer until they were practically snuggling with him.

"We heard you performed brilliantly on your broom. Like a professional instead of a first timer," said Fred, putting his arm around Harry's shoulder.

"Any thought to joining the quidditch team? Our last real Seeker left last year, and this year we had to put Angelina in that position. She's normally a Chaser, but no one else is small enough for the position," said George, putting his arm around Harry's other shoulder.

"She's alright, mind you, but we need some real talent this year if we're going to finally beat Slytherin in the championship."

Despite himself, Harry felt his curiosity rise.

"Does Slytherin win often then?"

The twins shared a rare disgruntled look.

“Try every year. At least since Voldemort took the school. He comes to almost all of the games where Slytherin play,” said Fred. “I think his presence intimidates the rival players into losing. Especially the Seekers.”

“And I suppose you want me to be a Seeker?”

“Well, you are the right build,” said George.

“And have good speed, or so I’ve heard,” continued Fred.

“Plus you must have had good eye and hand coordination to catch that book while flying that close to the water.”

“And of course, Voldemort already hates you, so... Hey, no loss there.”

“Oh thanks! Why don’t you just stamp ‘Please Cruciatus Me’ on my forehead?”

“And mar that beautiful soft skin of yours?”

“Never!”

With that, the twins really did snuggle up to Harry, pressing their freckled cheeks to his. Harry let out a frustrate sound and shoved them both off and away from him, snagged a pillow and smacked them both upside the head with it. His mistake was soon apparent when both twins shared a grin and took up their own fluffy weapons. The pillow fight that resulted soon grew beyond just the three and quickly involved anyone unfortunate enough inside or passing through the commons room.

When Professor McGonagall and Professor Gimms finally arrived to discuss Harry’s punishment, they were immediately coated in a fine cloud of feathers and a suddenly tense silence. Harry quickly tossed his half ruined pillow behind the sofa and hoped neither had noticed. Judging by the slight twitch in the corner of their Head of House’s eye, it seemed a futile hope.

"Weasleys, I want this room cleaned up and the pillows repaired by the time I return or you'll be cleaning more than just feathers out of the owlry this weekend. Potter, follow us."

Sheepishly, but considerably calmer than he had been, Harry jogged after the retreating professors. They said nothing to him, and thinking they might need time to reign in their anger, he did not disturb them. Instead of going to either McGonagall's office or the headmistress's like he had thought they would, they made their way instead outside the castle and towards the quidditch pitch.

It was lunch time and the grounds and pitch were almost empty. None of the first years or the Ravenclaw quidditch team remained. The only person present was a sixth year boy he recognized as a Gryffindor with large chest set beside him. He regarded Harry intently and (was it his imagination?) hopefully.

"So this is him?" the older boy said.

"Yes, this is Harry Potter," replied McGonagall, "Professor Gimms believes he is just what you need."

"Huh?" Harry said stupidly, now thoroughly confused. Was this other boy going to be in charge of his punishment somehow?

"Mister Potter," the stern witch said, finally turning to regard him fully, "this is Oliver Wood. He's going to help us perform a few tests involving your maneuvering skills on a broom. How well you perform will determine the shape of your punishment. I recommend you do your very best."

"Huh?"

Professor Gimms took his hand and shoved a broom into it. "Don't think about it. Just get on your broom. We're going to release the snitch. The faster you catch it the less trouble you'll be in. Understand?"

"No!"

“Go!” shouted Wood. The wooden trunk was now open and something shiny and golden flew out. Harry leapt onto his broom and was immediately after it. Again the feeling of rightness returned as his feet left the ground. Fears and anxieties were blown away in the cool autumn wind. His usual tumult of feelings were simplified into a singular sensation of freedom and his only thought lay in catching the Snitch.

It was much harder than his first flight across the lake. The lake had been open and flat and relatively safe. The journal had flown in an easily calculated trajectory. The quidditch pitch was a myriad of obstacles: the stands, the stadium walls, the goal posts. And the Snitch flew like a living thing, weaving about these obstacles, diving up and down, pausing, turning right back around, spirals, and loopy-loops and always at the speed of a hummingbird.

Twice he had brushed ever so lightly against the stadium walls as he pursued, and once just a foot above the ground. He followed the snitch between and around the goal posts, quickly learned the futility of it and tried short cuts and prediction of the golden ball’s path but failed more often than not. A surprising series of twists, turns, and whirls and snitch disappeared.

Frantically, he searched the pitch, but it could have been anywhere. Above, below, behind him, behind the stands or hovering momentarily in the shadow of a goal post, anywhere. He forced himself to remain still, searching for even the slightest glimmer. The time stretched

to a minute, then two, then three, and Harry felt anxiety return to him.

It was taking too much time. He wasn’t doing well at all. He was going to be punished more severely for wasting everyone’s time now. Perhaps they’d expel-

THERE!

He dropped like a rock- no, even faster than gravity would allow on its own, speeding straight down. His arm shot out, wrapping around something hard and round. But he was going too fast to stop his

descent and the ground was coming on fast. He kicked the back of the broom so it angled directly up and willed it to rise. It was futile to think he could stop himself completely with so little time, but he tightened his grip and the handle and braced himself.

As the ground became a scant four feet and him still falling, he released his legs from the broom and landed heavily on his feet. He stumbled, but held his balance. Only now with his feet on the ground did he realize what he had just done. His first day of flying and he'd been zooming about like a lunatic. He was sweaty and breathing quickly, both his broom and the Snitch felt as if they would fly out of his weakening grip at any moment.

"Yes, yes, YES!" he heard Wood cry. "He's perfect! We have to have him now."

Harry turned around. The other Gryffindor was jumping up and down with excitement, practically dancing around their Head of House. She looked positively stunned, and her glasses had slipped clean off her nose. Gimms remained calm and composed, but the thin line of his mouth curved up just a little. McGonagall suddenly came back to herself.

She strode over to Harry and held out her hand. Uncertainly, he handed her the Snitch. She look at it closely, a smile of satisfaction reaching her lips. The smile remained as she looked down at her pupil.

"Congratulations, Mr. Potter. You are now Gryffindor's new Seeker."

"Huh?"

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Harry is in quidditch again, Ron's in trouble, the Weasley twins may or may not be gay, and a mysterious diary appears... well, mysteriously. I rather enjoyed this chapter.

Chapter 15: Crowning of the Prince

Harry couldn't help but wonder if the Weasley twins hadn't known he was going to be drafted as their new Seeker. He had returned to Gryffindor tower (feather free no less) and found the twins still there, looking rather smugly between themselves. Clyde and Hermione made a show of doing their homework- or at least Hermione did- but were by his side the moment he'd entered the door.

"You haven't been suspended, have you?" she asked immediately.

He just barely managed a reassuring smile for her. He felt strangely disoriented and wondered if he'd actually taken a hit to the head during McGonagall's 'test'.

"I'm fine... I guess."

"Was it really awful, Harry?" asked Clyde, who looked him over critically for signs of injury. "What did they do to you?"

"Do to me? They didn't beat me with a cane if that's what you're wondering. I just... got scolded a bit. And detention... lots of detention. I'm basically the Quidditch team's towel boy for the season. I've got to attend all their practices and clean up after them and assist Wood in drills."

Now this statement was not entirely true and not entirely false. McGonagall had given him a choice. He could either spend Quidditch practice actually practicing with the team or he could spend it in real detention. The Weasley twin's talk of possibly angering Voldemort by actually winning (and if he was going to play he would never intentionally lose), made the second option tempting. The fact that Wood, McGonagall, and Grimms said he would be their secret weapon in the upcoming match (Youngest Seeker in a century! Wood had said ecstatically) made him that much more nervous.

But he couldn't backout. Not really.

McGonagall, in addition to threatening to put a dent in his free time for several months with detention, had also deducted fifty points from

Gryffindor for his behavior. They both knew he'd feel obligated to earn them back, and the only way to do that was win at least one Quidditch match. He wondered if the sorting hat hadn't suggested Slytherin to his Head of House when she first came to Hogwarts as well.

Until his first match, however, everyone except his teammates, Head of House, and Professor Gimms would believe he was being punished in the more traditional manner.

Hermione naturally cringed when he told her of the loss of points. Clyde wasn't much better. He actually looked pale.

"Well, you're going to be real popular now, Harry," he snipped. Harry could only stare as the other boy stalked out of the common room.

"What'd I do?"

"That's rhetorical, I hope," she said, raising an eyebrow. "I could make quite a list."

"It's not my fault Ron is a thieving prat!" he defended, then quickly turned to the Weasley twins. "Nothing personal."

They both shrugged.

"But you certainly didn't have to rise to the bait!"

"What was I suppose to do? He stole out of my bag, insulted me, insulted you and Natalie, and then tried to destroy my property-."

"I thought you said it wasn't your diary?"

"That makes it so much better! Was I suppose to let him get away with all of that?"

"You could have told a teacher! Now instead of just him being punished, you and the rest of us is going to have to pay for it as well."

"I won't be bullied by that stupid bigot," Harry growled, stalking towards his dorm room.

"No matter who else has to pay the price for your pride?!" she snapped back, just as angrily.

"I will take responsibility for myself, pride and all. Don't worry, I'll earn back your precious points!"

She called after him as he rushed up the stairs, but he ignored her. He half expected her to run up after him and apologize, but she didn't. Now he was stuck in his dorm when he should have been at dinner, too prideful to sulk down to the Great Hall and endure not only Gryffindor's scorn but his supposed friends as well.

"You are going to be popular after all this, aren't you," said Fred, popping down beside him on his bed. George sat across from them on Clyde's bed. "You being such a charmer and all."

"Shut up," Harry snapped, frustrated with the entire day and everyone it involved. Double Potions with Slytherin was tomorrow as well, making everything seem that much more wretched. "I'm not in the mood to amuse you."

"Jeepers, he's swell, don't you think Fred?"

"So fun and cuddly. I wish we could keep him."

Harry turned away from them, his 'go away' muffled by his pillow.

"If it's any consolation, Ronnykins got off a lot worse than you did. He has to clean the dungeons every Friday and Saturday evening for a month. No magic. The mildew has been building up for years."

He couldn't help but smile at the mental image of Moaning Myrtle screeching at Ron Weasley while he scrubbed out toilets. With that thought, perhaps he had gotten off light. It wasn't like he didn't love flying, and Quidditch seemed like a lot of fun. If somehow he did manage to win more than one game then he would more than make up for the points lost. Ron would be livid with jealousy. Draco wouldn't

be able to question his worthiness of Hermione's friendship. His fellow Gryffindors might actually forget about his earlier mistakes. McGonagall would be proud to have him in her House.

Youngest Seeker in a century, echoed in his head, finally sinking in.

Yes, he could do it. He would do it. Sitting up, he looked to both the twins, his green eyes shining brilliantly with determination.

"Tell me about Quidditch."

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Predictably, the other Gryffindors were not happy about the loss of points. It was so early in the year they hadn't had a lot to begin with, and Harry's misadventure set them back to almost zero. Their irritation with the first year was made painfully clear everyday and with every opportunity.

Things that Harry left out unattended had a tendency to disappear. He had to constantly watch out for feet or objects suddenly appearing to trip him up. McGonagall had taken to informing Harry when the password to the common room changed since the prefects neglected to mention it to him. Unflattering nicknames like 'the Black Cat of Gryffindor' and 'Little Miserable' started finding their way into meal-time conversations and hallway gossip.

There were even rumors going around that his 'Slytherin friends' were somehow paying him to sabotage Gryffindor's chances at the House Cup. Which was a bit conceited, Harry thought, since Gryffindor hadn't won the House Cup in over a decade.

If it weren't for the Weasley twins, who were both well liked and very feared (they were equal opportunity pranksters, but woe to those who earned their vexation), and their obvious fondness towards him, Harry suspected it would have been much worse. At least he received some reprieve with the other Gryffindor quidditch players who seemed to agree with Wood that he had the skills to win their next

match and were willing to set aside their misgivings. At least on the field anyway.

Hermione was more stressed than ever about her academics, now frantic to return Gryffindor to the lead. She never directly blamed Harry for the loss of points again, but he couldn't help but feel a flush of guilt any time he missed a single opportunity to regain house points while she worked herself to exhaustion. This was made especially difficult since now McGonagall was strangely frugal with points, Snape was forever a point miser to Gryffindor, Quirrel hadn't bothered with points for over two weeks, and he wasn't particularly strong in any of his other subjects.

Clyde hadn't continued his snappish attitude either, but he was spending more time with his other friends now than with Hermione and him. Harry didn't blame him. Who would give up all their Gryffindor friends- and Clyde had several now that he had apparently given up on 'the Black Cat'- just for one particularly difficult one?

Harry dealt with it all as stoically as he could. He kept to himself during classes and meals, studied as much as he could tolerate in his free time with Hermione, and pretended Ronald Weasley didn't exist even when they were sat next to each other in Potions.

Quidditch season couldn't have come soon enough. The weather turned cool and frosty as autumn set in, and morning practice were done in robes charmed against the nipping cold. Harry took to coming to the field early, just so he could be alone, hovering high over the pitch and looking out over the fiery colored forest and golden fields of the Scottish countryside.

The first Saturday of November was just as chilly and beautiful, but Harry did not go out to admire the view. Today was the first match of the season. Gryffindor versus Slytherin. He was up just before dawn to grab some breakfast and then went straight to the Quidditch pitch. The rest of the team arrived soon after.

"Alright gentlemen-" Wood began, as they all gathered around him.

A polite cough.

“And ladies,” he correct himself, “This is it. First game of the season. I know we haven’t had much luck over the years-”

A not so polite snort.

“-but we’ve got the advantage now. The Slytherins are going to come in cocky and sure, ready to take on Angelina, whose abilities they’re already familiar with. They’re going to get the shock of their life when they spot Potter instead, and you can bet they’re going to under estimate him. Our best chance is to keep them distracted and disoriented until Harry catches the Snitch.”

Wood turned to Harry.

“You just concentrate on catching the Snitch, got it Potter? Your only concern is that.”

“And not getting knocked off your broom,” said one of the Chasers.

“Just the snitch.”

“Or smashed into a wall. Those Slytherins are a nasty lot,” Angelina pointed out.

“SNITCH ONLY!”

Harry swallowed thickly and nodded.

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Harry and the other Gryffindors kept their hoods up as they entered the field. Wood was bound and determined to keep their surprise until the last possible moment. Judging by the confused whispering as they marched out, it certainly seemed to be working on the crowd. Everyone had assumed Angelina was going to be Seeker, but even with the hoods up it was apparent that the current Seeker was a little too short.

It wasn't until they were lined up face to face with the Slytherin team that they all finally drew back their hoods. A stunned gasp and intense discussion swept through the crowd. The Slytherins up in the stands were hissing out 'foul' before the game even started. The Gryffindors didn't look much happier, and most seemed convinced the game was already lost. Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw looked more intrigued than anything and were eagerly calling for the match to start.

Looking directly at the Slytherin Seeker- a fifth year boy who looked better built to be a Beater than a Seeker- Harry couldn't help but notice he didn't look as surprised as Wood had suggested. In fact, the boy was looking down right smug.

It seemed a bad premonition for the match to come.

"Players!" called Professor Gimms, dressed in his referee robes. "Mount your brooms!"

The crowd hushed, understanding that the game was about to start and they could only sit back and watch it unfold. Harry had to consciously force himself not to shoot up the moment his feet began to hover above the ground. He rose slowly and gradually with the other players until they were even with the stands. From here he could look directly into the 'Emperor's box', and see a gathering of some of his least favorite people. Voldemort sat in what could only be described as a throne, flanked on either side by teachers and his personal guard in less obsequious chairs. The Dark Lord looked curious, but not surprised, and perhaps a touch amused. To his right sat Headmistress Lestrage, looking extremely unhappy, and to his left was Professor Snape who looked as smug as his House's Seeker. A bit behind them was McGonagall. She looked worried.

Harry did his damndest to feel nothing but the unbridled thrill of flying. Somewhere in the crowd were his friends, but he had no time to look for them.

The Snitch had been released, and instead of immediately searching for it, Harry was forced to shoot upwards to avoid the Slytherin Seeker as he made a rush for him. Once the boy had passed, he made for the direction he had seen the Snitch go, but again had to drop

suddenly and then turn right sharply as two other Slytherin players came at him.

“Foul! Three fouls!” shouted Gimms, “Three penalty shots to Gryffindor!”

“Not half a minutes into the game and three fouls already!” came the voice of the student announcer. “That has to be a record! It looks like it’s going to be one intense match today! Captain Oliver Wood has unleashed a secret weapon, a new Seeker who looks to be holding his own. Will the ‘Black Cat of Gryffindor’ pull through or will bad luck follow him to his team’s defeat?”

Ferguson, the most experienced of Gryffindor’s Chasers, took all three penalty shots with ease but didn’t look at all pleased. It was apparent to him and everyone else on the team that their surprise was anything but, and Slytherin had just adopted the strategy they had hoped to use.

Harry didn’t linger on the unfairness of it, but took the time to assess everyone’s positions and locate the Snitch. The Slytherin team had him surrounded, but hadn’t taken into account above or below him which he thought careless of them. Additionally, their Seeker seemed more intent on watching Harry get pummeled by his teammates than actually looking for the Snitch. The Weasley twins seemed to have sorted out a strategy of their own and nodded to Harry when he briefly caught their eye.

The moment all three penalty shots were taken, Gimms blew the whistle to resume the match. The Slytherins descended on Harry like a pack of wolves. But Harry was no deer and he was no boar. His world did not exist on a single plain or on base thought. He dropped quickly, using his descent to quickly gain speed as he passed under a Beater. The opposing players made to chase him, but they were heavier and slower and the Seeker suddenly didn’t look so smug.

“And Potter’s avoided the Slytherin’s tackle- ouch! And Slytherin Chaser Morgenson takes a hit with a Bludger! Stay alert there boys! Potter seems to have spotted the Snitch! Slytherin Seeker Andrew

Whitehall is too far behind to catch up! Is this match already coming to an end?!"

The Snitch shot down and for the stands, and Harry pursued heedless of the danger. The golden ball sudden leapt away from the wall, angling off and downwards. Coming in too fast to avoid collision with the wall, he turned his broom sharply and turned his body on his side so that he hit the wooden platform with his feet and kicked off back into the field. A Slytherin smashed into the arena wall where Harry had just been and fell off her broom. Stunned, Harry watched as the girl fell to the ground below her.

So that's what those sand pits were for.

"And Casteel is down! But she's climbing to her feet! What an athlete! And the new Gryffindor Seeker is proving to be harder to pin down than anyone had thought! What a match!"

Seeing she wasn't hurt too grievously, he turned his attention back to finding the Snitch, but in his momentary distraction it had disappeared from his sight. But he was given no reprieve to look for it. He barely managed to avoid a Bludger an opposing Beater hit his way, and was side swiped a moment later by said Beater. The Weasley twins were rallying though and between the two of them, they managed to hit a Slytherin with both Bludgers at once.

"And Westbanks is hit with a double whammy! He's managed to stay on his broom but you can tell the breath's been knocked out of him!"

The Quidditch field was quickly descending into a battle field, and so many fouls and penalties were being called that the players were soon starting to ignore the referee altogether. Angelina was intentionally run into a goal post and had to be replaced by a very reluctant spare. One of the twins was bleeding from the head, but showed no signs of slowing, although he seemed a bit confused and hit a Quaffle at the Slytherin captain. The crowd was on the edge of their seats, gasping and cheering and booing in a cacophony of noise. Harry tried to keep out of the madness as much as possible and search for the Snitch, but the Slytherins were making it difficult. He

was forced to keep moving, faster than the other players and in erratic patterns, and the few times he spotted the Snitch he had to look away to avoid an oncoming Bludger or Slytherin or goal post or wall.

Westbanks, the Slytherin Seeker, had given up on watching Harry and was actually trying to find the Snitch as well. Harry had managed to distract him twice by pretending to see the Snitch, but the boy had soon caught on.

The match quickly began to tire Harry, and his bruised arm was starting to ache terrible. If he didn't find and catch the Snitch soon, then someone was probably going to get seriously hurt. That someone was most likely him.

He ducked under Wood while trying to throw off one of his pursuers and as he glanced up to make sure the two didn't collide, he saw something shiny above the other players. Unwilling to lose sight of it yet again, he shot upwards, nearly knocking his captain off his broom. The Slytherin Seeker followed, but it was clearly too late for him.

His broom angled straight up, he reached out with his hand to wrap his hand around the tiny metal ball. It shone like a second sun, blinding in its brilliance, and everything slowed into a singularly perfect moment. He could see and feel it in his hands, felt a joyous triumph as the delicate wings stilled, and the golden ball rested serenely in his grasp.

And then the world shatter.

Something fast and hard smashed into his back, between his shoulder blades. Broom and rider were torn apart. For a moment, both seemed to hover as if suspended. And then Harry began to fall.

He was too stunned to panic, and that was ironically what saved him. His thoughts were simple, ordered, and to the point.

I'm falling, was his first thought. I'm falling without my broom. I need my broom.

And very calmly, he called upon that instinct that had been present that fateful Thursday last September. It was the very same instinct that compelled his broom to leap into his hand with a simple 'UP!'. He reached out his hand, the one not clutching to the Snitch, to his hovering broom and released a command.

"Come!"

And it obeyed. In a flash the broom flew the fifty feet that had separated them to smack painfully into his hand. He gripping it as tightly as he could and felt his descent begin to slow. Too weak to climb back onto his broom and still too stunned to consider relinquishing the snitch, Harry hung helplessly by one hand as he made his gradual descent.

The entire arena was deathly still. Harry continued to float down, past the other players who all stared stunned as he went passed. Still a bit dazed, he looked one Slytherin in the eye as he passed and said simply:

"Bludger."

The boy blinked. "What?"

A malevolent black ball smashed into his side a moment later and unseated him. The broken tableau seemed to bring everyone back to their senses.

"Harry Potter's caught the Snitch! Gryffindor WINS!"

A deafening cheer rose up all around. Harry's feet had barely touched the ground, legs unable to support him, and Weasley's arms were suddenly around him. They were soon followed by the rest of the Gryffindor team who surrounded and praised and shook and thumped his bruised back.

"You did it, Harry! You did it! You did it!"

And Harry nodded and grinned and ignored the painful throb of his body. Beyond the circle of Gryffindors, the Slytherins were only now

descending. Though he was no stranger to hatred, he couldn't help but be a bit shocked at the sheer malevolence they exuded in his direction. If he weren't surrounded by his own teammates he had no doubt he would not have left the pitch on his feet.

Suddenly, his teammates fell silent and pulled away from him in order to watch the Dark Lord stride towards them. His expression was completely neutral, as was Snape's, but Lestrangle looked positively livid. Again, he felt as if his legs were going to give out underneath him.

It wasn't until Voldemort stood directly in front of him that Harry realized the other players had all fallen behind him to form perfect triangle, and bowed down on one knee in reverence. Harry was about to follow their example, but an outraged cry made him hesitate.

"He cheated!"

Everyone turned their attention to Morgenson, who stood next to a very red faced Whitehall. Snape lifted a brow.

"Care to expand on that?"

"He obviously has extra spells on his broom!" the dark boy groused, "There's no other way he could have summoned his broom like that without additional charms. He's a cheater."

With that, the boy pointed his broom at him like a giant accusing finger.

"It is rather suspicious," the Headmistress said offhandedly.

Harry felt himself flush at the accusation, glaring at the other boy.

"Do you have anything to say in your defense, Mr. Potter?" Voldemort asked, his tone more curious than accusatory. His indifference eased much of Harry's anxiety for what he was about to do.

"Yes. Up!"

Morgenson's broom leapt clean out of his hands and right into Harry's. The boy was jerked forward by the move, lost his balance, and fell flat on his face.

"MR. POTTER!" Lestrage snapped in outrage, snapping out her wand. Harry stepped back, but before she utter the curse on the tip of her tongue, Voldemort placed his hand on her wand and lowered it.

"I believe Mr. Potter has vindicated himself of wrong doing. I will not have him punished for an exceptional display of wandless magic or flying skill," Voldemort said pleasantly, although his eyes glinted harshly as he spoke to her. They softened, or at least lost their crimson glow, when he turned back to Harry. "In fact, it is deserving of recognition. Kneel down, Mr. Potter."

Cautiously, he did as he was told, bowing as the others did on one knee but never taking his eyes off the man. With twirl of his wand and a wordless incantation, a crown of golden laurels appeared in mid-air, and hovered there until Voldemort took it in both hands.

"To the victor," Voldemort said, and his voice echoed through the entire arena, "Glory and Honor everlasting."

And silence that enveloped the arena shattered into another riot of noise and jubilee. When the man spoke again, it was no longer amplified.

"You may rise." And Harry did, looking at the man questioningly. Voldemort merely smiled, a strange secret smile and leaned close to whisper in his ear. "It suits you."

And with that the Dark Lord strode away, leaving Harry terrible confused and blushing horribly. Bellatrix remained where her master had left her, her wand pointed towards the ground and looking as if she had somehow been betrayed. A twitch started under her eye, and she abruptly turned and stormed off the field, snapping something at the cluster of sulking Slytherins. Snape favored him an amused look.

"As interesting as today's match was," the dark man began, "Mr. Potter, I do hope you'll be exercising a bit more caution in the

following matches. I rather don't fancy the other players attempting to mimic you. I'm in charge of stocking the infirmary after all."

Harry for the life of him couldn't tell if he was joking with him, complimenting him, insulting him, or just making a suggestion. So he just sniffed at him. Once the Slytherins had all left the field, he was embraced by his teammates once again who still couldn't seem to believe that they had not only won, but survived to celebrate it.

"Oh wait until tonight, Harry!" one of the twins said.

"There's going to be such a party!" said the other.

"AND YOU'RE THE GUEST OF HONOR!" they shouted together.

All Harry could do was grin and let them all carry him to the showers.

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It wasn't until much later that Harry actually got the opportunity to shower. No sooner than he reached the locker room, than it seemed that every Gryffindor in school, and not a few Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs as well, was dropping by to congratulate him. Classmates who had ignored or even downright antagonized him were suddenly shaking his hand and saying things like 'I knew you were something special' and 'Can I have your autograph?'. It was all very baffling to him.

Even more baffling was that Hermione didn't seem at all pleased.

"You could have died!" she shouted at him, shoving aside several of his admirers in order to speak to him.

"It's only a game," Harry shouted back in order to be heard. "I did it to regain those points I lost. It was McGonagall's idea! Aren't you happy? If I win the next match, Gryffindor will be in the lead!"

A triumphant cheer rose from the crowded locker room at the mention of another victory to come. Hermione attempted to shout something

in response but her voice was lost amongst everyone else's. Eventually, she gave up and stocked off. He tried to follow after her, but was distracted when Clyde was suddenly in front of him.

"You did it mate! You actually did it. I can't believe I ever doubted you!"

But you did. The bitter thought rose up, seemingly out of no where, and Harry forced it away. Clyde might have been upset lately, but he hadn't stopped being his friend. If it just so happened that it was easier now to be more of friend, well then... he'd remember it in the future.

Finally, the rest of his team locked everyone out of the locker room so that they could all clean up and get ready. Still a bit shy about showers, he let the other boys go first as he checked and put away equipment. When everyone else had left, he took an extra long, hot shower. The hot water soothed his bruised and aching body, until he felt loose and relaxed. He switched into a clean, comfortable set of clothes and headed towards the castle to join in the revelry.

He never made it.

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A bit of danger in the next chapter and a familiar face makes an appearance.

Chapter 16- The Prince and the Grey Wolf

Harry knew he was being carried. He knew that whoever was carrying him was not being at all careful or gentle with the task. He knew it was starting to get dark.

Aside from that, he didn't have much clue as to what was happening. Any attempt to follow a single line of thought was thwarted by the twenty other unrelated thoughts that popped up to lead him astray. The world tilted and twirled, and he was powerless to right it, to even close his eyes to the madness of it.

And then suddenly, someone spoke and his mind cleared.

Ruthlessly, he was dropped to the ground and kicked in the side. He let out a cry and tried roll away, but someone else came from the other side smashed a boot between his shoulders. His two attackers continued kicking and stomping him mercilessly for a while longer, until Harry was certain they intended to kill him like that. But they stopped abruptly, and dragged him to his feet.

His body screamed in protest and he screamed along with it, but even that was too painful. He could barely breath, his lungs pressed against his injured ribs and collarbone, but he tried to beg them to stop. All he could manage was a gaspy sound, and his captors ignored him.

He was dragged to a tree and thrown against it. Here he must have blacked out for a moment, for when he opened his eyes again his hands were around the tree and he was facing two very angry looking Slytherins. Whitehall stood shoulder to shoulder with Morgenson, sneering down at him, their wands poised.

"I can't believe this little shit beat us," Whitehall sneered.

"Beat you, you mean," Morgenson said, although he looked just as displeased. "We would have won if you'd been doing your job and actually looked for the stupid Snitch."

The Slytherin Seeker shoved the other boy harshly.

“You were suppose to have taken care of him during the match. That was your job! Then you had to make everything worse and embarrass the team in front of the Dark Lord!”

Morgenson shoved the other boy back, knocking him to the ground and pointing his wand at him.

“At least I tried to defend our honor. You all just stood there like nitwits, while our Lord payed homage to that mudblooded GRYFFINDOR!”

The two boys were quickly trading blows, temporarily forgetting Harry for which he was grateful. Despite the lifting of the charm, a stunning hex he believed, he was still a bit unclear about what was happening. He had been kidnaped by these boys and taken to what appeared to be a clearing in a very large expanse of forest.

It wasn't the Forbidden Forest, that much Harry knew. The trees were younger and darkness within them was more natural. However, the cold autumn night was fast approaching and the rising dark was quickly becoming ominous. As distracting as the pain and cold was, Harry could figure out that this strange place meant something bad was in store for him. Little boys found dead in the woods wasn't such rare tale after all, and it seemed the humiliated Slytherins had been inspired.

As if to confirm his sense of dread, a long mournful howl fell over the woods. The Slytherin boys, who were both sporting bloody noses now, suddenly stopped their squabbling to listen. Forgetting their argument for the moment, Whitehall swallowed thickly and turned to his co-conspirator.

“We should go.”

Morgenson nodded in agreement. Together they turned and hurried further into the clearing. The Slytherin Beater suddenly stopped though and turned back to their victim. He stalked towards him, digging in his pockets until he found a pocket knife. Harry stiffened and tried to move away, but his bonds held tight.

“What are you doing?” asked Whitehall nervously as several howls joined the first.

Morgenson drew close, his dagger now drawn, his face inches from his victim's. Harry could neither move nor breathe, and fear rose up and flowed out of his eyes in desperate tears. The older boy merely looked down at him, his expression superior and merciless.

“Just making sure they find him.”

Harry let out a soft, pained cry as the blade was dragged across his hand. He could feel the warm blood welling up to flow down his chilled fingers and soak into the ropes around his wrist. Morgenson smirked in satisfaction, then turned to rejoin Whitehall.

There was a loud pop and then Harry was alone.

He was alone and he knew he was going to die. Horribly.

Whether by wild animals, cold, his injuries, or a combination of these, it didn't matter. He would never be found. Hermione would cry. Natalie would cry. Would the twins cry? They'd all cry their share of tears, wonder at what had happened to him, and then they would move on with their lives and he would be forgotten. His parents would be forgotten.

And all because Slytherins were sore losers.

The howls were getting louder and closer, as the night grew deeper. Through the break in the clearing he could see the moon rising up from the horizon, round and yellow. Well, bloody hell. Of course it was a full moon. Letting him be killed by any means other than magic or magical beast was obviously too muggle for the bloody pieces of dragon excrement.

Steadily the howling drew closer and closer, and he couldn't help but think that the creatures coming his way already knew he was there. Surely they could smell it? Even in the cold air, Harry could smell the

sickly-sweet scent of his own blood. His body trembled from cold and fear, and the pains in his body combined into one massive ache.

He wanted to scream. He wanted to cry. He wanted to curl up into warm ball and just let it end. But he remained silent. Futilely he tugged and twisted his bonds, fighting off the numbness and increasing his own pain.

There was suddenly a shuffling sound behind him, a disturbance of dry leaves. Harry froze. A twig snapped. His chest began to heave quickly, disregarding the pain in his ribs.

He expected the werewolf to immediately lung out and bite him, but it didn't. He could hear it sniffing about, making distinctive 'wuffing' noises, and pacing just behind the tree. It defied what Harry had heard of werewolves. Werewolves were not like real wolves. They feared nothing but silver, and would attack an entire band of armed wizards without a second thought or run head first into a speeding carriage.

Harry was under no illusions. This particular werewolf might be timid, but it was still going to kill him.

Finally, the beast moved from around the tree to investigate its meal-to-come. Or at least, that was what Harry thought it was doing. When the beast's golden eyes met his, Harry had a sudden feeling that he was going to be alright. He had seen documentaries on werewolves in DA&D, and seen their eternal bloodlust, but the eyes that stared back at him were calm and curious and a bit confused.

"Help."

He hadn't even meant to speak, and he was almost as stunned as the werewolf by his plea. Nevertheless, it moved around the other end of the tree and after a few scratching sounds, the ropes gave and Harry collapsed forward. He hissed, grinding his teeth. It hurt.

A cold, wet nose prodded him, urging him to his feet. Out of fear of refusal and fear of being found, he obeyed and stumbled forward. The werewolf hovered close, pressing its massive, warm body gently

against his, for support and guidance. The longer Harry spent with the creature the more comfortable and relieved he felt, and the more certain he became that it couldn't really be a werewolf. A shapeshifter of some kind, a sentient magical creature that resembled a werewolf, or a frolicking animagus of sorts (Clyde said he was going to try to get a licence when he turned sixteen).

Quietly and as quickly as they could, they made their way deeper into the forest. They stopped frequently to listen to the approaching howls, trying to gauge distance and time before they were found. His guide was soon quickening his pace. Harry struggled to keep up, but he was injured, cold, tired, and had only two feet compared to his companion's four. The pseudo-werewolf whined, encouraging him, but he just couldn't push himself any faster.

"I need somewhere to hide," he explained. "In a tree or a hole."

The other seemed to consider this, then lead him in another direction. Harry hobbled as quickly as he could beside him, although it was excruciating and made breathing almost impossible. He was lead into a bramble, and to a small dark hole. Harry didn't think he could fit. He wasn't even sure he wanted to risk the cramped space even if he could. The decision was taken from him, when a series of ear-splitting howls broke out mere fifty yards away. He scrambled into the hole, head first and started to crawl.

There was snarl and an angry growl, followed by several more. Panicking, Harry moved forward blindly, convinced at any moment he would become stuck or something would grab his foot and drag him out. For a few moments the earth seemed to tighten around him, making it impossible to breath, and pain became secondary to the need for air as he scrambled forward blindly. The tunnel suddenly widened into a tiny chamber. The ground was damp, covered with leaves, and smelled strongly of animals. If he kept his head down, he could sit up. He searched the darkness with his hands, but the only exit was the tunnel he'd come down.

The sound of fighting and howling echoed into his sanctuary, and he felt no inclination to leave. Instead, he laid himself down and curled

up tightly. Finally able to rest, he kept himself alert by listening to the fighting outside. He wondered if his friend had gotten away safely, if the werewolves knew he was in the hole and would attempt to dig him out, and what Hermione was doing right at that moment.

How long the fight above him lasted, he didn't know. He woke up, not realizing he had fallen asleep, and everything was quiet. The danger had passed and his burrow was now warm from his body heat and decaying leaves, and he fell asleep again.

When he awoke a second time, a faint glow of sunlight seeped into his sanctuary. He was still tired, but hunger and a full bladder were now a bigger concern than sleep. Stiffly, painfully, he crawled outside.

The day was still young and there was a thick frost on the ground. The flattened bramble and splatters of blood around the hole's entrance told the tale of a violent battle during the night. Although Harry wasn't particularly religious, he spared a quick, sincere 'thank you' to the Heavens that he had been safely out of the way of the carnage.

"Hello?" The call echoed through the forest, and the air rang with a resonance of isolation and emptiness. Where were the werewolves? Harry wondered. They should be human by now, and ready to yell at me for trespassing.

Harry was quite willing to be yelled at (even by werewolves) if it meant he would be returned to Wizarding World. Everyone would be worrying about him by now. If he wasn't so relieved to have survived the night, he would probably still be worrying about himself too.

After a brief pit stop, he went out to explore the forest and hopefully find a way out of it. Defying his natural revulsion, he followed the trail of blood in hopes of finding the human form of a werewolf. He didn't have to travel far.

"Bloody hell."

Although he should have expected it, the sight of the very naked man was startling. More startling than the strips of torn flesh and glaze of

blood- although not nearly as disturbing. The man lay face down in a patch of long, frosted grass. For a mind numbing moment, Harry thought he was dead.

Then a slight puff of fog escaped from his nose, followed after a moment by another. Panicked, Harry quickly tore off his outer robe, ignoring the pain it caused him and the nippy bite of the air.

"Sir, wake up," he begged, draping his robe over him, and finding it much too small. "Please, wake up. You'll die if you stay here like this."

He touched his shoulder timidly, and snatched it back when the werewolf jerked and turned his head. His large brown eyes were frightened and dazed. As they settled and focus on Harry, however, he seemed to immediately relax.

"James?" he rasped. "Have I... have I finally died?"

Harry's heart nearly stopped. James? Could he possibly be mistaken as his father or was this man delusional and speaking to a different, unrelated James? Either possibility seemed too much of a coincidence, but he pushed his confusion aside for later.

"No, Sir, but we have to get you some help or you might. Can you stand?"

The man didn't reply, lost in thought, then shifted about experimentally. A muffled hiss and groan, and he resettled back down. "No. I am too weak from the change."

"Are there others nearby? Perhaps your pack?"

"No, no..." the werewolf sighed, "They will have traveled back to the homestead twenty miles from here... and in little better shape... than I... right now."

The man's voice began to drift off and his eyes droop. Harry shook him, trying to avoid his injuries. He grimaced and opened his eyes again.

“Is there anyone out here who can help us? Any thing? A house or communication fire?”

“A cabin,” the man said, his eyes beginning to clear. “There is an outpost cabin about half a mile from here. There’s a stable attached, with a horse and a cart inside. Just go to the southern end of the clearing and you’ll find a path that takes you there. The password is ‘Aechyron’.”

“I will be back as quickly as I can!” he promised and sprang to his feet. As he dashed away, he thought he heard the man say ‘be careful James’, but it might have been his imagination.

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The cabin was a cheery little place, surrounded by small trees and overrun with vines. The shutters and doors were cast iron, but an inlay of wolves and stags and wild beasts added charm to an otherwise ominously practical feature. Connected to the house was a tiny stable, more fortified than the house with only a few narrow slots for windows. There were dents and scratch marks where werewolves and possibly bears had attempted to get in, but the sturdy construction held them all at bay.

Harry went to the stable first. The stable doors were held closed by a strange locking mechanism, that looked like a silver bust of a wolf placed over the door. When he had first reached for it, the wolf head snarled and snapped at him, nearly taking a few fingers.

“Aechyron,” he yelped. The guardian bust immediately went still and lifeless, and he heard a faint click. Cautiously, he reached for the door again. The silver wolf didn’t move and the door opened to his touch.

Inside was a small cart and a large horse. The dappled grey mare shifted nervously, as Harry gathered up a harness and opened her stall. For nearly fifteen minutes, Harry struggled to suppress his own fears of the big animal and slip on a harness. It was hard. His collarbone felt screamed in protest every time he moved his arms,

limiting how much he could move them. The mare danced around him as if afraid to be touched. Finally, he let out a growl of frustration.

“Do you want your master to die out there, you silly nag?”

The horse suddenly stopped shying away and held perfectly still. Harry felt just as surprised as she did. After a moment though, his sense of urgency returned and he moved cautiously forward. The horse didn't move as the boy gently touched and patted her neck, nor when he slipped on his harness and lead her to stand in front of the little grey cart. She remained perfectly stoic as Harry fussed and fumbled his way through attaching the tackle and cart.

Finally, Harry lead the mare outside and secured her to the cabin. He slipped inside (it was amazingly unlocked and unsecured!) and gathered up anything he thought might be useful. He loaded his supplies on to the cart and lead the mare as quickly as he could back to the wounded man.

He was still conscious and now shivering. Harry laid a large bear skin rug beside the man.

“Can you roll over onto it, Sir?”

The man grunted and after a moment did manage to roll over. Harry flinched at the sight of the claw marks across his chest and neck, and quickly covered them with the many blankets and furs he'd gathered from the cabin. He tucked him in snugly and gave him some water from a canteen.

“Better, Sir?”

“Call me Remus. And yes, this is much better,” he said, and looked ready to fall right back to sleep. Before he did, however, he looked Harry directly in the eye.

“You're James' son, aren't you? Harry? You look just like him. Except for the eyes of course-”

"I have Lily's eyes. Everyone says that," he said exasperated, and yet strangely thrilled. How many times had he heard that? Hold on. Remus. That name was familiar. "You're not Uncle Mooney?"

But Remus had already drifted asleep. Reluctantly, Harry let him be. As he began unloading the cart and making a sort of camp, his thoughts became fixed on their mutual recognition. The name Moony was infamous in the Potter house hold as one of James friends during his adventurous school days, sneaking out late night to run wild on the grounds. Harry had always assumed it was at a prestigious boarding school of the... well, normal variety. Not a Wizarding school. And not with a werewolf. What were the chances that he'd run into his second godfather in the middle of the wilderness?

Well... considering his recent luck, rather high.

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Remus woke early that evening, as the sun began to set. He was warm and comfy (vague stinging sensation in his chest aside) and lonely. Normally, during this time he would be at the homestead, enjoying a post transformation lethargy with the rest of his pack. His pack mates would all huddle close, patching each others wounds and talking of simple things. Their alpha, Fenrir, would stalk between them and over them and against them, counting and assessing each one. When he was finally satisfied, he flop down in the middle of them and soak up their affection for the rest of the night. For the next two or three days everything would be peaceful and everyone would be content.

Now, though, Remus was alone. His family and friends were far away and they could not reach each other for several days, if they even knew to search for him.

"Are you hungry, Sir?"

He opened his eyes and met brilliant green and a familiar face.

“James?”

“We’ve been over this before, sir,” came an amused reply.

“Harry.”

The boy smiled. “How do you feel? I tried to patch you up a little while you slept, but I don’t think I helped much.”

“I feel much better, don’t worry. The Wolfsbane should have been broken down by now, so my regenerative abilities should be kicking in. I’ll be healed, if a bit more scarred, by the end of the week.”

“Wolfsbane? That sounds familiar, but...?”

“It’s a potion that allows a werewolf to maintain its human mind after transformation. My pack always has at least one who takes it, just in case something like what happened last night occurs. What did happen by the way?”

“Oh! So that was you. Thank you. You saved my life... and got hurt because of it.”

“Nonsense. I am glad I was able to save a human life, particularly a son of James-”

“You are Uncle Mooney, aren’t you? You have to tell me. Were my parents Why wouldn’t they tell me? Why hasn’t anyone else told me?” Harry said excitedly. Then his expression turned funny. “What an awful nickname! Mom always did say Dad had no tact.”

Remus burst out laughing, winced, and then started laughing again. The boy had moved to sit beside him, and the light pressure against his side and the half familiar scent did much to relax the werewolf.

“What are you doing here, Harry? The last I had heard James and Lily had...they... in Germany somewhere almost four years ago. I thought for sure you’d be safe learning wizardry at Swarzekeinen by now. You’d be eleven now right? How on earth did you end up tied to a tree here?”

Harry gave Remus some canned stew he had heated in the fire to eat while he explained the last six months (had it only been that long? It felt like years) of his life; his abduction by WYRA and Snape, being a ward of Hogwarts, Hermione, Nagini (not about being a Parselmouth though), Voldemort, Ron, the broomstick incident, being the youngest Hogwarts Seeker in a century, his victory, Whitehall and Morgenson, and finally the attempt on his life. When he was done explaining, Remus could only blink at him.

“And I thought your father had a knack for trouble. Dear Lord...”

“Professor McGonagall and Hermione say the same thing. Come to think of it, I think Snape said something similar. Except of course he was utter git about it. My classmates call me the ‘Black Cat of Gryffindor’, you know.”

“And you thought my nickname was tacky? That’s awful. And to be murdered by fellow students? Over a Quidditch match? If only Dumbledore were still here... he never would have allowed such a thing to happen.”

“Remus, tell me why my parents left Britain. Why did ever tell me about magic? Why no one told me the truth about them.”

The werewolf seemed to consider his question a long time, then eventually sighed.

“I don’t know everything. I know that they were very frightened for you, especially when the war seemed to turn irrevocably in the Dark Lord’s favor. Your father was an Auror, and a damn good one. He brought down many of the Dark wizards, but when he needed protection the Ministry copped out, and he had to go into hiding instead with you and your mother. Dumbledore did his best to protect them.”

Harry remained silent. He had heard of Dumbledore, of course. Professor Toure had mentioned him. She had described him as a stubborn, pseudo-plebian politician and anarchist. A man who endeared the lower classes with temporary and cheap platitudes, while steadily degrading the foundation of their society and culture.

Harry just thought she didn't like him because he'd stood against Voldemort during the war.

Perhaps she didn't like him because, apparently, he wasn't a dark wizard either.

"He even set up a secret keeper so their house could never be found, but they must have panicked and run. I don't blame them. If they hadn't gotten out when they did, there would have been no escaping to the continent. The Dark Lord managed to seal off the country shortly after and then everything was lost. Even Dumbledore had to flee."

"He was your headmaster when you and my dad went to school, right? What was it like?"

Finishing the last of his meal, Remus set it aside and thought carefully for a moment.

"It was, by far, the most wonderful place I have ever been. What made it even more so, was the fact that I shouldn't have been allowed to attend. I had been bitten when I was still very young, and lycanthropy had been apart of my life for years. By all law I shouldn't have been allowed anywhere near other children. By law I shouldn't have been allowed to exist," he spat bitterly.

"...I don't understand," Harry said, "Why wouldn't you be allowed to go to school? You're only dangerous a couple hours out of the month... it's not like it's your fault."

Remus smiled a bit at him, lifted his hand to rest it on Harry's cheek.

"So like your father. So ambivalent towards danger, towards social expectation. You have no idea, do you? You are one of the very few wizards who would willingly sit next to a werewolf, regardless of form. You are of the even fewer who would do so, completely without fear."

Despite his words, Harry did not feel the slightest bit afraid. Remus was a man, one his father had trusted as a friend for life. He had

been a wolf the night before, and had still honored his father's trust and protected his son. How could he possibly turn away from him?

"Did my father sit by you without fear?"

Remus chuckled a bit. "Yes. Yes, he was the first to figure it out in Hogwarts... and he never turned me away, he never ignored what I was either, or made me feel ashamed of it. He and Sirius were the best friends any man could hope for."

"Sirius? You mean Uncle Padfoot?... Where do you come up with these names?"

"Simple, your first Godfather was an animagus... more specifically a dog animagus."

"Oh!... Wait then, my dad's old school name... Antlers or something..."

"Prongs. And yes, he was an animagus too. A stag."

"... my dad sometimes called my mom 'my little vixen'..."

Remus laughed loudly at that.

"So totally unrelated?"

"Your mother wasn't an animagus, unfortunately. She and your father didn't really get together until their last year at school together, and he never told her about me until shortly after graduation. Your father became an animagus in order to keep me company during the full moon, so she didn't have a reason to learn. She had figured it out before, of course. She was even smarter than James, but she never mentioned it to anyone. I think she understood perhaps better than even your father or Sirius did. Women are more empathetic than men after all."

He silent for a moment.

"I don't know why they never told you the truth or decided to live as muggles. They might feared the Dark Lord would send assassins

after them. Perhaps they had come to despise their world and magic in general, as so many of us have after witnessing how destructive it can be. I just don't know. But I hope you they were happy. I hope you all were happy."

They continued to talk long into the night, until the night grew too cold and Harry grew too sleepy. A bit timidly, the boy climbed under the furs to lay next Remus. The werewolf didn't seem to think it odd at all, and continued telling him stories of his father and mother and Sirius and Snape (he was going to dump verisaterum in his tea at every opportunity for having kept his origins a secret for so long) until Harry drifted off. Remus remained awake for a long time afterwards, staring down at him and wondering what life would have been like if Lily and James hadn't fled.

Would they have died by Voldemort's hand? Would Harry? Or would Harry have been spared? Raised in England by a pureblood family? Perhaps they all would have been spared, taken in by Fenrir as he and Sirius had been. Harry would have grown up a werewolf pup, no doubt with several more siblings (no werewolf female seemed to be able to stop at one), hunting and playing in the forest with Sirius and him and the pack and Greyback.

A werewolf's life was not a bad life. Sometimes it was actually quite wonderful. At least, nowadays.

Those futile, painfully beautiful dreams began to give way to dangerous, selfish thoughts. How easy it would be to make at least part of those dreams true. Harry had nearly been murdered, sacrificed for the hurt pride of wretched dark wizard spawn. How could he send his and Sirius' godson back to that? Wouldn't it be better to simply keep Harry here with him and Sirius, his rightful family? Harry, James' cub, now his and Sirius', to complete the family they never could on their own.

Mentally, Remus recoiled at his own thoughts. How utterly conceited and selfish they were, he realized. Harry was a wizard with his whole life ahead of him. His family may have been lost to him, but he had not let it hold him down or back. It would be unforgivable to take away

those secret dreams that must have sustained the orphaned boy. For certainly, being a werewolf likely wasn't one of them.

[illegible]

Remus was strong enough to climb into the cart the next morning, and out of it again when they reached the cabin. With a little bit of help from Harry, he managed to hobble to his bed and then collapse. He slept through most of the day, waking up occasionally when his godson brought him food, water, or checked his wounds. When he fully awoke that evening, Harry was napping beside him.

The boy had changed out of his ruined school robes and into a set of clothes he must have found in the werewolf's trunk. Harry was practically swimming in his wool sweater, and a pair of suspenders were all that kept his pants up. He looked like James after a shrinking hex. He also looked extremely comfortable.

Reluctantly, he nudged Harry awake. The boy blinked owlshly at him and sat up.

“What is it?”

"I think I should take you back to Hogwarts tomorrow," Remus said.

“Hm, what? Why? You’re still weak from your injuries, and I’m not much better.”

“If I don’t take you back tomorrow, you may never leave. My pack will come looking for me tomorrow, and it wouldn’t be a good thing if Greyback is with them.”

“Why not?”

“Because Greyback is territorial. You’re too young for him to consider a real threat, but old enough he’ll hold you accountable for your ‘folly’.”

“Folly? I was kidnaped and thrown in his territory!”

“He won’t care. The Wolf and Snake Treaty states very clearly that he’s within his rights to kill or turn any muggle or wizard, regardless of age, status, or circumstance found within his designated territories. You’re a healthy, adolescent male. He’d turn you for sure, just as he did me.”

Harry remained very silent for a moment.

“Will I... I wanted... Do you suppose... we’ll meet again? You and I... and maybe Uncle Padfoot too?”

Remus smiled at him wistfully.

“I don’t know. It seems unlikely, but then so is the chance that we would ever meet at all. Perhaps this is fate, and if that’s the case, then we’ll definitely meet again. Sirius too.”

Harry searched his face, searching for a lie, but found only a hopefulness that he couldn’t bring himself to question. Instead, he moved a bit closer to Remus and laid back down, his forehead pressed lightly against his guardian’s shoulder.

“Goodnight, Uncle Moony.”

“Goodnight, Harry.”

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So Harry finally learned the truth, or at least part of it. Sirius is a werewolf, but he won’t make an appearance for some time. Go ahead and ask me some questions. I’m sure this chapter has left you with a lot of them.

Chapter 17: The King's Justice

Remus woke Harry before dawn the next morning. Silently and a bit stiffly, they made a breakfast of porridge, tidied up the cottage, got dressed, and went to the stable. With some difficulty, they both managed to mount Helga and headed out at a leisurely pace.

"Normally, I would simply apparate us both to Hogsmeade," the werewolf said. "But neither of us is in any condition to do that without getting splinced."

The ride was a very quiet, tense affair. Harry was still sore from his injuries, and despite his companion's regenerative abilities, he seemed just as fragile. Holding on to Remus' waist as they rode, Harry could feel the tension through his entire body. As dawn finally came, Remus had broken out into a sweat.

"We should go back," Harry said, "You're not in any condition to travel, Moony."

The werewolf gave him a pained, but genuine smile.

"No worries, lad. Just a hundred yards or so and we'll be out of the Pack Lands. We can hail a bus from there."

"A bus?"

"A sort of bus."

"Way out here?"

"It's only five miles from Norrington."

"What? How do you keep the muggles away?"

"Disillusionment charms. Temporary ones anyway. There's been discussion about putting up ward posts. Our alpha doesn't like the idea of a magical boundary, but it's really the most practical solution to all these trespassing issues. If anyone gets a little lax maintaining their section of the boundary, then muggles tend to wander in. Plus

witches and wizards don't always take their own laws seriously. They don't seem to realize their lives are forfeit once they stepped into our realm."

"Are many people killed?"

Remus remained silent for a bit. "They were in the beginning. Many werewolves too. Everyone was an enemy it seemed. Danger everywhere. Too many people running scared, wands always drawn and teeth always bared. Now... well, the danger is still there of course, but the boundaries have been set."

"Do the werewolves and wizards never see each other anymore?"

"Oh, we do business and occasionally enjoy the company of wizarding kind... but we're like two different countries with separate customs and philosophies. Some people accept it, some people are prejudice, and other completely over romanticize the other's lifestyles. As it is, our alpha is pro-segregation, but when he's finally overthrown? Who can say? Depending on the new alpha's position, we may become more open to our wizarding heritage or we might completely cut ourselves off. Then of course, there's Voldemort."

"Because of the Snake and Wolf Treaty?"

"Partially, yes. This truce only works because Voldemort enforces his end of the treaty, and Greyback enforces his own. They're powerful allies, with a wary respect for each other. If someone were to overthrow Greyback, Voldemort is in a position to rescind his end of the treaty. A civil war could break out."

"He wouldn't do that, would he? I mean, he's trying to make Britain stronger, isn't he?"

"Yes, and what better way to do that than to unite all of wizarding Britain in a common cause? Defending their children and loved ones from the evil lycanthropic threat?"

Harry had nothing to say to that. It seemed horrible to contemplate, and the twisted logic behind it made him feel physically ill. He hadn't

ever thought of himself as naive, but the ease with which Remus was able to lay down political intrigue, war, and hatred was startling. His guardian must of sensed his unease because his next words were comforting.

“Don’t worry so much, Harry. Voldemort gains more from peace at the moment than war. He has more than enough on his plate without adding werewolves as a side dish.”

Their conversation turned to lighter topics, about life as a werewolf and life as a Hogwarts student. Remus seemed to find his life even more peculiar than Harry found his, which was a bit ironic. Hermione, Draco, Professor Snape, and Headmaster Lestrage were all subjects of considerable interest to Remus, each for different reasons. Fenrir Greyback, Sirius Black, the pack commune, and the forest dwelling races sparked Harry’s imagination like a wildfire, and despite never having seen any of them, he longed to imprint their images to paper by whatever medium he could find.

They came to a simple barb wire fence and dismounted. Helga was unbridled and set loose, but she lingered at the fence for their company. Remus pulled a wand from his robes that Harry hadn’t seen before, and after a couple flicks he put it away.

“It may be a few minutes,” he said. “Knight buses are a bit hazy first thing in the morning.”

“Night buses?”

“You’ll see.”

And indeed, Harry did see. Not five minutes later a terrible smashing sound could be heard, and then suddenly there was a bus stopped not two feet from them. It was scratched and covered in leaves and twigs, but Harry still could not fathom how a bus had managed to get through all the trees. The two boarded the bus, and were greeted by a rather grouchy driver and a ticket master fast asleep. The driver nudged the ticket master roughly.

“Oi! Leave off, mum,” the pimply faced man grouched. He stretched and let out an enormous yawn.

“Who you call’n, mum? I ain’t that ugly! Now sell them their bloody tickets, you boob!”

“It’s Bob! Not boob. And I’m getting to it. What can I do for you gents? I got tickets to St. Mungo’s for a good price this week. You both look like it might do you a spot of good.”

Remus graced him with a regretful smile.

“Hogsmeade, if you would. I fear my young friend here is a bit late for class.”

Oh, bollocks. Harry had completely forgotten about classes. He’d missed that quiz in potions, he was suppose to study for his Transfigurations practical this weekend, and he hadn’t finished either his Charms or Herbology homework!

“I ‘m going to get so much detention,” he lamented once they were both seated on what appeared to be beds. Weird.

“It could be a lot worse, you realize?” Remus said, chuckling.

“That’s easy for you to say. My innards have only been saved so that Snape can use them for potions ingredients.”

The werewolf barked out a laugh.

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They reached the castle just as third period was starting, and the halls were deserted. Now that he was standing safe and sound in Hogwarts, Harry felt at a distinct loss about what to do. Did he go to the headmistress’ office and report what had happened? Did he go to the infirmary (where ever that was) to get patched up and then go back to classes? What about Whitehall and Morgenson? What about the other Slytherins? He doubted Draco would have condoned their

actions, but that didn't mean others weren't capable of similar acts, especially if it was to maintain their House's honor.

"Let's go to the infirmary," Remus suggested. "Once you're fixed up, the nurse can alert Minerva of your return. She'll have a better idea of what to do than I would."

It sounded like the perfect plan to Harry, and he followed Remus knew exactly where he was going. They were just climbing an unfamiliar staircase when they ran into their first castle occupant. Or rather, said castle occupant ran after them.

"You!" came the scandalized voice. "What are you doing here? You're violating your probation!"

Remus looked down at the harried potions master, his expression completely benign and perhaps a bit condescending. Calmly, the werewolf descended a step and placed a hand on Harry's shoulder. The young Seeker, who had never seen Snape so out of sorts, looked between them with obvious curiosity. Suddenly, Snape turned to Harry, and looked positively stunned. If he weren't so confused, he would probably have enjoyed causing the dark man all this strife.

"Potter, where have you been? And what are you doing with this... this..."

"Why, Severus, I've never known you to be at a loss for words," Remus said.

"Mangy vagabond!" Snape snarled.

The werewolf wasn't the least bit phased, but Harry scowled at his insult.

"Why don't you ask Morgenson and Whitehal? They knew exactly where I was and the company I was keeping."

Snape stared at Harry intensely, raking his form for clues to his whereabouts. The boy was still dressed in his school robes, which were dirty and torn in places and he held his left arm close to his

body. The presence of one of his old school nemeses sparked his memory of the current lunar cycles and the date of Harry's disappearance. He looked rather troubled by his conclusion.

"Are you bitten?" the dark man asked softly.

"No," Harry replied, and then crossed his arms. "But only thanks to Remus. He saved my life."

"A werewolf saved you on a full moon, Potter? I find it unlikely."

"What's the matter, Severus? Have you no faith in your own potions? The Wolfsbane you provide my pack with every month has been of use to us for some time. A clear minded lycanthrope does wonders for diverting... accidents?... as it were."

If Harry didn't know any better he would have thought Remus was trying to goad the other man into an argument. He felt more than a bit of envy at the man's audacity. But Snape was a man better versed in the game of wit and intrigue, and his expression quickly turned cool and reserved.

"I am... glad to know that my potions have been of some assistance to you Lupin. Now that I know whom is benefitting directly from them, I feel more inclined than ever to improve the formula."

"My alpha will be glad to hear it. He doesn't put much faith in potions, but even he is ... impressed... with your work."

Both men regarded each other darkly for several moments, until Harry got bored of watching them and started his way up the stairs again.

"Where are you going, Potter?" Snape snarled, drawn unwillingly away from his staring match his old rival.

"The infirmary, sir," Harry replied, not bothering to stop his slow ascent. "I think, anyway. I'm not entirely sure where it is. Remus was escorting me."

“And now I will,” Snape said coolly, stalking up the stairs, past Remus (never turning his back to him). “Since you’ve already pulled me from my class with your impromptu return, I may as well see it through.”

“How did you know we were here anyway?” Remus asked, fighting off a growl as the dark man stopped beside his godson. Snape graced him with a malevolent smirk, and placed a possessive hand on Harry’s shoulder. The boy flinched at the contact.

“You should know this already, old friend. Your present form may not have been enough to set off the castle’s defenses, but it was more than enough to set off the wards for an intruder.”

Moony looked stunned for a moment, then openly angry. Harry watched awed as the werewolf’s eyes turned amber and a hint of fangs peeked out over his grimacing lips.

“You’re a liar, Snape. Hogwarts never forgets its own. And even if I somehow did manage to set off the wards, they’re tied to the headmaster or headmistress, not Slytherin’s head peon.”

“Very good... for a mongrel, but you forget. The wards will alert the deputy headmaster or headmistress in their superior’s absence. Headmistress Lestrange left... or rather, was sent to find the student she somehow managed to misplace.”

Snape’s wicked expression became even more sinister, as he turned his gaze to the student in his grasp. “How unfortunate for her to have just missed you, Mr. Potter. Incompetence and bad luck are a dangerous combination when in the direct employ of the Dark Lord.”

Remus merely shrugged, his anger dissipating with the simple gesture. Sensing their time was now at its end, Harry carefully maneuvered himself out of Snape’s grasp to bid his guardian goodbye. Remus returned the hug, just as delicately as Harry gave it, and ruffled the boy’s messy hair affectionately.

“Try to stay out of trouble?”

“For all the good it does me? Be safe, Remus, and take it easy once you get back.”

“The sooner the better,” Snape sneered. They both ignored him.

“The same goes for you. Sirius would kill me if something happened to you, when I...” Remus trailed off, realizing he had almost let loose his secret heart’s desire.

“When you, what? Could have taken the opportunity to eat him? Must you Gryffindors turn everything into a melodrama? Just go, Lupin, before the castle vomits you out.”

Said Gryffindors spared him mutual glares of distaste, before turning back to each other.

“Tell Uncle Sirius hello for me?”

“I will. I’ll ask for permission to write, but it’s an unlikely we’ll be allowed. So just in case... Goodbye, Harry.”

Harry smiled, trying to keep it as real as he could even though he felt all wrong and it made his face ache. “I’ll see you later, Remus.”

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Harry was escorted by Snape to the infirmary in complete silence. Snape asked no questions about where he had been or what he had done over the last three days. Snape also said nothing about what had happened in the time he had been gone. What did people think had happened to him? Were his friends worried? Why had the Headmistress been sent to look for him?

He was bursting with questions, but every time he looked to Snape to ask, he quickly changed his mind. The potion’s master expression was so openly hostile, Harry feared what he might say or do if he were to actually gain his attention. The only thing keeping the young Gryffindor from inexplicably disappearing was the oath Snape had told him about that prevented a teacher from harming a student.

As they entered the infirmary (Harry thought it a bit silly to put the hospital wing on the third floor), they were greeted by very plump, middle aged woman with a nurses habit. She took one look at Harry, look positively indignant about his physical state, and quickly rushed him behind a screen for examination.

“My word, are you Harry Potter?” she asked, as she helped remove his soiled clothes and clean him up a bit using her wand. “The whole school has been in an uproar since your disappearance, and I am quite glad to see the morbid speculations floating about turned out to be false. This is a nasty looking bruise, dear. Does it hurt to breath deeply?”

“A bit. It feels better than it did yesterday,” he replied. “So no one realizes that I was-”

“Lord Voldemort,” Snape hissed. The nurse actually flinched at the name. “Has asked that the events that led to your disappearance first be relayed through him, and him first. The one thing this school doesn’t need is another one of your overblown stories stirring up the students.”

Harry let out a huff, but didn’t ask anymore questions. So Snape wasn’t keeping silent of his own accord? Did this mean he was going to have to tell Voldemort his tale directly? Shouldn’t law enforcement handle this sort of thing? Did Voldemort intend to cover up the debacle to preserve his House’s honor? What would happen to him? Would they threaten him or use memory charms or magical confidentiality contracts on him? Would Whitehall and Morgenson remain at Hogwarts and go unpunished?

As he was cleaned up, patched up, and given a clean set of hospital pajamas, his thoughts began to turn increasingly distressing and it didn’t take long for the nurse (Madam Pomfrey she had said) to notice.

“Here you go, Mr. Potter,” she said, offering a vial of blue liquid. “Something to ease those frazzled nerves of yours.”

Harry excepted it reluctantly, distrustful of potions in general, and swallowed it down. It didn't taste too bad, and within moments he was feeling rather relaxed. He was lead to a bed and curled up to take a nap without a second thought. Sleep was almost upon him when he overheard Pomfrey and Snape talking in quiet voices to each other.

"Any serious injuries or toxins?" came a silky voice.

"I am not sure I should be discussing this with you, Professor," she said. "You are not his Head of House, and given You-Know-Who's orders for secrecy... Well, lets just say his injuries are rather telling."

"I will be informing Our Lord of Mr. Potter's return. It would be best if I were able to give him a general description of his health. He will be eager to talk to him, after all."

There was a tense silence for a moment.

"Let him have a bit of sleep first," she said finally, "All he needs is that few hours rest to heal the worst of it... and then he should be up and ready to return to classes. Although I'd prefer he slept here tonight."

There was an irritated snort. "You say that to everyone who walks through your door."

An equally irritated 'humph!'. "Not everyone. You are more than welcome to spend your night and day elsewhere!"

If Snape replied, Harry didn't hear. Too quickly, his mind descended into a dark and dreamless sleep.

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"Potter, wake up."

Harry rolled over onto his back and opened his eyes to a very blurry black head. He sat up, rubbed his eyes, and then patting the air around his bed in search of his glasses. Snape's rough, callused

fingers grabbed his chin, and a moment later he could see the dark man scowling down at him.

“Get dressed. Lord Voldemort has requested our presence in his study.”

A set of clothes was placed at the corner of his bed, and Snape shut the privacy screen now surrounding his bed. Through the white sheet, Harry could make out his distinctive profile. The potion’s master looked decidedly impatient.

Quickly dressing, he joined Snape and they made their way quickly from the infirmary. Madam Pomfrey, who was shooting the older man a disapproving glare, managed to spit out an order for Harry to return should start feeling tired or sore again. The young Gryffindor wasn’t planning on it. He was feeling refreshed and energized, with only the barest of aches where previously there had been stabbing pains. Briefly he examined his wrist and found them a bit red, but otherwise unmarked.

They entered a tower not unlike the Headmistress’s own, but when they entered the Dark Lord’s office Harry was rather amazed by the difference. Lestrangle’s office was cluttered, ancient room with too many portraits of dead men and women, stacks of paperwork, and strange assortment of baubles. Voldemort’s office was the picture of elegant sophistication. The circular room was lined in bookshelves, laden with tomes and occasionally a well placed instrument. There were only an office desk, a few sitting chairs, a chaise, and a telescope by the window by way of furniture, and large painting of Salazar Slytherin with a feathered serpent of some kind draped around his shoulders.

Headmistress Lestrangle occupied the chaise, and would have looked beautifully elegant herself if her body language weren’t so tense. She scowled darkly as they entered the room, and Harry hesitated.

“Have a seat, Mr. Potter.”

Voldemort’s smooth, confident voice moved him out of his surprise, and he quickly took the chair indicated. He looked directly at the Dark

Lord, and was relieved to see the other looked genuinely pleased to see him. His red eyes weren't exactly friendly, but they were bright with a sort of curiosity.

"Professor Snape was telling me that you showed up in the castle early this morning, escorted by a werewolf no less. Considering your abrupt disappearance after your Quidditch victory and the rising of the full moon that night, I think it would be safe to assume that you didn't go gallivanting off into the forest on your own."

Harry merely nodded, waiting for an actual question. He didn't have to wait long. Lestrage was on her feet and stalking towards him suddenly. He nearly bolted from chair to keep his distance from her, but Snape (who had been leaning by the door) was suddenly between them, his wand in his right hand and Harry's shoulder in his left. Lestrage spoke as if the man wasn't even there, but she did stop her forward assault.

"And I suppose we're to believe Slytherins were the ones to have taken you?" she hissed. "A convenient explanation. But it doesn't explain how you came to be in the company of your godfather's lover."

Now that was news to him! Remus and Sirius were... what? A couple? Mates? His father hadn't mentioned his best friends being gay (was his dad bi then?), and Remus sure as hell hadn't said anything about it!

"Lestrage, control yourself," Voldemort commanded, although he looked even more intrigued than before. "Let's not jump to more than the truly obvious conclusions. Why don't you give us a rendition of the events that have transpired, starting from the moment you left the Quidditch pitch."

Harry wasn't sure what information he should withhold, if any, and so told the events of the last several days as sparsely as he could without actually hiding anything. Even with all three person's occasional questions (or accusation on Lestrage's part) it took less than five minutes. When it was all done, Snape looked disturbed, the

headmistress looked furious, and Voldemort just sat back in his chair and stared at him curiously.

“A rather amazing adventure, Mr. Potter,” the Dark Lord began, rising slowly from his chair. “Indeed, it is a miracle that you survived.”

Harry tensed as the man strode around his desk, took a sitting chair and placed it directly across from him. When Voldemort sat down, the boy involuntarily stopped breathing. Serpentine eyes regarded him calmly, in mock compassion.

“A miracle, but... I’m not a religious man.”

As quick as a snake, Voldemort moved forward, his hands gripping tightly on either side of Harry’s head as he forced the boy to look directly into his brilliant red eyes.

“Relax, Mr. Potter,” he hissed, parseltongue slipping out like a whisper, “It only hurts if you struggle.”

But Harry did struggle. He struggled with his swinging fists and kicking legs. He struggled with his mind, creeping away and lashing out blindly at the invading pressure inside his head.

His fight lasted only for the briefest of moments, before a searing pain lanced through brain. He froze, gave a single violent shake, then went limp in the man’s grasp. In his stunned state, his thoughts scattered and resistance crumbled until the world became insensible.

The only thing he was aware of was the shifting of his thoughts by an alien presence and Voldemort’s eyes staring directly into his.

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Harry was brought back to his senses, and wished taste hadn’t been one of them. The salty, sour taste of a potion seemed to cling to crevasses of his lips and mouth, and not even the water Snape offered him immediately after seemed to help much.

As his thoughts cleared, he pulled away quickly from the man, clambering to his feet and stumbling away until he was at the far end of the room. Using the bookshelf to support his jelly legs, he turned a heated glare to the occupants of the room. Snape stood with his arms crossed beside the chaise, where Harry had apparently been laying, an empty vile in one hand and a shattered glass at his feet. Lestrangle was sulking by the telescope, endeavoring to ignore everyone and failing miserably. Voldemort was once again behind his desk, scribbling away on some parchment.

"What did you do to me?" he asked shakily.

Lestrangle and Snape offered only condescending sneers, and the Dark Lord's reply was flippant.

"Legilimency."

"Bullshit," Harry spat out automatically. All three looked at him, startled. "I've been under legilimency before. That was infinitely worse."

"Potter, watch yourself," Snape hissed in warning.

"Are you implying that I am lying?"

Harry tensed, swallowed at the sudden thickness in his throat, but didn't look away.

"I don't think I implied anything. There's no way that was just legilimency."

The Dark Lord smirked, but said nothing to confirm or dissuade his conclusion.

"I had to make certain you were not attempting to deceive me. Coincidence is one thing, an opportune moment is another thing altogether. It seems you've managed to obtain both. There is now no reason to perform any further investigation by the Court- which I guarantee is great deal more bothersome than a brief headache and a nasty potion."

Harry wasn't certain he agreed. The idea of that man skipping through his brain was extremely distressing, and if he thought on it too long he knew he was going to need a calming draught pretty soon as well.

"Justice will be carried out swiftly. Your assailants are on their way up now."

"What? Just like that?!"

"Just like what?" Voldemort said, starting to become annoyed. "Your innocence has been proved, as has their guilt. Why prolong the matter? I for one would like to get back to other matters, wouldn't you?"

Frankly, yes he would. Harry could think of a hundred things he wanted to do right now that didn't involve worrying about Morgenson or Whitehall sulking behind every corner. But it all seemed too fast. He'd spent three long days away from the world, and suddenly he was back in it and it was spinning too fast.

But it was out of his hand. And he was glad for it. He couldn't imagine what punishment attempted murder of a classmate was awarded, especially not by the Dark Lord himself. Suddenly, he didn't want to know.

"Can I go then?" Harry asked.

"And miss the best part of the trial?" Voldemort asked, looking genuinely surprised.

"Somehow I don't think it's going to be a PG-13 show."

Lestrangle and Snape didn't seem to understand the reference, but Voldemort smirked wickedly.

"Nevertheless, it will certainly be educational. Sit down before you fall down. This won't take long."

Harry reluctantly obeyed, taking up the one end of the chaise and staring resolutely out the window. Time passed and no one spoke, enveloping the entire tower in a tense silence. A knock on the door made more than just Harry jump.

“Enter.”

Morgenson strode into the tower confidently, his school robes so perfectly pressed and presented that Harry just knew a spell was involved. The older boy looked as smug and conceited as Harry remembered him. It made him want to chuck something heavy at him.

Behind him, Whitehall slunk in. Unlike his accomplice, the Slytherin Seeker looked exhausted and nervous in the way that chronic worriers are. Neither boy noticed Harry sitting by the window, their gazes focused either on the Dark Lord or their feet. Morgenson tried to meet Voldemort’s eyes directly, as Harry often did, but they inevitably ended up focusing above or to the left of the intimidating man’s head. If Harry weren’t so worried that both boys were going to become nothing more than bloody stains on the carpet in the next few minutes, he would have mocked them for their cowardice.

“Do you know why you are here?” Voldemort asked, looking completely nonchalant as he started pulling out forms from his desk.

Both boys shook their heads. The Dark Lord raised a regal brow.

“Really? Absolutely no idea?”

Whitehall shifted a bit behind Morgenson, while the other started to shift a bit uncomfortably from foot to foot. “I suppose you want to question us about the Gryffindor Seeker,” Morgenson said, not hinting at the slightest bit of guilt. “But we’ve told the headmistress and our Head of House everything we know already.”

Morgenson turned to Lestrage, who wasn’t looking at him, and then to Snape who was looking at them a bit too keenly. Harry was surprised when he didn’t seem to notice him sitting right behind the Potion’s master. Instead, the boy looked over him as if he wasn’t even there and returned his attention to Voldemort.

“Yes, I have looked over their reports of the matter and found nothing amiss,” Voldemort said, amicably. “Young Mr. Potter’s disappearance is indeed very mysterious. Whether by Potter’s own will or someone else’s, the plan was quite clever...”

Whitehall’s frown deepened, and Morgenson practically puffing up like a blowfish and still trying to appear unaffected.

“...but sloppily executed. Wouldn’t you agree, Mr. Potter?”

Voldemort made a gesture towards him, not exactly like pointing, and Harry felt the magic that he hadn’t been aware of slipping away from him. The two Slytherin boys turned to him, their expression of horror identical.

“Im-impossible! You’re dead.”

Harry gave him an angry scowl. “If that’s the case. Perhaps you’re dead too.”

Morgenson turned white and Whitehall look just barely above fainting.

“Now, Mr. Potter, that’s not a very nice thing to say,” chided Voldemort, “Although, I do understand your ire. I am rather upset myself.”

Harry turned away from his would-be murders and from the Dark Lord. He looked out the window, curled up a bit, and mentally curled up on himself. There was nothing he would have liked better than to be somewhere, anywhere, else. Yet, he couldn’t help but hear, and every swish of clothing, every footstep, and every labored breath unfolded the scene of two lives at their possible end.

“It’s not so much that you should wish to vindicate yourselves,” Voldemort continued, “It is perfectly natural to wish to maintain one’s supremacy, more so with Slytherin’s than most. A few hexes... some form of public humiliation... a curse, at the very worst. Any of these would have sufficed on any regular student over a schoolyard grudge.”

Harry felt his insides twist in horror at the man's words. Was the leader of Wizarding Britain really condoning such wretched behavior? He wanted to cover his ears and stop listening, but he didn't dare. Voldemort had wanted witnesses, sadist that he was, and apparently his two cronies weren't going to cut it.

"However, your actions went far beyond acceptable bounds. Not only did you select for your victim a person whom I, your sovereign and patriarch, have shown personal favor to with the intent to murder, but you violated the Snake and Wolf Treaty, adding treason to your list of crimes. Have you any idea the damage you could have caused?! Our peace with the lycantropes is tenuous at best without fools like you making it worse!"

As the Dark Lord spoke, his once calm voice began to increase in pace and volume, his anger rising like an unstoppable tide.

"I tell you now if Greyback demands restitution for this trespass, I will not hesitate to throw you both to the wolves. Pun intended. Crucio!"

Harry bolted out of his seat as two tortured screams pierce the room. Instinctively, he turned towards the source and found the older boys withering on the ground under the same spell. Briefly, his eyes found the Headmistress, who was sneering down at them from her chair and found an instant hatred for her. Beside him, Snape watched with a silent intensity. What he was feeling, Harry couldn't decipher, but what ever it was it didn't seem to be pity.

The cursed dragged on, as did the screaming, and with each passing second he felt his mind and soul twist into a painful state as if he were under some strange curse himself. Finally, he could stand it no more and covering his ears to block out the sound, he let out a scream of his own.

"IT'S ENOUGH!"

His concentration broken, Voldemort turned sharply to the shivering Gryffindor, his anger still hot and shining through his eyes like embers. Whitehall and Morgenson laid on the floor at his feet whimpering,

crying, and curling in on themselves. Harry could barely stand to look at them.

“What did you say, Potter?” Voldemort hissed in what may or may not have been parseltongue. The young Gryffindor felt suddenly thick, and his throat tightened as if in some phantom’s grasp, but couldn’t not speak. The consequences of not speaking seemed worse than facing the Dark Lord.

“It’s enough,” he said, his voice barely above a whisper. He swallowed thickly, and spoke again, louder this time. “I’m satisfied. They’ve been punished enough for their crime against me. Their crime against Greyback will be dealt with by Greyback himself. It’s enough. There’s no need to keep... to keep hurting them.”

The tightening around his throat became very real as Voldemort’s cold hand was suddenly around his throat, his crimson eyes glaring down at him angrily. Harry could only stare up at him, wide-eyed and terrified.

“I decide when enough is enough, you silly whelp,” he hissed, throwing him to the floor. Harry instinctively curled up, expecting to be kicked or cursed. Instead, the Dark Lord stalked back to his desk and reseated himself. “It is enough,” he said once he was seated. “For now. I must begin explanations and negotiations with Greyback before I decide the rest of your punishment. But just so we understand one another, this is the last day you will ever step foot in Hogwarts. Should you violate this condition, your lives will be forfeit. If you should ever approach Mr. Potter again, in malice or contrition, your lives are likewise forfeit. Headmistress, take them to the dungeons while they await the proper authorities. Professor, escort Mr. Potter to his dormitory, and explain to him the need for discretion on this matter.”

Harry didn’t wait. He was out of the office before Whitehall or Morgeson to climb to their feet. He paced back and forth at the bottom of the stairs, until he was finally joined by considerably more composed potion’s master. The man’s expression was no different than before, and the nerve wracked Gryffindor found it more disturbing that if the other had been scowling at him.

“When you are asked what happened to you after the match,” Snape began, his tone the same as with any lecture he thought of particular importance. “You will tell them that Whitehall and Morgenson did in fact kidnap you.”

Harry blinked owlishly. Certainly, Snape wasn’t going to instruct him to tell the truth. He wasn’t much of a politician, but Harry knew the situation was delicate and could hurt a lot of reputations, Slytherian House’s not being the least among them.

“Their sudden disappearance from classes upon your return would never go unnoticed,” the professor explained. “However, you will tell no one about them attempting to kill you or about the werewolves or Lupin’s impromptu rescue. Instead, you will say you were ‘confounded’ and abandoned in muggle London. The Vanguard tracked you down yesterday evening at British social services, completely unharmed, and you were detained at the Court for questioning and returned to Hogwarts this morning. Don’t get clever. Keep everything as vague as you can, and let the public make up the rest.”

Harry nodded. While he didn’t like the idea of lying just to benefit Voldemort’s grand scheme, he couldn’t deny that he was relieved he wouldn’t have to recount those awful moments before Remus’ rescue when he was certain he was going to die. Also, on some level, he wanted to keep his new friendship with Remus a secret. It wasn’t that he felt ashamed to have a werewolf for a godfather (two of them in fact), but he didn’t think he could stand anyone criticizing the kind, gentle man who had saved his life and happened to turn furry once a month.

“Will Remus get in trouble for this?”he asked timidly.

“Yes,” Snape said waspishly, though he wasn’t looking at Harry.

The young Gryffindor wanted to protest, point out that the man had done nothing wrong, but had been very brave and selfless. His platitudes filled his chest, waiting to be expelled in one long testament, but he swallowed them instead. It was useless to say anything.

Snape wouldn't care, and even if he did he wouldn't be able to do anything. Remus' fate lay with Fenrir Greyback.

With Snape's quickening stride, it wasn't long before Gryffindor Tower was in reach. Before they reached the portrait of the Fat Lady, his guide grabbed him by his shoulder and spun him around to face him. Harry, having already been grabbed by the neck that day, slapped the hand off sharply and jumped out of his reach. They eyed each other cautiously, mutual animosity and distrust flowing between them like a palpable heat.

"You will tell absolutely no one of what transpired during your disappearance. That includes my goddaughter. If you drag her into this mess, the Dark Lord will be the least of your worries."

Harry glowered hatefully at the man, then spun away from him to stalk to the portrait.

"And Potter."

Reluctantly, he looked back over his shoulder.

"Congratulations on not doing something cliché, like dying. Hogwarts hasn't had this much entertainment in years."

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1. I don't know the English rating system for movies and television, so if you know just mentally insert the appropriate term.

2. The 'Vanguard' is Voldemort's equivalent to Aurors, just as the 'Court' is the equivalent to the Ministry.

Author's note: Wow, that's my longest chapter so far. So it took so long to get to you, but I got a new job this week so it's been tough finding the time to write. I hope you enjoyed it!

Chapter 18: Return of the Prince

The password, surprisingly, hadn't been changed over the weekend as per the usual custom. Harry wondered if they hadn't changed it because of him, like a porch light left on to welcome home a prodigal son. Perhaps he was just being overly sentimental.

No one was in the commons room when he entered, and likewise, the first year dormitory was empty. The first thing he did was open his trunk and quickly locate those previous items he hadn't risked carrying during the Quidditch match. His wand, warm and magnificent in his grasp, and his watch which was scorching hot.

"It's not my fault I'm late," he said, "I ran in to a couple of... problems."

After a moment, the watch seemed pacified and cooled to his touch. Checking the time, he was unsurprised to find it dinner time. Not wanting to cause yet another scene in the Great Hall, he found his usual cubby corner in the common room and started to draw sketches in the troublesome diary. It was a strange little thing. Whatever he drew in there disappeared shortly after, but if he requested it back, it would appear again. Occasionally, the diary actually put in little comments or doodles of its own.

Today, it seemed particularly chatty.

Where have you been? And what have you been doing? The subject matter is very different from your usual.

Harry took a moment from his sketch of Remus, in werewolf form, staring up close at the observer. He was having difficulty translating the lycanthropes' bright and curious eyes in ink alone, and welcomed the distraction.

You wouldn't believe the last couple of days I had. I've won a Quidditch match, been kidnaped and nearly murdered, and met one of my father's old friends who happens to be a werewolf and my godfather's mate. He's a werewolf too. And it turns out my parents were wizards after all. Seems they forgot to mention it to me.

He went back to his sketch, practicing the eyes with some quick doodles on the edge of the diary. It was several minutes later before the diary finally made a response.

And I thought drawing was your only outlet for creativity. I see you're trying your pen at fiction as well.

Go suck an egg, was Harry's tart reply.

The diary's clever retort was to make the half completed sketch of Remus suddenly disappear.

"Hey!" he said, indignantly. Irritated, and now developing a slight headache, he shoved the diary into his bag and felt distinctly better. He had started to theorize that the charmed journal drew on the magic of the writer to perform its clever tricks, and handling it too long caused his frequent headaches. It was such a neat little book though, and having so little that was really his, Harry couldn't bring himself to get rid of it or tell anyone who might take it away. This included Hermione, for though she was a very good friend, she was a bit of a worry wort. Any thing with even the most slim possibility of being cursed was a reason for days of endless and tireless research.

And that was why it was a stroke of luck that he got rid of it when he did, because not half a minute later Hermione came stalking through the door looking the most worried Harry had ever seen her... and angriest too.

"Of all the pig-headed, stupid, insensitive, load of swill..," she seethed, stomping noisily through the portrait hole. She was followed closely by Clyde, who was still scarfing down a piece of bread from dinner. "As if Harry would just run away! He was just so bloody miserable after his incredible Quidditch victory and all his adoring fans, and then saying he'd explain everything later, that he just decided to take a jog through the Forbidden Forest! Honestly, does Draco think I'm that naive? That I'm stupid?!"

"Hermione," Clyde protested, his mouth still full of bread, "he was probably just trying to make you feel better. You prophesizing Harry's gloom and doom wasn't exactly helping matters."

"If he wanted to make me feel better, he could start by investigating some of those Slytherin housemates of his. If anyone had motive and opportunity, it was them. They've been acting suspicious for days now, and did you see that Morgenson and Whitehall were absent during dinner? Do you think the Court finally suspects they have something to do with Harry's disappearance?"

"Well, I'm certain they do now," Harry said, finally choosing to reveal himself as he stepped out of the hidden cubby. Both his friends let out a startled shriek at his sudden appearance, staring at him as if he were a ghost... well, a ghost other than usual wandering Hogwarts. He gave them both an amused grin.

"Not exactly the warm welcome I was hoping for, but-"

Before he could say anything further, he found himself with an armful of sobbing female.

"Thank God," Hermione cried, "I thought for certain something awful had happened to you..." And then, conceiving that something awful still could have happened, she pulled away to give him a very thorough inspection.

"Harry, mate!" Clyde said, "Don't scare us like that!"

"Well, I didn't want you to choke on your dinner, so I waited a moment at least. And Hermione! Stop it! The school nurse gave me a very thorough check up already. I'm fine," he assured them. Hermione didn't look convinced.

"What happened, Harry? When you didn't show up in the Tower, Fred and George went looking for you, but couldn't find you. We had to tell McGonagall, and she alerted the entire school and we still couldn't find you. The Court even got involved the next morning, and searched the entire castle and even some of the Forbidden Forest. There were rumors that they found some of your clothing or your equipment in there."

Wrong forest, he wanted to say, but checked himself. It was so tempting to just spill the last several days he'd had, and the visit with Voldemort as well. Instead his mind scurried to pull together the story he had been told to give.

"Just rumors, I'm sure," he said, "Though you were right about Whitehall and Morgenson. They ambushed me outside of the locker room."

"I knew it!" Clyde announced, looking thoroughly indignant, "I knew it had to have been one of those bloody Slytherins!"

"Oh really?" Hermione said, her expression blank. The boy looked a bit sheepish.

"Well, I never disagreed with you."

"Anyway," Harry continued. He went on to give them the contrived story about being confunded and abandoned in the muggle world, WYRA's rescue, and his return early that morning. He tried to play it off as a bad prank, keeping the telling light and even humorous. Clyde listened rapt with his tale, but the more he talked the more angry Hermione seemed to become.

"Of all the wretched..." she fumed, "You could have been killed! You could have been mugged, beaten, kidnaped, or even raped! I can't believe those two would do something so horribly irresponsible and petty over a silly game!"

"Hey!" both boys protested on behalf of their 'silly game'.

"Well, really!" Hermione huffed.

Before an argument could breakout over the merits of Quidditch, the portrait opened to let in a couple of third years. Their reaction, like Hermione's and Clyde's, was to let out shrieks of surprise and then stare stupidly for several moments. Feeling a bit awkward under their awed study, Harry forced a smile and a little wave.

"Hello."

"No way!" cried a tawny haired girl. "You're alive!"

"I think so," Harry agreed, and then took his pulse to make sure. "Yep, still here."

"Oh my God, no one's going to believe this!" said her companion, a lightly freckled boy., and then an instant later disappeared back through the portrait hole. The girl looked suddenly flustered with being alone with the now infamous, Harry Potter. She opened her mouth as if to ask something, shut it, opened it again, changed her mind and ran after her escaping companion.

The trio stared at the portrait hole for a moment, then looked to each other.

"What was that?" asked Clyde.

"I dunno," offered Harry, "but I hope everyone doesn't react that way. It was funny the first time, but it gets old fast."

Hermione looked a bit amused, her previous worry dissipating with the realization that he really was here and he was safe, unharmed, and in good spirits. With her good mood restored, her next words were a bit teasing.

"What do you expect? It's not every day one of your housemates wins a Quidditch match against Slytherin, is kidnaped, presumed dead, and then returns. You can bet this is going to be in the Wizard Weekly too."

Harry groaned at the thought. He, like most people, had his fair share of daydreams about being famous, but it had never occurred to him that it would be quite this... embarrassing.

"And then of course, there'll be interviews," Hermione continued. "There's already been several reporters following this story who visited the school, and interviewed the students and teachers, so you can bet there will be at least three times as many as before."

Clyde made a grimace.

“Bloody nuisance they made of themselves too. They must of heard we were good mates, ‘cause they seem to follow me and Hermione like puppies... creepy puppies with cameras and notebooks and no respect for privacy. One bloke followed me into the bathroom! Can you believe it?”

Harry wished he didn’t.

“I know!” Hermione said, her teasing tone now indignant. “I think the same fellow tried to follow me up into the girl’s dormitory! He set the wards off and McGonagall came storming in. I’ve never seen her look so mad! She transfigured his notebook into a bird and threw it out the window. Then, he actually had the gall to yell at her about freedom of the press and the right to free speech!”

“What happened?” Harry asked.

“She transfigured his camera into a fish and threw out the window and into the lake! Then she said if she ever found him in the tower again she’d turn him into a pig and let him loose in the Forbidden Forest,” Clyde said, and then let out a long hooting laugh.

“But it’s going to be ten times worse for you, Harry,” she said, looking sympathetic. “Not only are the reporters going to come after you for the story, so is every other over curious classmate and teacher. And they can follow you anywhere in the school.”

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Harry had hoped Hermione was exaggerating, but it was less than an hour before her prediction came true. The two third years had rushed off to immediately tell their entire house that the Black Cat of Gryffindor apparently still had an extra seven or eight lives. The other tables near by quickly learned of what was happening, and dinner wasn’t even half over when half the student body got out of their

seats in order to storm Gryffindor tower. A few reporters who had lingered for the day managed to slip into the crowd with them.

Harry and his friends were soon cornered in the common's room, and no amount of verbal or physical aversion could get them away or around the curious horde. A continuous stream of questions was poured out, most of which Harry couldn't answer and the rest he had to lie about if he said anything at all.

Some of the questions were obvious: Where have you been? Why did you disappear? Who was responsible?

Other questions were just bizarre: Were you influenced by the alignment of the planets? Do you have any injuries now of a magical nature? Have your eyes always been that bright?

And some were just plain inappropriate: Did any of those London Muggles touch you, Harry? If you could take revenge on your abductors, what punishment would you choose? Do you think the love of your girlfriend ('I beg your pardon!' Hermione snapped.) guided you home?

To everything Harry replied either, 'I'm not allowed to say, it's under investigation,' or 'I don't know. I was confused most of the time,'. After half an hour of this, several repeats of the same questions and answers, and no end in sight, Harry said nothing and settled himself in for a long night.

It was almost midnight, when McGonagall finally arrived at the commons room and sent everyone to bed. Their own beds, and that included the other houses and the reporters who had invaded her domain. She spared a clearly exhausted Harry a pat on the shoulder, and sent him on his way. Even here his dorm mates tried to question him, until a rather protective Clyde told them all to leave Harry the bloody hell alone for eight bloody hours.

The next day wasn't much better, and Harry had to use every bit of his (and Hermione's and the Weasley twin's) wits to get to his classes without being cornered, questioned, and made tardy. Classes were a welcome reprieve, as none of the reporters dared interrupt a

professor's class- they were all extremely short tempered it seemed and with collections of hexes that only the most deviant intellectuals might acquire- and they were all being extra firm on the 'no talking in class' rule. Harry had actually been relieved when Professor Snape had informed him he would be making up his lab practicals that Saturday. The prospect of that weekend without any privacy was bleak enough without the benefits of his professor's protection..

Meals were taken in the kitchens with the house elves, who cooed and clucked over him, but didn't ask any questions beyond 'how many lumps of sugar would Mr. Potter like in his tea?' Studying was the trickiest venture, since regular trips to the library were required and reporters liked to hang outside and wait for him or one of his friends to come through. Removing his glasses and transfiguring his tie and badge different House's colors worked twice, but they quickly caught on. Luckily, the twins thought it hilarious fun to help their 'idol', and they were a treasure trove of disguises, pranks, and distractions.

By Friday, Harry was on the verge of hexing someone.

"Bloody hell, when will this end?"

Clyde shrugged, his demeanor almost as sullen as Harry. Constantly being questioned when Harry wasn't around, and then completely ignored when he was, was a blow to his pride as well as his patience. Hermione was also irritable, but she had experience dealing with reporters because of her father's activity in politics and could see the end in sight.

"The Dark Lord has been gone for most of the week," she said, "And the Headmistress has been too busy trying to salvage the situation regarding her failure to protect a student to deal with it all properly. That's the only reason this nonsense has been allowed to continue. When he gets back, those reporters won't be allowed anywhere closer than Hogsmeade."

He didn't think it possible, but Harry was actually looking forward to Voldemort's return. A return which would be the Saturday after next at the latest, when Slytherin and Ravenclaw Quidditch teams would face off.

That weekend Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw were playing. Harry wished he could go and watch them, but with the enormous amount of overdue homework and the castle mostly empty, Hermione had succeeded in convincing him to spend the morning in the library. They were unexpectedly joined there by Draco and Natalie. Both complained it was too cold to watch a bunch of Powderpuffs and Bookworms fumble around on broomsticks. Ron, who was sulking over Potion's essay, didn't look like he agreed, but had tagged along anyway.

Their whispered discussions over alchemy, aconite, and the Elven-Orcan War of 1222 gradually lapsed into more casual matters in more casual tones.

"Where's your other fellow today? What's his name? Claude or something," asked Draco, not looking up from his DADA textbook.

"Clyde? Unlike me, he's actually had all week to do his homework," Harry said, not bothering to look up from his Astronomy text book either.

"So what's your excuse, Hermione?" asked Natalie, who did look up and rather slyly at that.

"I don't much care for Quidditch," she replied and made it an actual point to not look up.

"Then why were you at the Gryffindor-Slytherin game if you don't like Quidditch?" the blonde witch inquired. At this Draco glanced surreptitiously up at her.

"Harry asked me, of course."

"Really?" This time, Natalie's curious gaze turned to Harry. It felt strangely accusatory, though Harry couldn't fathom why she be imply he'd done something devious.

"She wouldn't have come otherwise," he explained defensively, "I was sworn to secrecy, and couldn't tell her beforehand. I figured she'd be mad at me afterwards if I didn't ask her to come see for herself."

"How in the name of Merlin did you get on the team in the first place?" Ron blurted out, as it was clearly something that had bothered him for a while now. Harry couldn't help but feel a bit smug with his answer.

"Punishment," he said.

"Punishment?" asked the three Slytherins. Hermione, who had learned of it all from the twins and then from Harry directly, shared an amused look with her troublesome friend.

"Yes. I was forced to play Quidditch," Harry explained, "As punishment for disobeying the professor during flying lessons."

Ron had gone completely white.

"B-b-but... I had to scrub out cauldrons! Why aren't I playing Quidditch?"

Harry thought it perfectly obvious, but the boy looked so disturbed that he didn't have the heart to be bluntly honest about the matter.

"Well, I suppose the Head of our Houses chooses punishments that best help the school, and preferably their own houses. Professor Snape must have felt there was a greater need for clean cauldrons than for a new Slytherin Seeker."

"Amen to that," said Draco, "Father took me to a Gryffindor-Slytherin match last year. Gryffindor got creamed. I was almost embarrassed to watch. But still... Quidditch as punishment?"

"Were you watching the match out there? I thought I was going to die. Your team is evil."

Draco's looked backed to his book. None of his Slytherin friends, or Ron, had questioned him about the events of his disappearance, more out of lack of opportunity than anything else. The other three

houses had been pretty protective of him, and he had not been alone with a Slytherin since his return. So Harry was unsurprised when the Malfoy heir used the conversational opening to ask in the most disinterested tone the matter that was most definitely of interest to him.

"Yes, well, you would know. I heard aWhitehall and Morgenson have been suspended because of their involvement in your disappearance. I trust they didn't rough you up too badly?"

"I don't know. I was confunded, remember?" was Harry's automatic reply.

A look of annoyance passed over Draco's face briefly, but it quickly turned neutral again. Ron who was slightly appeased by Harry's earlier response, had returned to sulking over his essay. Natalie didn't bother hiding her skepticism, her brow arched elegantly at him.

"Surely, you remember something," she asked.

"Nothing I haven't told half the reporters in Britain at least twenty times. I don't know why everyone keeps asking me. WYRA probably knows more about what happened than I do. Ask Snape about it, he probably knows quite a bit. I wish everyone would just shut up about the matter and leave me alone."

The opportunity for interrogation having passed, Draco slid easily onto other subjects. This time it was a matter so non sequitur , it threw off both Harry and Hermione.

"Father wished me to invite you to our family Christmas Party."

"What?!"

Madam Pince, Hogwart's rather strict librarian, sent a warning glare from the check out desk..

Amazingly, it was the adopted Malfoy and not the invited who had shouted out in surprise. Her expression was so horrified, Harry

couldn't help but wonder if Malfoy Christmas parties were a code word for 'apocalypse'. Draco rolled his eyes.

"You can't be that surprised?" he said, "After all, he's on good terms with the Dark Lord, and appeared in the papers on two separate occasions. And he isn't even twelve yet."

"Draco Narsissio Malfoy, my friends are not father's toys! I won't have him playing his deranged political games with him!"

Draco ignored his sister's outburst, turning a conspiratory look towards Harry and grinning wickedly. "If Father invites you for a private talk, run. He'll probably try to arrange a betrothal between you and Hermione... or me. Which ever he thinks will most appeal to you."

Harry just blinked stupidly at him, unsure if he was joking or not, while Hermione sputtered and blushed.

"Oh, and of course, you two are invited as well," Draco said, waving dismissively at his companions.

"Jeepers," Natalie said sarcastically, "Thanks for remembering us non-celebutantes."

"Yes, well, one must acknowledge the little people from time to time."

"Brother!"

Madam Pince slammed down one of her ancient books.

"WILL YOU ALL BE QUIET?! THIS IS A LIBRARY NOT A GOSSIP HALL!"

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That afternoon found Harry descending the stairs to the lower dungeons. He had two potions he was expected to brew, and according to Clyde they were lengthy. He'd need at least, three hours to finish them, and he couldn't have been happier.

“Potter,” Snape growled, taking in the boy’s dusty, cobweb ridden clothes with irritation. “I know this is a Saturday, but a little effort towards your appearance is still warranted.”

Harry blushed, pausing a moment to pat some of the dust off. He only succeeded in making himself sneeze, and making Snape look even more irritated.

“Sorry, Professor. Some reporters tried to corner me outside the library and I had to duck into a secret passage.”

The dour potion’s master said nothing to that, and merely swished his wand at him. Instantly, the dust and cobwebs disappeared and his robe look freshly laundered and pressed.

“Thanks,” Harry offered reluctantly.

“Don’t bother. Cobwebs are a potent potion’s ingredient and I don’t want to spend all day here because they keep falling into your work,” he sneered, pointing towards the only work station with a burner already set up.

“Well, then thanks for nothing,” Harry muttered and stomped over his station. Skimming over the directions on the board, he filled his cauldron a third of the way full with water and set it to boil, then went to gather his ingredients. As he was sorting through the various containers, Snape settle behind his desk with stack of essays in front of him, but favored watching the boy like a hawk over his grading.

“Are you finished with your essay on aging botanicals and their affects on Sleeping Draughts, yet?” the man queried, looking like he already suspected the answer as unsatisfactory.

“Almost,” Harry responded. “Speaking of which, your wormwood is starting to mold.”

“That’s for sixth year potions. Fresh wood is just to the left. I suppose my Goddaughter warned you about that?”

Harry left the storage closet, and returned to his work station, separating each ingredient in the order he would have to add them to the cauldron.

“No, why?”

“You’re only the third or fourth Gryffindor to notice. And exactly how complete is ‘almost’. I expect it by Monday, along with the essay on Pepper-up.”

“I just need to write the conclusion and revise it. I’d be done by now, but Hermione got us kicked out of the library for yelling.” Looking over the directions again, the young Gryffindor began pulling the seeds out of the milkweed pods and separating them from the down. It was a bit tricky, as a lapse in concentration would cause the feathery material to fly into the air and drift dangerously close to his cauldron.

“Hermione? Yell in a library? I imagine Draco was involved in some capacity,” the dark man said, mostly to himself.

“Well, yes. And Malfoy Sr. too, I suppose. I’ve been invited to their Christmas party. Draco says his father’s going to suggest a betrothal, but I think he was just playing.”

The older man snorted.

“Don’t be so sure. Draco’s already gone through two betrothals, and Hermione’s likely to be engaged before graduation.”

“What?! That’s... that’s... gross!”

Snape rolled his eyes. “I know, imagine all those nasty cooties they got!” he said sarcastically.

“That’s not what I meant and you know it!” he huffed, turning down the heat to his now boiling cauldron and stirring the water twelve times with the piece of wormwood. There was a long silence, before questions started popping up in his head. “Would he really try to set up a betrothal with me?”

"To you? Perhaps. With you? No. You're still a minor and a ward of the school. If he were to ask anyone it would be the Headmistress or even Voldemort."

"What? Why would they have any say in the matter?!"

Snape gave him an irritated look.

"Are you or are you not a ward of the school?"

"... Voldemort, though?"

"No authority technically, but do you think the headmistress would defy him in any manner whatsoever?"

Harry said nothing to a perfectly obvious answer. For nearly half an hour he worked on his potion and pondered what he should do. He certainly didn't want anyone marrying him off, but his presence at the Christmas party didn't seem like it would prevent it if that was what the Malfoy patriarch wanted.

"What do you think I should do?" he asked finally.

Snape, who had been quietly occupied with his grading said nothing and Harry thought he was either being ignored or hadn't been heard. Heaving a heavy sigh, he turned back to his potion and nearly dropped his ladle when the man spoke.

"Why ask me?"

"Er...well, you're friends with the Malfoys so... I figured... Slytherins and all...um.."

"I'm sorry I don't speak in fragmented sentences. Shall we bring in someone to translate?"

"Well, do you want me as your other godson...er, godson-in-law?"

The man gave him a long, considering look, and the longer he looked the more his considerations seemed to disturb him. Harry gave him his nastiest scowl.

"I doubt it's something you... we... need to worry about. You might have gained some attention, but that may fall on either side of the fence or fade away altogether. Lucius Malfoy won't make such a gamble so early in the game."

"So I should go?"

"If only so as not to insult the Malfoys, yes."

Harry nodded, feeling relieved that a course of action was decided upon. Unfortunately, his relief was short lived as he realized his potions had turned from the correct blue green to dark green. Letting out a startled yelp, he quickly removed the overheating potions from the fire.

"Of course," Snape said, watching smugly as Harry puttered about trying to save his brew, "Advice from Slytherin is always self-serving. I recommend taking it in small doses."

Chapter 19: Ballrooms and Backrooms

Time passed, Voldemort returned, the reporters left, the Weasley twins released a clutch of Gurgles (a sort of small pixy with beak like a humming bird, which it used to collect earwax to build their nests) in the middle of the Halloween feast, and Harry's grand, albeit vague, adventure was gradually forgotten.

Despite speculation on possible trauma resulting from his kidnapping, Harry went on to win both his matches against Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw and was looking forward to facing off against Slytherin for the Quidditch Cup. The closer the final match drew, the more apt his potions professor was to giving him detentions.

This should have been extremely irritating, but it was quickly becoming an anticipated reprieve from his housemates. Hermione, who had not given up on the belief that Harry should not attend the Malfoy Christmas party, had unwittingly enlisted the help of just about every Gryffindor in school to back her up. Malfoys were Slytherins (Hermione being adopted Malfoy made it forgivable for her associate with them). Malfoys were evil. Malfoys would trick him into betraying his House. Malfoys would make him do bad things. Malfoys would cut him open and give his blood to Snape (that particular one was a favorite of the Weasley twins, and was soon elaborated upon with rituals of virgin sacrifice and monsters composed entirely of tentacles). Snape, being a Gryffindor-hating bastard, kept things nice and balanced with his snarky comments and favoritism.

"I trust you have something appropriate to wear?" Snape asked off-handedly, peering over at Harry who was hunched over a growing pile of beetle eyes. Harry was serving his fourth detention that month for ... he couldn't remember what, and tearing apart fragile beetle bodies for second year potions.

"A friend is lending me some dress robes. He promised to re-size them to fit me properly."

"You could always re-size the clothes yourself."

"If I weren't serving so many detentions with you I might actually have the time to learn spells outside of homework," Harry said, looking expectantly at his potion's professor.

Snape merely smirked.

"I will be escorting you to and from the party, so don't expect to be there long. You will arrive here appropriately attired at seven-fifteen sharp, or I'll leave without you."

Harry said nothing and continued working on his beetles until Snape finally released him to wash up before dinner. He couldn't say that he was displeased with his escort's decision to make their visit brief, as he wasn't really looking forward to the party despite his insistence on going. He was going on principle, but pragmatically thinking he doubted he'd enjoy it much.

Christmas time in Germany had always been spent with family, playing out long standing family traditions from both sides and creating new ones every year. Parties were very few and only with their closest friends and their families in attendance.

Christmas at the Dursley's had been a farce in comparison. A time of gaudy decorations, Dudley being even more horrendously spoiled than usual, and constant cleaning and baking of sugary treats. The least favorite part of the season by far, however, was the ostentatious parties where in Harry was dressed up in his only nice set of clothes and an ugly green tie with red Santas on it. Mr. and Mrs. Dursley would parade Dudley around to all their associates with a beaming pride matched only by Dudley's own conceit. Harry would be forced to follow as he was introduced as their adopted ward of some war torn nation in Eastern Europe. And he would be forced to stand there under the pitying and condescending gazes of strangers and endure listening to them wax on and on about how kind and generous the Dursley's were for taking him in.

He hated them in those moments.

He imagined the Malfoy's party would more closely resembled the later than the former, although he had to admit he was curious to see

more wizarding traditions. The decorations around Hogwarts were breath taking, and he couldn't imagine a family that had sired Draco Malfoy would allow anything less. What he worried about most was the people. What sort of people attended a party held by Voldemort's right hand man?

Fred and George Weasley gave a rather colorful list, on the top of which was Voldemort himself, followed shortly after by the Seeker of the Chudley Canons, and Satan.

Would they ignore him? Would they pity him? Would they sneer? Would they stare?

What would they see when they looked at him? The orphan of two of Voldemort's most hated enemies? The lucky Gryffindor who survived an attempted murder by his school mates?

"Harry? Are you just getting back?"

Looking back from the portrait of the Fat Lady, Harry saw Hermione coming up the stairs with two large books in her arms and her school bag at her side.

"Yeah. Snape gave me beetles this time. How did the study session go? Gobbledegook."

The portrait swung open and they both climbed inside. Hermione let out an exasperated sigh.

"You didn't miss out on anything important. Everyone was too distracted talking out their holiday plans to get much studying in."

Harry smiled.

"Can you blame them? Two weeks without classes and only a few essays for homework? Besides, I'm sure there excited to be going home for the holidays. Aren't you?"

Hermione smiled back weakly. Harry gave her a weird look.

“You really don’t want to go home for Christmas?”

She sighed, and pulled him into a little nook in the corner of the common room. They sat across from each other, and Harry only now realized how miserable she looked.

“Go home to what, Harry? My foster father barely looks at me at the best of times, and curses my birth at the worst. Narcissa pretends nothing’s wrong, convinced hiding me under pretty bows and good manners will make everything fine and wipe away the supposed blemish of my dirty blood. My house is a museum and death trap rolled into one, and I’m not even allowed in the library!”

Harry wasn't sure what he should say to that. He had known Hermione didn't get along well with her foster father, but he hadn't realized it was so bad that she would shun her own home rather than face him, and he had never heard her utter a complaint about her foster mother before.

“Is that why you don’t want me to come to the party, Hermione? Because you think your foster family will look down on me too?”

“Yes...no... sort of.”

“Thank’s for clearing that up.”

“Harry, it’s not that I care what they thinks of you. You’re a wonderful friend and wonderful person, nothing they think or say will convince me other wise, but Harry... if they choose to... if they wanted... they could... they could...”

“Hermione, what could they do?”

She wiped the corner of her eyes and sniffed.

“They could... forbid me from being your friend.”

[illegible]

Harry looked in the mirror critically as Clyde bustled around him, straightening up his robes and making sure they fit properly. They were blue with silver clasps and bangles, and made him look unusually pale.

“Not to sound too much like a girl, mate,” Clyde said, “But you’d look way better in green.”

“Professor McGonagal would have a heart attack.”

“Snape too, if we were lucky.”

They both laughed.

A familiar warmth in his pocket alerted him to the fact he was running late. He pulled out his watch and cursed.

“Too late to do anything about it now. Thanks for letting me borrow this, Clyde.”

The other boy shrugged dismissively. “Not like I’ll need it. Me and my ‘uncles’ won’t be going home till the night before Christmas.”

“Yeah, I’m sorry that your Grandmother hasn’t been feeling well.”

“Don’t worry about it. This happens every year. She’ll be fine once the stores stop selling eggnog. Now go on before the greasy git leaves without you!”

Harry hurried down into the dungeons alone. Hermione, Draco, and most of the other students who were going to attend the party had left several days before to spend the holidays at home. Despite his friend’s reluctance to return home, once there the letters she sent suggested she was having some fun. Mr. Malfoy was even busier than usual at Court, and the result was the rest of the family was left to enjoy their holidays with each other. Harry didn’t begrudge her happiness, but couldn’t help but feel lonelier than usual.

While there were only a few students left behind during the holidays, and that number kept decreasing the closer it came to Christmas,

those that stayed were intent on enjoying themselves. The remaining students all sat at one large table now, allowing the otherwise segregated houses to mingle freely with each other and their older and younger companions. Harry tried to be sociable, but there was this barrier of infamy between them, one he had gotten during the Welcoming Feast and strengthened with his Quidditch victories and kidnapping. Every time he spoke to someone unfamiliar he felt their unspoken expectation.

Clyde was by far the most enjoyable company, but he also craved large groups of people and wasn't above leaving Harry alone for hours to go out and have a snow ball fight. The Weasley twins... well, they were really only safe in small quantities. Like alcohol, too much and you found yourself either embarrassed, injured, or in trouble with authority. All his Slytherin friends had left about the same time as Hermione.

Well, at least he'd get to see them he thought.

Harry arrived at the potions lab just in time to catch up with Snape.

"Cutting it close aren't you? And what a horrid color," the greasy git said by way of greeting.

"There's nothing wrong with blue, and beggars can't be choosers."

"What a perfectly muggle sentiment. Cambi rosso."

His robes suddenly turned Gryffindor red. The boy looked himself over and regarded Snape skeptically. "What? No white fur trim?"

"I could just as easily turn them pink if the color is not to your liking."

"Ho ho ho."

Snape rolled his eyes and led Harry further into the dungeons. They entered the Slytherin dorms. Harry had visited once or twice with Hermione, but hadn't stayed long in the gloomy place. This was first time he'd seen the Slytherin common room decorated, and it looked

very pretty and very cold with its Christmas tree laden with silver ornaments and pure white furniture.

They walked to a narrow door and Snape pulled a key from his pocket. Using the key on the door, a glimmering light seeped through the cracks of the door before fading away. As they stepped through, Harry knew they had just warped to Malfoy Manor. They were deposited into what appeared to be a cloak room. They were immediately greeted by a rather ugly little creature dressed in what appeared to be a pillow case. It looked around the at the rows of hanging cloaks, gloves, and scarves with barely concealed terror.

"My Masters bid you welcome, my Lords," it, she?, said, bowing so low its floppy ears brushed the ground, eyes flitting about from side to side. "Gigi is escorting you to the ballroom, now."

She practically ran from the room.

"What on earth is that?"

"Boggart," Snape informed him. "The only way you can catch them by locking them in a closet. Their quite terrified of them."

"Oh."

Harry was so distracted by the funny little creature skittering about, he failed to notice Snape's dark eyes glowing with humor.

They were led down a very long corridor lined with portraits that followed their progress with calculating grey eyes. Between the portraits were display cases, filled with many strange items and books that turned their own pages every so often. Harry was hard pressed not to stop and study them all more closely, but Snape's insistent hand pressing on his shoulder kept them moving forward.

"Hermione was right," he said, "This place is a museum."

"Not a sentiment I recommend repeating to the rest of the Malfoy family, Mr. Potter."

"It's not the first time we've heard it said."

Draco Malfoy was leaning behind a marble pillars. He slunk from his hiding spot, smiling mischievously. He was richly dressed in dark blue and silver, and on him it looked quite flattering. "Father sent me to wait for you. Our Lord is holding a private discussion with some of the inner circle."

Snape nodded. Draco turned to Harry.

"Just go through that door. Hermione's probably sulking in a corner somewhere. Nice robes, by the way."

With that, Harry was left to his own devices. He was seriously tempted to go back the way they'd come and get a better look at some of those display cases. Then he remembered Hermione had described the house as not only a museum, but a death trap as well. With a deep breath and a conscious effort to maintain his posture, he opened the door.

A waltz was playing, but from where he couldn't see. There had to have easily been over three hundred witches and wizards filling the room, all dressed beautifully in their finest. Harry felt distinctly underdressed, but no one paid him any attention as he made his way through the- good god was that a diamond or a crystal ball?

"Harry!"

He turned to see Hermione, Natalie, Ron, and several of Draco's other friends clustered together in a corner. As he made his way over, he couldn't help but notice Ron standing awfully close to Hermione and looked rather pink in the ears. She was dressed in a satin white gown, embroidered with crystal snow flakes that flickered different colors every time she moved. Her hair had been curled into ringlets that escaped from her silver hairpin to cascade down her naked shoulders. Combined with the glowing smile escaping her pink painted lips, he could sympathize with Ron for the first time ever.

Hermione was gorgeous.

"About time you showed up, Harry," Natalie greeted, looking mysterious and beautiful in black silk and white gloves. "Hermione was starting to develop a twitch."

"Natalie!"

"Don't melt your snowflakes, Princess, I was only teasing. Come on, Zabini, lets squeeze in a dance before everyone starts getting drunk."

"Natalie!"

The blond bombshell was already off, leading her rather flustered date away. Harry just smiled as she disappeared, then turned to his friend.

"You look nice." She just shrugged and looked him over. Her expression turned quizzical.

"You look...ah.."

"Like a prepubescent Santa," Ron offered, smirking.

"I was going to say 'festive', but..."

"It used to be blue, but you know ... your godfather's Christmas spirit and all."

That earned him several snickers, and a sympathetic look from Hermione. From somewhere in the folds of her dress she pulled out a wand.

"Cambi verde."

His robes turned green.

"What am I? A mood ring?" Harry lamented. "Think Snape will cry 'blasphemy!' if he sees me like this?"

"No, but he might turn you pink."

“Who has he done that to?”

“Lucius for one.”

From there they fell into casual conversation, laughter, and the occasional interruption of an adult dropping by to extend their greetings to their host's daughter. Draco eventually showed up, shoved Ron onto Parkinson for a dance, and then made an escape before they got back. The other Slytherins eventually wandered off to get something to drink or mingle with their dates, leaving them to wander by themselves out onto the balcony. Aside from a few wizards enjoying a smoke, the large balcony was practically empty. Although the area was covered in a layer of snow, they left no foot prints and it was only slightly cooler outside than in.

“Didn't you want to dance, Hermione?” he asked, realizing they were probably the only two who hadn't yet.

“Is that your way of inviting me to?”

Harry blushed. “I don't really know much about dancing. I think the last time I tried was when my mom taught me to waltz at her friend's wedding. I was only seven, so...”

“Well, come on... show me what you remember, I'll fill you in on the rest.”

“Oh...um...okay.”

He stepped up to her, feeling awkward and clumsy before they had even started. It was a lot different dancing with someone about the same size than it had been with his mother. Hermione had to correct the position of his hand on her hip and remind him not to keep looking at his toes. His face was on fire and Hermione was on the verge of laughing.

“Okay, I think we're ready to start,” she said, “Let's just keep to the basic steps, then we'll try something adventurous like twirling.”

“Oh, ha ha.”

“And one, two, three, and one, two, three, and- Ouch!”

One moment Harry was fumbling through his dance steps, stepping on Hermione’s toes no doubt, and the next he found himself face down in a snow drift. Lifting his head, it took him a moment to spot a large mansion almost half a mile away, and then realize it was Malfoy Manor. No sooner had he realized this, than he was landing heavily on his back and looking up at Hermione’s concerned face.

“... Okay...”

“Are you alright, Harry?”

He considered the question. “I hope so. Tell me, did something odd just happen a moment ago?”

She smiled and helped him climb back to his feet. Now at a proper angle, Harry could see that they had company in the form a ‘bogart’, a different one than before, wearing a flour sack. It was peeking at Harry rather guiltily.

“I’m sorry about that, Harry. You stepped on my toe and Dobby overreacted a bit.”

“Dobby?”

The ‘bogart’ let out a mournful wail.

“Dobby has disgraced his mistress and attacked a wizard! Oh, Dobby is the most awfulest of House Elves. Dobby must punish himself!”

“Oh, Dobby! Don’t-”

In a rather alarming display, the strange creature picked up a flower pot and smashed it over its own head. Harry watched stunned as Dobby snapped his fingers, and the pot fixed itself, and he smashed the pot on his head yet again.

“Dob-”

Smash.

"No, stop-

Smash.

"Immobilis corpus!"

Dobby stopped mid-self-punishment. Hermione let out an exasperated sigh.

"Now I command you stop that. It was an honest mistake, and you know I dislike it when you decide to punish yourself," she chided, then turned to Harry. "This is my personal house elf, Dobby. He can be a bit... overzealous, but he's really a very good elf."

"I thought he was a boggart?"

Dobby let out a horrendous wail.

"Oh, Dobby is a boggart! How he has shamed his mistress!"

"What is all the racket about?!"

Draco came storming out to the balcony, took one look at Dobby and rolled his eyes.

"I should have known. I thought you were told to stay out of the way tonight?"

"Oh, Dobby is the worstest elf ever!"

"Draco, you're not helping!"

"Dobby, go do dishes in the kitchen. I'm sure there's plenty of sharp pointy things still in the sink for you to punish yourself with."

Dobby bulbous eyes widen, look far to pleased at the prospect of pain to be healthy. Hermione sighed and released him for her spell, allowing him to disappear with a loud 'pop'.

"Blimey," Harry said. Draco smirked.

"Takes a bit of getting used to. Dobby's been Hermione's elf since she was five and she still doesn't know how to deal with him."

She scowled darkly at her brother, who smiled sweetly and draped an arm around Harry.

"Sister dear, mother was looking for you. She wants you to meet her in the powder room."

Hermione sighed, then looked apologetically at Harry.

"She probably wants me to meet all her society friends again. I'll try to keep things brief."

Once she was gone, Harry found himself alone with Draco. He expected the other boy to return to the party, but instead he pulled Harry off to the side. The pale boy regarded him coolly and Harry was suddenly reminded of that moment on the train where Draco had threatened him.

"I like you Harry," the Malfoy heir said finally, "You make school... interesting. And you're a fairly descent fellow, for a Gryffindor of course."

"Of course," he conceded.

"I can appreciate that my sister likes you, but I have to wonder... why do you like my sister?"

Harry frowned. "I don't know what you mean. Why wouldn't I like Hermione? She's clever, funny, and a good friend."

"Yes, yes she is. She is also bossy, condescending, and a spoil sport."

Yes, Harry admitted to himself, that was true, but that wasn't all Hermione was.

"She's... I dunno. She's Hermione. Sometimes she's a bit too smart for her own good, but... she's... well, she's like me."

"Like you?" Draco asked skeptically.

"I don't think it's something you could really understand. We're both trying to make the very best out of what happened to us."

"Happened to you? Nothing happened to Hermione. I never would have allowed it. Our family never would have let anything hurt her."

"But she's still hurting, isn't she, Draco?"

The other boy looked ready to snap at him, but hesitated, then looked away. When Draco looked back at him, his expression was mutinous.

"You sure you just don't think she's cute?"

Harry rolled his eyes. Draco made a frustrated gesture.

"Well, damn. Why couldn't you be shallow? This would be so much easier if I could just shove Natalie off onto you."

"What are you babbling about Draco?"

"You know my parents are going to arrange a marriage for my sister, don't you?"

"..."

"Despite what I said, I doubt they'll arrange it with you. So listen, don't go making her fall in love with you, ok?"

"Er..."

Draco shook his head, looking at Harry like he was imbecile. "Gryffindors!"

"Yes, well, Slytherins!" Harry said, pointing towards the ballroom dance floor. From amongst the many twirling couples, a rather flushed Hermione and Ron were dancing. Draco gaped.

"I leave him alone for five minutes!"

Harry laughed at his retreating back. A familiar warmth drew his hand to his pocket, and he pulled out his watch. He had been at the party almost three hours now, longer than he had anticipated. Was his watch telling him Snape wanted to leave now? Deciding he should find the potion's master before the man found him, he went back inside. As he suspected, Snape was nowhere in the ballroom. Natalie tried to coax him to dance, but he made his excuses and kept looking. Hermione, Draco, and Ron had all disappeared into the crowd. Harry had almost despaired of finding the bastard, wondered why he would even want to find him, and then spotted someone who could help him.

"Gigi!"

The saggy eared house elf turned curiously to him, and gave him her usual bow.

"Mister Potter honors Gigi by remembering her name. How may Gigi help young Mister Potter?"

"Er... yes, I'm looking for Professor Snape. You know, the man I arrived with."

"Professor Snape is in the drawing room with Master and Master's Master. Gigi will take you there!"

"Master's Master? You mean-"

Before Harry could protest, Gigi had taken hold of his robe and with a loud 'pop' was transported into the drawing room. Instantly, there

were at least a dozen wands pointed directly at him. Blinking owlshly, Harry slowly lifted his empty hands.

“Potter?!”

Harry turned his head towards the fireplace where three very familiar Slytherins were seated and one man who could only be Malfoy Sr. with his hand entwined intimately with beautiful, haughty woman that had to have been Narcissa. His eyes skimmed them briefly, and something about their stances suggested he had interrupted something. When his gaze found Voldemort’s, he tensed.

“I didn’t do it!” he blurted, then slapped his hand over his mouth.

Voldemort let out a bark of laughter. The room was suddenly less tense. The other witches and wizards in the room put their wands away, and set their expression to something other than vacant surprise.

“Oh, Mr. Potter, what does such a reflexive statement say about our relationship?” Voldemort asked rhetorically, striding towards the young wizard. He stopped just before him, raising his hand to touch Harry’s cheek, tilting his face for gentle inspection. Harry remained tense and quiet, feeling more than just the Dark Lord’s gaze on him. Finally, the elder wizard released him. “What brings you to our little corner of the world, Mr. Potter?”

“... I’ve misplaced myself again, My Lord.”

Voldemort smirked, turning away to take up his position by the fireplace again. “I believe we had a discussion about that at the start of term.”

“Yes, sir.”

“No luck?”

“It’s one of my New Year’s resolutions, sir.”

Voldemort chuckled, and several others did as well, though Harry doubted they knew why. Lucius Malfoy was watching their interaction with intense curiosity, his grey eyes alight with thoughts Harry could not possibly dream of. Beside him, Lestrage, dressed in a green gown so dark it was almost black, was fixing him with a stare that rivaled Nagini's. Snape... Snape was expressionless, which Harry knew meant something. If the bastard was content he'd be smirking.

"Do tell how you ended up here. I trust vampires weren't involved?"

"Er... no, no vampires," Harry stammered, then turned a rather dark look on Snape. "Though there might have been a boggart."

Snape's stoic expression cracked, just bit. It was enough that Harry felt some of his confidence return to him.

"I'm sorry if I interrupted your gathering, My Lord. I was merely looking for Professor Snape, when one of the house elves sought to... assist me."

"And why were you looking for him?"

Harry shrugged. "He might not have to abide by a curfew, but I do."

Voldemort looked to the clock resting on the mantle, and then back at Snape.

"I must apologize my friend, it seems we have impeded your responsibilities with all this idle conversation."

Snape inclined his head. "Not at all. You are always my highest priority, My Lord."

"Then I release you for the night. Go, take your young charge home and enjoy the rest of the holidays."

The potion's master stood, bowing respectfully to the Dark Lord and then to Lord and Lady Malfoy, his hosts. He strode towards the door, snagging Harry who was caught again in Voldemort's crimson gaze.

The connection broken, Harry's stride easily matched Snape's toward the exit, his hand the first to reach the door knob.

"Oh, and Mister Potter."

Harry stopped, peering hesitantly over his shoulder at Voldemort, looking like the devil in the fire light.

"Merry Christmas."

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Lord and Lady Malfoy retired to their bedroom at three o'clock, leaving the clean up for the party to the already weary house elves and the few caterers they'd hired for the party. This being the first time they had been alone in days, they were both desiring the other's company. So while Narcissa sat on the bed, and her husband worked to remove her shoes, they began their first and only honest discussion of the entire day.

"A rather eventful party wasn't it?" Narcissa began.

"Indeed, if Potter hadn't shown up when he had, your sister and Severus might have crossed wands," he agreed, his hands sliding up her leg to unclip her pantyhose from her garter. He graced her with a mischievous smirk and kiss to her ankle as he exposed her naked skin. She smiled back, reaching to unfasten the silver clasps of his robe.

"She was being extremely antagonistic tonight, wasn't she? I know Severus has been especially competitive with her recently, but I hadn't realized she was feeling so defensive. I would never have allowed so many of her cronies into the private party if I had thought she was going to gang up on him. We'll have to write Severus an apology letter."

"Hmmm... I don't know... Potter showed up at a very convenient time for him. He completely ruined her flow of innuendo about his professionalism as an unbiased teacher, hah!, and rather discredited

her by actively seeking Severus out. What Gryffindor would seek out the cruel, tormenting Head of their rival house? I can't help but wonder if he didn't somehow signal Potter to come and save him. Do you need assistance with your jewelry?"

"Just my necklace if you would. Severus conspiring with a Gryffindor? James Potter's son, no less? I can't see it. Besides, his arrival was too perfect. There was no way Severus could have planned for that specific situation nor Potter's specific method of entrance. It was a fluke. Gryffindors have a knack for them."

Lucius conceded to her logic with a tilt of his head. She took his wrists to remove his cuff links.

"Speaking of Potter... what do you make of him?" Narcissa asked. Lucius scowled.

"I wanted to throttle him."

She laughed and moved to unbutton his shirt underneath his robes.

"He wasn't that bad. I found him quite endearing. And such pretty eyes, he had. Even from across the room you could see how green they were."

"Yes, our Lord seemed to think the same thing. They couldn't look away from each other."

Narcissa paused, thinking back on the encounter. She hadn't realized it at the time, but the boy had not looked away from Voldemort. Not once. When was the last time anyone had held the Dark Lord's gaze for so long without look away or dying? Perhaps not since Dumbledore had been forced to retreat across the Channel.

"Do you suppose the boy is love with our Lord?"

"Well, it would explain Bella's hatred for him, wouldn't it? But it's Voldemort's reaction that concerns me I've never known him to entertain the affections of others, especially not children. There's something going on, and I'm sure Severus and Bella know what it is."

Helping Narcissa to her feet and allowing her dress slide to the floor, he stood behind her and began untying her bodice. They stood quietly until the contraption fell away and left her completely naked. Lucius' warm hands ran the contours of her natural form, massaging light indentations the bodice had left on her pale skin.

"Perhaps we should ask Hermione," Narcissa suggested offhandedly. "Draco mentioned that they were quite close."

Lucius grunted, and hid his scowl in her hair.

"Please don't mention that little mudblood while we're doing this. It's rather a turn off."

A rather nasty retort was on the tip of her tongue, but the argument was old and led nowhere, and she was much too tired to start it up again now. She took up a wandering hand and kissed it affectionately.

"Then we'll just have to wait to see how things unfold. Perhaps in the end, you'll have your chance to wrap these beautiful, strong hands around that boy's little neck, but for now they belong to me."

Chapter 20: The King and His Prince

Harry's Christmas came and went quietly. Hermione and all his friends returned to the castle refreshed from their break. He wasn't sure who was happier. Him for being reunited with his friends or Hermione for being reunited with the library.

Classes continued, tests were taken, points were gained and lost, detentions were served, and nothing crazy ... crazier than the usual school related accident happened. Voldemort came and went from the castle, rarely seen except at Quidditch matches and the occasional dinner. If he showed Harry any special interest, the boy didn't know as he made it a point never to look in his direction.

The highlight of Harry's second semester was definitely Quidditch. Transfiguring pens into forks and creating potions that equaled a visit to the dentist was great and all, but Harry had yet to find any sort of magic that rivaled the feeling of flight. In the air he felt powerful, like he could go straight into battle with only his broom and still come out the victor.

It was a very good feeling to have, especially as the final game of the season was once again between Gryffindors and Slytherins. They may have been short a Seeker and a Chaser, but Slytherin's strength had always lay with its Beaters. Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw had grown bolder since Gryffindor's first victory, but they lacked the blind aggressiveness that was Slytherin and the intense competitiveness of Harry's house.

Walking to the Quidditch pitch, his team encircling him like an armed guard, the young Seeker was practically shaking with excitement. He had been to almost every match, as participant or spectator, and his knowledge of the game and of Slytherin's tactics had grown immensely. With every flying maneuver, every point earned, and every foul called Harry imagined using what he learned against his most dangerous rivals.

And today he would have his chance.

"Alright there, Harry?" asked George... Fred?

He gave him a grin.

“Oh I like that look!” laughed the other Weasley twin. “Makes me thinks there’ll be an explosion at some point in the match.”

“Yeah,” Harry said, “Lestranger’s temper when Slytherin loses.”

The team laughed, but quickly sobered as they neared the pitch. Even from the outside, it was obvious the stadium was packed. He suppose he should have figured that the championship game would have more spectators than usual, but the audience wasn’t something he spent much time considering in Quidditch.

“Who are all the extra people?”

“Well, in addition to the entire school,” began team captain Oliver Wood, “There are mostly other parents. No one aside from students and their guardians are allowed to attend... security issues, you know? We usually get at least one player who goes off to the national league after graduation, so people like to come and guess who.”

Harry felt himself relax. Perhaps it was a bit egotistical, but after the year he’d had he was worried they were there to gawk at him. The team quickly prepped for the game, joking around to settle everyone’s nerves as they waited. Finally they were called to the field.

They were greeted with thunderous applause from one side of stadium and resounding ‘boos’ from the other. Harry tried to find Hermione in the crowd, but realized it was hopeless. He didn’t even know what side of the stadium she was on, as she might very well have sat with her brother amongst the Slytherins.

The only people he could recognize right away were Voldemort and the Hogwarts staff seated in the VIP section, but he avoided looking. Too many Slytherins with too much power over him to settle his nerves any. Instead, he focused on the Slytherin team.

They looked as ogre-ish as he remembered, although they had gotten a smaller and swifter Seeker. Franklin Borgish was a thin boy

with exceptionally long limbs and fingers. Harry had seen him play a few times, and that extra reach was a definite strength when catching the snitch but his balance was compromised as a result. He wondered if he couldn't make that work to his favor.

Professor Gimms stalked onto the field.

"Players, mount your brooms!"

The stadium fell into a hushed silence.

The whistle shrieked.

The balls were released.

And the players were off.

"And Potter doesn't waste any time!" cried the announcer, "He's got the Snitch in his sights from the get go, and Borgish is just starting after him. Oh-no, they've both lost sight of it!"

Harry had not, in fact, lost sight of the Snitch, but it had suddenly changed directions and headed directly towards the Slytherin Seeker. He had looked in the opposite direction, and predictably, so did Borgish. The other Slytherin players had opted for a new strategy, and were not focusing on destroying Harry first. No, they seemed quite intent on destroying everyone else.

They were aggressively circling and obstructing the Gryffindors, not so much to gain or lose points, but to disrupt their movements in such a way that left them confused about their next move. The Weasley's soon figured it out and were using the same tactic against one of the Slytherin's Beaters. The others were having a harder time discerning their intentions, and Angelina nearly fell off her broom twice trying to avoid a collision with a player who just barely managed to change direction.

Harry could only partially follow his team's movements, aided mostly by the announcer's commentary, as a majority of his attention was focused on the snitch and keeping Borgish (who was still much closer

to it than he was) from spotting it. The snitch flew downwards, finally away from the other seeker.

If it hadn't moved so close to the ground, Harry never would have seen the shadow streaking towards his own. More on instinct than in thought, he angled his broom downward and shot towards the ground. He wasn't aiming for the snitch, just avoiding that incoming shadow, but Borgish must have interpreted it like that and followed suit. Harry risked a glance back to see Slytherin beater, Marcus Flint, speeding after him. Above them, he could see the rest of his team preoccupied with battles of their own, and understood the Slytherin's plan at once.

Keep the rest of the team busy, wait till Harry was distracted, then take him out long enough for their own seeker to catch the snitch.

A good plan, but Harry had no intention in letting them carry it out.

He leveled out at about six feet from the ground and angled his broom into the distance, encouraging Borgish to look that way as well. Once the Slytherin seeker was busy looking for the supposed location of the snitch, Harry slowed and descended even further so that his feet were brushing the grass. Quietly, almost sedately, Harry changed directions.

"Slytherin Chaser Corvis barely avoids two bludgers sent at him by both Weasley twin beaters, and Chaser Jones takes advantage by scoring a goal. Twenty points Gryffindor! And what the heck is Potter doing?"

By now Harry had practically stopped and Flint was coming at him full speed. He watched his progress by following the shadows on the ground, counting down until the moment of impact. Above him he could hear his teammates calling for him to look out.

"Five...Four..."

The shadow was too close now. He'd never be able to avoid a collision on his broom.

"Three...Two..."

His feet were suddenly solidly on the ground.

“One.”

He jumped-not flew or levitated or floated, but jumped to his left. Flint flew by him, unable to stop and expecting resistance, he had too much speed and too much of an angle. The nose of his broom hit the ground first, and the larger boy flipped clean off of it and smashed into the turf. No sooner had Flint’ face connected with the grass, then Harry was in the air again.

“Oh my God! I can’t believe he fell for that! I mean, Ouch! And Slytherin Captain Marcus Flint looks to be out of it for the game! But what’s this? Potter’s changed directions! Has he found the snitch?!”

He had never lost sight of the snitch, Borgish was on the wrong end of the field, the rest of the Slytherin team was distracted, and Flint wasn’t in any condition to stop anyone. All he had to do was reach out and-

“And Potter’s caught the snitch! Gryffindor wins the Quidditch Cup!”

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Headmistress Lestrage had waited until she was in her office to explode. The endless number of portraits all looked down with either amusement or disgust, as she screamed and stomped and broke things in a mad fit. And from her perfectly white teeth and rosy red lips fell the blackest words of her black heart.

Like the jealous Queen cursing the fair and innocent Snow White, she thought only of the supposed wrongs against her. Her dearest and most precious Dark Lord, like a proud and solemn father he had presented yet another golden crown of laurels to that scruffy vagabond and his Gryffidork horde, while Slytherin House, his real family stood shocked and shamed from the side lines.

And while she could only stand there, and consciously fight to keep her hand from her wand, Snape had left her to talk to his House team. She had expected him to feel the same way, they were both Slytherins after all, and they all know exactly how badly they had failed their House, their families, and their Lord. As the Headmistress she had to appear impartial, but she itched to curse Borgish and Flint as much as she did Potter. But again, though it really shouldn't have surprised her, Snape had disappointed her.

He quite solemnly gathered the players around him, handed Flint a healing potions from his robe, and spoke to them quite calmly.

“This is an unfortunate outcome,” Snape said, and the Slytherins looked dejectedly at their shoes, “But do not let this be viewed as a shame. Lift your heads and keep your eyes forward. You are Slytherins.”

They followed his instructions, the older ones quickly finding a way to stand on their injured pride. When they could all look their Head of House in the eye again, he continued.

“This was a very well played game. I have not seen our Lord so enraptured for many years. The Black Cat’s,” he sneered the nick name, “silly antics caught us off guard. Unlike the other Houses we learn far faster from our mistakes. We will have victory again soon.”

And it was a lie, a lie, a lie! But those stupid fools had seemed so satisfied with that insipid notion! To Hufflepuff with entire lot of them! You could never, ever fail. To fail was a weakness, and the weak died or lived wishing they had! Look at how quickly their Lord had turned from them for this small fallacy after ten years of perfection? Glory and Honor for Gryffindor?! Glory for the Mudblooded, useless, little Potter?

“AAAAAAaaaaahhhhhhhh!!!”

[illegible]

In Voldemort's office, Snape broke with his usual tradition to enjoy a bit of brandy with the Dark Lord. He was truthfully disappointed in his little Snake's failure at the match that day, but in the scheme of things it was small loss. Their futures would not suffer for it. They would still graduate to become the leaders of Wizarding Britain, and two of his players had already received scholarships to play at wizarding universities. They would all get over it, and play even better next year.

Having consoled himself, he took the time to instead consider how he might take advantage of the situation. On a purely vindictive level, he took great enjoyment from the fact that he could practically feel Lestrage's insane rage vibrating through the castle stones. On a more pragmatic one, he knew Lord Voldemort could feel it as well and that reduced her once again in his eyes.

It was clear the elder wizard was quite taken with Lily's boy. Studying the Dark Lord during the match, he had eyes only for Potter, and that was a bit frightening. It wasn't exactly affection he had seen, but a look he had seen men of very specialized profession get when they find an extremely valuable tool. The wizard's dark mind had been spinning with possible uses for the child.

A Prince. He had said the wizarding world should have a prince, but what did that mean?

Voldemort hadn't meant an heir. The potion master knew he was practically immortal and had no need of one, particularly a Gryffindor even if he was of Slytherin descent.

A vague idea of what the man might want, flitted in and out of Snape's mind, tangible as spider silk. He gave up on the speculation quickly. If he couldn't think of it with a clear head, he certainly wasn't going to find the answer while drinking.

"You look pleased, Severus," Voldemort said, looking quite content sitting across from him. They were placed by the warm fire, Nagini dozing around her master's shoulder. It was rather intimate, and without Lestrage demanding the Dark Lord's attention like a spoiled child it felt doubly so. "Especially considering Slytherin's loss today."

Ugh. So maybe he hadn't consoled himself completely of that fact.

"Yes, well... their first loss in ten years. Gryffindor have been more like mewling kittens than lions since your rise to power, so I'm not surprised they were caught off guard. Potter turned out to be quite the trickster. Perhaps he should have gone to my House after all."

He quickly shielded his mind, keeping the Dark Lord from detecting the lie. Potter was as Gryffindor as James Potter and...Lily... ever were.

Voldemort seemed pleased with the comment though, just as Snape thought he would.

"Yes, he was a little imp today, wasn't he? I trust Slytherin wasn't too devastated?"

"Disappointed of course, but they'll recover. There's still the House Cup, of course."

"Of course," Voldemort conceded and took a drink of his brandy. "I do hope Bella keeps that in mind before she starts breaking things. I do keep my Founder's Collection in her office after all."

Inside, Snape was practically singing! Voldemort, alone with him, openly mocking the headmistress lack of self control. If he weren't afraid of Potter cooties, he would go and kiss the little waif right now! Outwardly, he kept his expression neutral, although his voice was vaguely condescending.

"She's always been very... passionate about House pride."

Voldemort looked amused.

"And you are not 'passionate', Severus?"

Snape smirked. "I am proud, my Lord, and I am dedicated. But passionate... I have always viewed passion as more of a Gryffindor trait than a Slytherin one."

Voldemort just smiled and lifted his glass.

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Harry spent the remaining weeks before the end of term trying to hide his silly grin from every Slytherin he encountered, especially Snape. The first week after the Quidditch Cup, it had been difficult with all the other Gryffindors smiling and congratulating him. Even many of the Hufflepuffs and the Ravenclaws had been impressed with him. And truth be told, he was rather impressed with himself, as well. The three detentions he had received from Snape and the exploding inkwell in his bag had gone a long way in curbing his enthusiasm.

Now with only a week remaining until the end of term, his enthusiasm had all but disappeared. Soon the castle would be empty, and without Wizarding Culture classes that summer he would not see any of his friends or teachers until September. While the rest of his classmates would be returning to their families, he would be spending his summer alone at the Sleuw's. It would be an improvement over the Dursley's, but it still seemed a sad option when he could think of so many others he wanted to spend time with.

Hermione.

Clyde.

His Slytherin friends... acquaintances?

Remus and Sirius, the Godfather he hadn't seen since he was an infant.

"A knut for your thoughts?"

Harry turned to see Natalie, strolling across the green. Classes had ended for the day, but Hermione had insisted on a trip to the library and all he had wanted was wide open spaces and fresh air. With the charmed journal in hand, he had found a grassy knoll outside from which he began sketches of the Whomping Willow, and hadn't been expecting company.

The Slytherin girl had forgone her school robes, opting instead for a green summer dress with matching lace up sandals that wound up to her knees. A gentle breeze danced with her hair, her dress, the free ends of her sandal ribbons and not for the first time Harry thought her quite beautiful.

“Do you really have a knut?” he asked.

“In this dress? Heavens no. It took be half an hour to figure out where to put my wand. What are you doing?”

He lifted the journal, showing her some of his pencil sketches. She ‘oohed’ at the drawings and then grinned. She walked a little past Harry to a small outcropping of rocks between him and the tree, and sat herself primly down.

“Draw me?” she asked.

Harry turned thoughtful. He had been drawing for over an hour already, and he was already experiencing a faint headache from touching the book for so long. “I don’t know. People are harder to draw.”

“Oh, come on Harry! Consider it a birthday present.”

“It’s your birthday?”

She grinned. “Will you draw me if I say yes?”

“I’ll promise to draw you for your birthday if you tell me the truth.”

“I’ll give you a clue. It falls on a Sunday this year.”

“That’s not a clue!”

“Well, then I guess you’ll just have to draw me every Sunday until January.”

It was such a Natalie thing to say that Harry couldn’t help but laugh.

“So what are you doing out here Natalie? And without Draco or your usual girly-ish friends for that matter.”

“Girly-ish friends?”

“Parkinson.”

She snorted. “I suppose she does only rank as ‘girly-ish’ with that unibrow. And she’s not a friend. Frankly, we can’t stand each other.”

“Then why are you always sitting by each other?”

“Because Draco likes to be seen sitting next to the prettiest girl in Slytherin, and Parkinson isn’t that girl. Poor thing, she’s insanely jealous.”

Harry shook his head. “I’ll never understand Slytherins. So why are you here instead of making all the other Slytherin girls jealous?”

“I wanted to talk with you before the term ended, and since Hermione has buried her brain in a book somewhere that doesn’t resemble ‘here’, I thought now would be the perfect time. Won’t you miss me when I leave for the summer?”

“Of course I will,” he said honestly. “I’ll miss everyone. Well... I’ll miss everyone except Ron and Snape anyway.”

“Will you write me?”

“If you write me first. I don’t have an owl, and the school’s owlry is off limits in the summer.”

“Well, then I’ll write you every week. And you better have my pictures ready or I’ll be very cross with you, Mr. Potter!”

From the tallest tower in the school, a silent observer couldn’t hear the boy’s ringing laughter through the gentle roar of the wind, but peering through his telescope his crimson eyes followed the movement of his throat and crinkling of his eyes. Adjusting the

instrument just the tiniest bit, he could just barely recognize his journal set in the boy's lap, forgotten but not discarded.

Back on the school grounds, with no viewing mechanism of his own, Harry could neither see nor hear Voldemort's dark laughter. But he felt it as a chill running down his spine and a strange ache where his fingers touched the journal.

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"...And with six-hundred and twenty-five points, the House Cup once again goes to Slytherin!" the Headmistress declared, and with a swish of her wand all the banners in the Great Hall turned green and silver.

"Blah, not again," Fred groused, "I was so sure we'd win this year after we won the Quidditch Cup."

"What do you expect with Snape handing out points to his House like it was candy?" Clyde pointed out.

"... You might want to use a different analogy, mate. Who the heck would accept candy from Snape?"

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"Stop groping my sister in public!" Draco snapped irritably, scanning the platform for gawkers. Hermione released Harry from her rather overzealous hug to glare at her brother. Harry grinned at the blond boy.

"Tell her to stop groping me first! Ouch! Don't poke me so hard, Hermione. Your nails are sharp!"

"Boys, ugh!" she huffed. "Now, when I get back you better not have burned the Forbidden Forest down or flooded Hogsmeade or something. And get your homework done early this summer. If you do, you can send it to me and I'll check it for errors. Did you remember to

pack everything? It's so silly with you living right next to the castle, but they won't let you back in-

"Hermione, come on! The good seats are going to be taken if you don't hurry, and I'm not sitting next to a Hufflepuff. I've accepted that you're a Gryffindor, but a man has to draw the line somewhere!"

The two best friends shared a grin, and reluctantly parted company. Harry remained on the train platform until all the other students were on board. Though he would be taking the Hogwarts Express to the school every year, he wouldn't be taking it away from there. It was awfully tempting though.

He waved goodbye to his friends and fellow classmates until the train was so far away he could only make out its location by the trail of white steam, until finally even that was gone. Turning back towards the platform, he made his way over to the cluster of teachers standing a ways back in the shade of the station awning. The four Heads of House had accompanied each of their students there to make sure everything ran smoothly, but now with only him left he turned to McGonagall for instruction.

"Will I have time to gather my things or have they already been sent to the Sleuws?"

There was a hesitance in the old witch's response, and Flitwick and Sprout gave each other a rather obvious look. When Snape's mouth curved in a strange mockery of a smile Harry knew he was in trouble. McGonagall gave him what she must have thought was a comforting pat on the shoulder.

"They've been sent on ahead, but Our Lord has requested to speak to you."

"... About what?"

Another hand replaced McGonagall's, this one making no attempt at comfort. Snape peered down at him.

“That is between the two of you, Mr. Potter. Come along. It’s best not to keep him waiting.”

McGonagall glared daggers at Snape’s back as he lead one of her Gryffindors towards the castle. All year the man had been taking liberties with Harry, and the more it happened the more Harry seemed to take it for granted. And she hated that. She hadn’t thought of herself as bias when it came to each of the Houses, but watching Lily’s son finding his company with snakes left her skin crawling.

But what could she do? Snape’s interest in Potter was a reflection of the Dark Lord’s interest, and how could she fight against that now? That same reckless and proud nature that defined Gryffindors had drawn the King of Serpent’s cool regard.

Her only consolation was Harry had not yet suffered any permanent damage...yet.

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It was his first time completely alone with the Dark Lord. Snape had not lingered, though for moment Harry thought he might have, and disappeared to places unknown. Lestrangle was gone, for which he was thankful, as was Nagini. He should have felt better about his enemy number being reduced to one, but this one was more dangerous than them all combined and he felt like that eight year old child again, being lead from a life he knew into some unknown danger.

He lingered by the door.

Behind his desk, Voldemort regarded him with his usual amused expression.

“Tell me, Harry,” he said, his voice serpentine, “What do you think of being a wizard?”

It wasn't a question Harry had been prepared for. The man may as well have asked him the meaning of life. But his mouth opened, and as usual, he spoke without thinking.

"I don't think about being a wizard anymore than I think about breathing," he said, and with a conscious effort, continued in English. "I am what I am."

The Dark Lord let out a soft laugh, and gestured for Harry to sit in one of the chairs across from him. Reluctantly, he obeyed.

"A simple answer followed by a vague one. Who do you suppose you are, Harry?"

This gave the boy pause. Did he really know who he was? Until last year he hadn't known he was a wizard. Until a few months ago he hadn't known his parents were either, that he had a living Godfather, or that he had a history still far beyond his grasp. And even if he did, how could he answer a question like that?

"..."

"Shall I tell you who you could be?" Voldemort offered, leaning back in his chair. "You could be great. You've already accomplished great things."

"..."

"Is that modesty or fear that keeps your tongue?"

"What do you want from me?"

At this, Voldemort's snorted and turned away, irritated.

"Gryffindor."

Harry's mouth twitched. "Guilty as charged."

"I suppose these are matters that require more forethought. Perhaps you'll have better answers by the end of summer?"

“...I’ll think them over.”

They fell silent, both regarding the other cautiously. Harry having no clue why he was there to begin with and Voldemort having found his bait ignored, neither were familiar enough with the other to fall into a conversation easily. When the silence stretched into awkwardness, the young Gryffindor tried his best.

“...so... Where’s Nagini?”

Voldemort considered ignoring the asinine question, but decided to encourage the child’s confidence. It was part of the reason he was here after all.

“I’ve sent her ahead to my summer home. I thought it best, since I brought a gift for you. She’s rather jealous, after all.”

That seems a common trait among Slytherins, Harry thought to himself. Aloud he said, “A gift? What for?”

Voldemort stood, striding towards an oddly shaped item with a black cloth draped over it. He set his hand on it and turned back to Harry.

“Consider it a ‘thank you for amusing me’ present.”

Removing the cloth, he revealed a large gilded birdcage, in which was perched a beautiful white owl. It blinked sleepily, and turned its bright yellow eyes to study Harry. Despite his wariness, Harry couldn’t help but be drawn from his chair to get a better look at it. So enraptured he was by the owl, he completely overlooked Voldemort’s pleased smile.

“I had heard that you have no familiar, and when I saw her I thought her perfect for you. She got in a fight with Nagini the moment they met.”

Harry chuckled, but did not look away.

"Here, let me introduced you properly." Tapping the very top of the cage with his wand, Voldemort hissed an unfamiliar spell and the gold wires pulled away from each other, curling out from the base of the cage like flower petals. Without a barrier, the white owl stretched her wings and hopped onto Harry's outstretched arm. Her black talons, which could have ripped him to shreds, pinched his skin beneath his shirt but he ignored the pain.

"Oh, My Lord... she is beautiful."

"I am glad you like her. You will be keeping each other company for many years to come."

He ran his fingers through her white feathers, and she puffed up proudly under his adolescent adoration. Turning a timid, questioning gaze towards the elder wizard, he asked, "What is her name?"

"A good question. What is her name? She's your owl."

His mind filled with name after possible name. Bianca... no, too snobbish. Whitey...too lame. Hedwig... cute, but not quite right.

"Elsbeth," he decided.

"Elsbeth, the White Witch of Ireland?" Voldemort asked, considering it. "A fine name, although I would like to point out she killed and ate her husband's mistress."

Harry shrugged. "No one's perfect."

Voldemort just grinned and stood back, admiring his work. Snape appeared to have been right. A small bit of kindness at the right time went a long way with the child. Already the Gryffindor was more at ease being alone with him. It was a frail sort of trust, but it was a start. In time, he fully intended Harry to associate their private time together as something positive.

Just like all his servants did.

Snape had been so pleased with their private audience after the Quidditch Cup. Bellatrix used to be the same way, back when he actually allowed such meetings to occur. They, like all his former Death Eaters, knew that while alone together he was pleased with them, and while in company he either wasn't or was on neutral standing.

It was only a matter of time before Harry was counted among them..

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In case you're not sure, Elsbeth is Hedwig, just with a different name. I never cared for the name Hedwig.

And that is the last chapter of Harry's first year. Next week will Harry's summer followed by his second year. It should be even more exciting than his first year. I hope you all enjoyed it! Reviews (and critiques) welcome!

Book II:

Chapter 1: The Prince and the Wolf Lords

When Harry had thought about his second summer with the Sleuw's, he had pictured a very lonely couple of months doing chores for his care takers, a little bit of homework, writing a lot of letters, and a bit of drawing now and then. And his time was spent doing those things... and quite a bit more.

He owed Professor McGonagall a very nice thank you letter for making it possible. The day after the end of term, she had come down to the cottage to visit with the Sleuw's before she went on her summer holiday. They had all been sitting around the kitchen table enjoying a tea, scones, and conversation, when McGonagall had turned her attention to him.

"So, Mr. Potter. Have you any plans for the summer?"

Harry had shrugged, looking more depressed than he meant to and said, "Nothing special. Just homework and chores."

She had regarded him curiously for a moment and then smiled.

"Homework and chores won't fill all your time. Have you considered finding a job? A little spending money of your own will help decrease your student debt after you graduate, after all."

"A job? I can get a job?" he asked, surprised. "Doing what?"

At this Mrs. Sleuw let out a bubbly little laugh.

"All sorts of things, dearie! The Wizing Weekly has an entire section of jobs for minors in the employment section."

"There's a lot of summer positions opening up now," McGonagall said, "If you find one you're interested in, then write me letter and send the ad with it. As your Head of House and one of your legal guardians, I have the authority to approve or disapprove it. I'll set up an account at Gringotts for you as well, if you like."

And Harry did like. His pride was practically demanded he do such an adult thing. A job. What a perfectly marvelous idea!

A week later, Harry found himself working for Wibble's Wards and Boundaries Inc. as a 'post setter'. All he was required to do was follow a boundary line (this was very easy given the line was three inches thick and glowing bright orange) already made by the 'line maker', and place a spelled post the size of a golf tee in the ground every five feet. He would then utter two simple spells and the posts would grow to normal size, firmly planted in the earth. The posts would each have identical runes burned into it. Later, a 'ward setter' would come by and activate the runes and the wards would be set to perform various functions, like anti-apparition or silent alarms or dispelling garden gnomes.

It was pretty tedious, but Harry didn't mind. It was a job with real money (not a lot mind you, but still more than he had), and it allowed him to get away from Hogwarts and seeing different areas of Britain. There were many different places that required warding posts; farms, ranches, private properties, large gardens, and even animal sanctuaries.

His co-workers were all older men and women, but friendly enough. Commutes and lunch breaks were lively affairs, with a lot of teasing and dirty jokes flying around. Harry rarely had much to say, but he liked listening to them talk. Having so little experience with the wizarding world it was interesting to see what adult wizards and witches thought of it. There was a lot of grumbling about taxes, mortgages, and inflation. Plenty of debate about Quidditch, foreign affairs (Harry knew Britain was pretty much cut off from the rest of the Wizarding World, but hadn't realized how angry British wizards were about it), and the newest magical discoveries. Laughter and sorrow with families growing, shrinking, arguing, and reconciling. Teasing involving someone's latest girlfriend or boyfriend or both.

When ever their conversations delved into something confusing to him, Harry would write Hermione a letter. He sent a lot of letters. Two or three a week to Hermione alone, and at least once a week to Natalie who always demanded her portraits. Occasionally, he sent

one to Clyde, but he was much less reliable about sending one back. Elsbeth was quite busy, and Harry used his first payment to buy her lots of owl treats and nice owl stand to make up for it.

Early July found Harry laying posts for an animal sanctuary. At least that was what the Foreman, Mr. Wumbs had told him. He was rather suspicious. The pudgy little man had been anxious that morning, and his usual warnings about staying on the right side of the fence had been particularly earnest. Harry had even been given a safety portkey, a little stick that hung around his neck, that he was to snap in half if he thought himself in trouble or if he got lost. The other workers had said it was standard procedure when working around such a large area because they wouldn't see each other for several hours at a time. Having done similar jobs before, Harry didn't entirely believe them, but he didn't want to lose his job by refusing to go.

The first day, he had been nervous, but nothing had happened. The only thing remotely dangerous he had seen was a wild boar and a large stag, and both had run away from him very quickly. By the second day, Harry was starting to enjoy his surroundings. It was hot out, but the trees were thick and shading, and all around him the forest smelled richly of an earthy perfume. When he worked quietly enough he was able to see all sorts of animals, some he had only learned about that year. Wood sprites, so easily mistaken for dragon flies if you weren't paying attention, and a Popcrit, a sparrow-shaped bird that could change colors like a chameleon. He very much wished he could have brought his sketchbook.

On the third day, he was feeling perfectly at ease and having worked steadily through the morning, he decided to stop for a bit and enjoy an early lunch. No sooner than he had sat down and started digging through his satchel for a sandwich, than he became aware that the forest had gone silent. Slowly, he removed his satchel, and taking the safety portkey in hand, stood up again to look around.

There was a man standing on the wrong side of the fence. Immediately, Harry could tell he wasn't a muggle, but his manner of dress was strange even for a wizard. He wore black leather britches and matching arm guards, but no shirt or shoes. His exposed skin was tanned and muscular, but heavily scarred with both claw marks

and small burn patches. To add to his savage appearance, he wore a necklace of large claws and teeth and a small braid inlaid with bone beads hung down the side of his face.

Harry's hand tightened around the portkey, but did not immediately break it. The man was still almost fifty feet away, and had not moved towards him. Although how he had gotten even that close without Harry noticing was a bit of a mystery.

They eyed each other curiously for a minute, before Harry spoke.

"Are you a werewolf?"

The man looked surprised by the question, but then grinned. When he smiled, his whole intimidating demeanor seemed to fade, so that even the deep scar across his nose looked no more malign than a freckle.

"Are you Harry?"

The young wizard gave him an equally surprised look, but couldn't call up the good humor. He was just plain unnerved.

"Uh...I...um..."

The man started to meander towards him, and he took an instinctive step backward. The man hesitated, crossed his arms, but didn't stop grinning.

"Oh, come now pup, Moony got a better reception than this. Doesn't your own Godfather warrant at least a hug?"

A spark of recollection. An evening spent with his father looking through old photo albums, and his finger pointing at a picture of man no older than eighteen with his arm wrapped around his father's neck. Black hair, black eyes, and grin like a wolf. That's your godfather, Harry. If anything happens to us, there no one I'd trust with your safety more than him.

"U-Uncle Padfoot?"

If possible the grin grew even wider and he continued his confident stride forward. Harry released the portkey, and moved forward to meet him. There's was a brief hesitation on both their parts as they reached the boundary line, but they both disregarded it so that Harry moved over it and into his godfather's arms. The hug was strong, like being hugged by a bear, leaving Harry breathless.

Padfoot let out a joyous laugh and then released him, holding him at arm's length to get a better look at his godson.

"Just like Moony said alright, James' face and Lily's eyes. The papers don't do you justice."

"Papers?" he asked, confused and more than little overwhelmed with this sudden reunion.

"Of course. Werewolves might be a bit isolated from the rest of the world, but we still get the news papers. You were in them for most of November. Fenrir was so mad at Moony that you got away... Damn pervert that he is... Uh... you probably didn't need to hear that."

No, Harry thought, he probably didn't.

"Is Moony alright? Greyback didn't hurt him, did he?"

"More than he already was? No. The dumb beast might be leader of the pack, but he knows better than to go messing with what's mine. Especially not without Lord Moldy-wart still holding his leash."

Harry blinked owlshly at his Godfather's total lack of respect for his alpha and the leader of the wizarding wolrd. Fenrir might have been a real son-of-a-bitch (no pun intended), but Harry knew very well that no werewolf would insult an alpha unless they were one too. And no one insulted Voldemort... period.

"But enough talk of unpleasant people, we'd do much better talking about ourselves," Sirius continued, moving Harry to sit on a fallen log before joining him. "So how on Earth did you find this place?"

"I didn't. I just wanted a job for the summer. I had no idea I'd be helping to ward werewolf territory..." Suddenly, the boy looked rather vexed. "They said this was an animal sanctuary."

Sirius mirrored his expression and pulled off something much more intimidating. "Well, I'm sure that the description was accurate enough to them."

They each glowered at their internal musing, until they muttered out simultaneously, "Bastards."

They both laughed, and quickly fell into conversation as if they had known each other for years. Sirius' description of Hogwarts, particularly the Hogwarts that he and James experienced, was very different from how Remus' description. For one thing, Sirius and his father seemed rather like Fred and George, and wasn't that a scary thought? His description of an adolescent Snape were funny at times and rather offensive at others, and he sensed a lot of bad blood between them.

Sirius was delighted to hear that he'd help win the Quidditch Cup, rather amused when he described his Slytherin friends, and down right disturbed to learn Voldemort personally gave him an owl.

"I'd have her tested for spells as soon as possible," he said. "She might have reconnaissance spells on her."

Harry had thought of that already, but as the only thing he had been sending were simple letters to his friends he hadn't worried about it. It wasn't like he was plotting to overthrow the government or anything.

"You know," Harry said between a lull in their conversation, "Moony said it was so unlikely that we'd ever meet again, that if we did, it would have to be due to fate. Do you suppose that's true? That we were fated to meet again?"

Sirius seemed to consider.

"I used to think that Prongs and I meeting was fate," he said finally, "If it weren't for him, I know I would have turned out as Dark as the rest

of my family. Moony too. Who knows what would have happened to him without us there? So yes, I don't think it unreasonable that us reuniting would be fated too."

"...Do you think Fate would mind letting us borrow one of her owls? I'd rather like to keep in contact this time around."

Sirius snorted.

"No, owls wouldn't be a good idea. Too conspicuous and easy to tamper with. Don't you worry about it Prongslet. Me and Moony will figure something out. We're still the Marauders after all. Here, give me something of yours."

Harry didn't have much on him that he could give up without being noticed. His watch was absolutely out of the question, so they settled on one of his socks.

"And this I'll give to you," the werewolf said, handing him his claw and tooth necklace. Harry thought it much too nice, but Sirius waved it off. "I can make a dozen or more in a week. And you're not getting my pants. I'm fond of this pair. Ok, now we each have focus for a location spell. Now when you get back I want you to hide it somewhere you don't store anything that belongs to you. It's important that it never absorb your or anyone else's magical signature or the spell won't work."

Harry grinned, feeling a rush of happiness, sharing a secret with someone he wanted to have a secret with. Sirius was his family, and these desperate measures were his way of saying he wanted to keep it that way just like Harry did.

Their time together was cut short by a burning sensation coming from his pocket.

"Ouch... dammit!" Harry cursed, pulling the hot watch from his pocket by the chain. It popped open on its own to reveal the time to him. "I'm late. They'll start looking for me soon."

They shared a disappointed look, but Harry managed to smile.

"I didn't get very far today. I'll tell them I tripped and lost some of my posts, and fell behind looking for them. I should be back tomorrow."

Sirius managed to grin as well.

"I think Moony and I should be able to get away for the day. You know, go out to make sure you interlopers haven't been fiddling with the boundary lines and all."

"Naturally," Harry agreed, climbing off the log and walking back towards the boundary. He stood on the other side, and turned back to wave his Godfather goodbye, but the man was already gone.

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"Not that I'm complaining," Sirius began, sticking one of the posts in the ground. "But why did you pick such a boring job? Why are you working at all for that matter?"

"I get to travel around and stay outdoors. As for why...student debt," Harry said simply. "And a little extra spending money is always good. It would be nice to get Hermione something for her birthday for once. Cambia."

The post sprouted up, full sized .

"Well, I hope she's cute," Sirius muttered, setting another tiny post.

"Sirius, don't be a wretch," Remus scolded, setting down a post of his own. "This was very mature of him."

"I know," the darker werewolf lamented. Harry giggled at their antics. It was only the third day of working on the fence, and Sirius and Remus had both come to visit for the last two. He got a pretty good idea of their personalities. Sirius seemed to be an overgrown teenager most of the time, taking very little seriously and always finding mischief where he could. Yet whenever Fenrir Greyback or Voldemort were mentioned he would become grave and rather scary,

his powerful, scarred body tensing with unspoken (and occasionally spoken) hatred. He also lived up to lupine blood, running about only half clothes and perfectly at ease in the forest. He'd even seen him eat a grasshopper without a second thought once.

Remus was his opposite, but complimentary half. He was playful to an extent, but more mature and thoughtful. He didn't seem to hold any particular hatred for Greyback, perhaps he was even strangely fond of him in a weird werewolfy way and mentions of Voldemort just left him depressed and a little fearful. No one would have expected him to be anything other than a wizard, he was so normal. He was probably the only reason Sirius wasn't running around naked and eating rabbits raw.

"Just the same, he shouldn't have to be doing this," growled Sirius, "The Potter vaults should still be intact. As long as there's a Potter heir, that snake-tongued bastard and his little toadies shouldn't be able to get to it."

"Cambia. I have money?" Harry asked, looking at them both curiously. The two shared a look.

"Yes," Sirius said, his lips twisting. "You have quite a lot, actually."

"But don't expect to have access to it any time soon." Remus threw his friend a reprimanding glare. "If no one has told you about your parents, it's because they were hoping you'd never find out. If you confront someone about having access to your vault, they'll just tie it all up in legalities for years. It's a common problem with families who lost their patriarchs fighting for the Light during the war."

"Yeah," Sirius grumbled. "I don't have access to my vault supposedly because I'm a werewolf. That's a load of dragon shit. The goblins would let me in and out of the Black family vault if I showed up, but those damn Death Eaters pigeon-holed me here. I could have done a lot of good for the pack with that money. Probably still could if I could get a bloody lawyer."

Remus gently patted Sirius on the shoulder, but the other just glowered off into the distance. Harry on the other hand had remembered something.

"I know a lawyer," he said.

Sirius was startled out of his glum thoughts, and looked curiously at his godson.

"How do you know a lawyer?"

"His partner wanted to adopt me last year," he said, looking a bit embarrassed as he remembered that day. "I still have his card. I could write a letter and ask for some advice for you. Perhaps he can get me into my vaults as well."

Sirius looked like he was considering, but Remus shook his head.

"No, you don't want to start a conflict with the government right now, Harry. Especially when you're still a ward of a government institution. They could assign you a guardian, and that guardian would have full access to your vaults until you were of the age of majority. They'd be free to 'donate' as much of it as they wanted to whatever cause they saw fit."

"But what about you and Sirius?"

This time his godfather seemed to find the problem. "If you found us a lawyer, someone might investigate and find out about us cavorting out here, and then we'd all be in a lot of trouble. We've been officially warned off contact with minors. I imagine you've been given similar orders regarding werewolves."

Harry nodded sadly, knowing they were both right. But then he managed a smile.

"But when I'm seventeen... I'll be an adult. I can hire a lawyer then and visit you openly at the trading posts when ever I want. That's only... five years and a couple months away."

This time both werewolf's considered longer. Sirius just shrugged and ruffled Harry's hair.

"You're a delightful little scamp, you know that? Let's just see what happens over the next couple years. Five years might not sound like a lot of time now, but believe me a lot can happen."

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On the fifth day it rained, and Harry wasn't able to make it to the meeting point until almost two hours later than usual. It made him irritable and anxious, and the few co-workers foolish enough to remark on it to him, were met with dirtiest looks ever seen in a pre-teen. With a charm to water-proof his cloak, he was finally allowed to go.

He jogged the entire way, tripping occasionally in the slick mud, until he finally reached the end of the line of posts. Pausing, he looked around for his godfather and friend.

"Padfoot? Moony?" he called out when he couldn't immediately spot either of them.

There was no response. Miserably, he wondered if they'd been waiting in the rain and finally got fed up enough to leave. Were they as irritated with him as he was with his boss? He sighed heavily, and got to work setting posts. He couldn't ignore his responsibility, and perhaps when the rain stopped they would come back and he could apologize.

It didn't take him long to feel something was amiss. It wasn't quite like when Sirius had first appeared. The silence now could easily be attributed to the rain, but that eerie feeling he felt could not. He saw nothing, but he felt something. He felt like he was being watched.

"Padfoot? Moony?" he tried again. "If this is you getting back at me for being late, it wasn't my fault. The foreman wouldn't let be come until the rain let up a bit. Guys?"

Around him the forest was wet, shiny, and empty. Harry tightened his cloak around his shoulders and listened. He only heard the rain and his own breathing, but he knew he wasn't alone. His eyes fell to the forest beyond the boundary, searching for the eyes he could feel on him. Again there was no one, but this time something white caught his attention.

It was a necklace. Made of teeth and bone and raven feathers.

Just like the ones Sirius wore.

He moved towards it instinctively, but then stopped abruptly at the border line. It was suddenly very clear to him that he didn't appear to have Sirius or Remus to protect him in that forbidden territory, and without them it felt... well... forbidden. But he still wanted to investigate.

"Wingardium leviosa necklace!" he summoned, swinging his wand about as he had been taught just last semester. The necklace rose obediently, but when it started to move towards him it appeared to get snagged. Confused, Harry repeated the spell, using more force. The necklace lurched forward, snapping the tether it had been bound to. A resounding snap echoed through the wood, and the trap beneath the necklace was suddenly released; a mass of netted canvas camouflaged with dirt and leaves.

Dumbly, Harry looked up at the contraption.

"Well, damn," he heard, and spun around to stare to his left at a man who was also looking at the contraption, although with a bit more contempt. "I forgot they taught that spell in first year."

This stranger was a werewolf, but not like Remus or Sirius. He was tall and wiry, and he kept his reddish-brown eyes wide and unblinking. He reminded Harry of a jackal. The stranger shook his head at the ill-planned trap and over at Harry, leering wickedly.

"Oh, well. There's still the old-fashioned way."

And then he was surrounded. Five people, four males and a female, formed a loose circle around him. They were dressed like Sirius, or even more scantily, and looked even more savage with ropes and knives in their hands rather than wands.

He bolted, breaking for the largest gap in their ranks, but that was their intention from the beginning. No sooner than he'd broken through their ranks than yet another werewolf sprung, seeming from the earth itself.

This one was the largest by far and even more scarred than Sirius. His hair was grayish and cropped short, the beginnings of a peppered beard at his chin and side burns. He seized Harry by the arms, inhuman claws digging into the fabric of his cloak and eyes like the wolf on the full moon.

Harry froze, too shocked, too frightened perhaps, to move. It was amazing he simply hadn't fallen over dead.

"Ah, and here we have it lads," Fenrir practically purred, "Blackbone's pup."

Blackbone was Sirius' pack name, Harry knew. But how had they found out about their connection? How had they known he was even here? Where were Sirius and Remus?

The alpha werewolf eyed him critically, and he could only stare back dumbly.

"You're a bit skinnier than I'd thought you'd be. But I bet you're fast. Let's find out."

Fenrir threw Harry away from him, towards the border. The boy kept his balance and ran, but fear hadn't taken all his senses yet and he curved away from the borderline. Harry was fast for his age, always had been, but the werewolves were just plain fast. They had surrounded him again within seconds. One of them lunged for him, but Harry managed to dodge him and spun around with his wand waving.

“Colpo vento!”

A sudden, intense wind caught the unbalanced wolf, knocking him into one of his pack mates. Harry was ready with another spell, but another attack smashed into his side. He was thrown into a puddle of mud, and held there by a heavier body. He struggled blindly, unable to breath, until he was jerked on to his back and held there. Above him, the female werewolf looked down at him, her brown eyes pitying. The other wolves crowded round. The jackal-like one retrieved his wand from the muck, grinning wickedly down at him with the rest.

Fenrir crouched down directly over his face, looking smug.

“You are fast. Nimble too, with a little bit’o bite to ya. I like that. I guess we’ll keep you.”

Lovely.

“You -you didn’t catch me on your territory,” he tried weakly.

“Perhaps, but who other than you knows that?” the alpha chuckled, but then sobered. “You’ve been play’in a dangerous game, pup. You ‘ave none to blame for this but yourself.”

Fenrir looked to the female restraining him. “Bring him, Athena, before someone comes looking for him.”

As one, the pack stood and turned back towards their land, Athena dragging Harry with them. For all the pity in her eyes, there was none in her grip, but he struggled as much as he could anyway. He dug his heels. He flailed about. He called for help. He snarled and clawed, and kicked, and if he weren’t afraid of infection he would have bitten too.

She merely growled and tightened her hold, until Harry thought his arm would break.

And then he started to cry. In pain. In fear. In sorrow for those he’d leave behind.

The she-wolf hesitated, adjusting her hold, so that her arm rested around his small shoulders and held him close to her body. He was wet and very cold, but her skin felt hot against his cheek.

"Hush," she said, "Don't be afraid."

But he was afraid, and he continued to sob quietly.

"Please let me go."

"No."

She pulled him forward again, and they now stood in Fenrir's territory. The alpha led the way, the jackal walking beside him as they talked quietly. Frequently the two werewolves looked back at Harry. The other werewolves dispersed into a haphazard ring around them, flitting in and out of sight, but never truly gone. They walked for almost half an hour before Harry was calm enough to speak again.

"Where's Siri- I mean... Blackbone and Slivermoon?" he asked quietly.

Athena looked to her alpha, but he didn't appear to have heard him.

"...They are being punished for their treachery as we speak."

Harry's eyes widen. Sensing his alarm, she tried to pacify him.

"Do not worry about them. Blackbone is very strong and Slivermoon has a temperament suited for hardship. The Goddess Moon ascends in only a few days, and all will be forgiven. She will heal their bodies and their hearts, and embrace you as another of her children then."

As romantic as she made it sound, Harry was under no illusion about what would happen. There would be blood and pain. Death on one side of the knife and a curse on the other. Either way, Sirius and Remus would never forgive themselves even if the Goddess Moon and Greyback did. He asked nothing else, but followed along meekly.

Outwardly, he appeared sad and submissive. Inwardly, he was frantically looking for the first opportunity to escape. As long as

Athena held him so closely, he knew it would be impossible, but if he could just get her to let go of him...

Half an hour later he could feel his window of opportunity closing. He couldn't let them reach their settlement with him. Lycanthropy was a method of punishment, and as such it followed certain protocols. He remembered Hermione lecturing him about it during the summer before. Once a witch or wizard was handed over to the werewolves, they would immediately be taken to their settlement, stripped naked of all their possessions, and confined to a cave or hut to await the next full moon. The rituals held during and afterward were sacred and therefore secret to all but other lycanthrope.

Harry wasn't worried about the rituals just yet. There was still the possibility of escape.

He just had to keep them from stripping him...

"Little one," Athena said, eyeing him worriedly. "You're shaking. Are you cold?"

Fenrir paused, turning an irritated look back at them both.

"Hurry it up. He can warm up when we get there."

She averted her eyes under his scowl, but the look she gave him when his back turned was twice as mean. She rubbed Harry's arms as if to warm him, and urged him to hurry.

They came to a ridge over which a creek, fat with the morning rain, fell into a shallow pool some fifty feet below them. The only means to cross over the creek was a large tree, which appeared to have been cut down for that purpose. One by one the pack emerged from the forest, jogging across the makeshift bridge before disappearing again, until only Fenrir, the jackal, Athena, and Harry remained.

"I'll go first," Fenrir said to his subordinates, "Send the boy over after me. Athena, you'll follow behind. Grindel bring up the rear. And don't think of trying to swim away, pup. If the waterfall doesn't kill you, I sure as hell will."

Harry flinched and looked away, keeping up the appearance of submission. They all moved to follow the alpha's command, but the moment Athena released him, Harry jumped into the creek. He heard her cry of alarm, followed by Fenrir's cursing, and then he was underwater.

It was cold, and having already been cold to begin with, it felt almost unbearable. With blind, trembling fingers he tore at his cloak, letting the increasingly rapid current carry it away. He struggled to the surface, swallowing air, before he was dragged under again.

And then he was falling instead of drowning.

With the shallow pool rushing up to splatter him and only a few seconds to save himself, he fumbled at the tie around his neck, following the leather string to the little wooden stick, and taking it in both hands-

Snap!

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Harry landed in the mud. That was probably a good thing, otherwise he might have broken something. But Harry was unable to appreciate that fact at the moment. All he was able to appreciate was that he wasn't dead and he had escaped.

Barely.

Miraculously.

In either hand was half of the emergency portkey. Too weak to carry more than one person and only usable once, he had been forced to wait until no one was attached to him to activate it. So he was alive. He had escaped.

He thought he should be happier. Relieved at least.

But all he felt was cold.

Chapter 22: The Serpent King and the Wolf King

Harry did not care much for St. Mungo's. Being of a magical nature, he had thought he would be more accepting of it than a muggle hospital, but he was quickly corrected. Hospitals of any kind were no fun at all.

Or perhaps he just missed his wand.

Since it's loss in the werewolves' forest, he had not felt quite himself. He felt listless most of the time, anxious occasionally. His sleep was poor and he had a small but persistent headache.

One of the nurses had called it 'magical withdrawal'. Ironical given his magic wasn't any less, merely unreachable without his wand. The nurse had said keeping occupied or getting another wand was the only way to get over it. Which was bloody useless advice considering that the doctors wouldn't allow either to happen.

His only real malady when he'd been admitted to St. Mungo's were bruises and small cuts. A light healing potion later and he was cured, but they had wanted to keep him for a few days for 'observation'. Harry had thought them rather stupid. McGonagall had given her authorization though. She wouldn't tell him why, but then again he hadn't told her about his run-in with Greyback and his pack or about Sirius and Remus. He wasn't sure what he should say.

Everyone suspected he'd encountered werewolves. His silence on the matter did nothing to dissuade that thinking, but telling the truth would be self-incriminating and lying could only make the situation worse.

So all he could do now was wait for someone to punish him for violating Voldemort's treaty. He was rather surprised that it took them three days to send someone, and that someone would be none other than Snape.

"Good day, Mr. Potter," the potion's master sneered as he entered the hospital room. "Judging by your vacant expression you were not expecting me."

Harry, who had been laying in bed reading a novel, graced him with an irritated look.

"Sorry, sir. I'd have had tea and cakes ready if I'd known you were coming."

"You have a lot of sass for someone in your position," Snape growled.

Cowed, Harry looked away. "And what position is that?"

"Don't play stupid boy. You might not have contracted Lycanthrosis, but the Dark Lord and I both know you've been in contact with Black and Lupin."

Oh, so that's why they wanted to keep him in observation in his own room. They were waiting for the full moon to see if he went mad.

"Greyback's been demanding your head," Snape continued, "and I dare say he just might get it."

This was nothing Harry hadn't thought about before. He had half resigned himself to that very outcome, trying to comfort himself with thoughts of being reunited with his Godfather and separated from the inherit dangers and corruption of wizarding life. For a little while, he could convince himself that it wouldn't be a bad life and he could learn to enjoy it even. Then he would remember Greyback, that mad, hungry look in his eye and enough power in his hands to snap him in half and he was afraid.

The door opened again, and a toady looking woman entered. She was dressed garishly in a bright pink sweater with fuzzy trim, smiled widely, and blinked too often. Harry didn't recognize her, but judging by the distinct loathing in Snape's expression he guess the other man did. Harry gave the man a questioning look.

"Madam Umbridge," Snape drawled, "this is the victim, Harry Potter. Potter, this is Court Representative Dolores Umbridge. She will be acting as a witness to this interview. I remind you that everything you say and do now will be recorded for purposes of review by officials of

the Court. Not that knowing makes any difference, as you won't be able to control a thing you say under veritaserum."

Harry swallowed thickly.

"Eh-hem," the woman coughed...croaked? "Court policy dictates that a witness should be given all courtesy-"

"Oh, do be quiet. I know Court policies very well. I helped write almost a quarter of them," Snape hissed. The woman blinked rapidly, her expression fixed in that weird simpering look. He ignored her. "Now then, Potter, once I administer the potion, I will need you to keep eye contact with me so that I may monitor your reaction to the potion. Five points if you can tell me why."

Harry wasn't sure if he should laugh or gape. Had his Professor just made a joke? Well, since the man appeared to be expecting an answer he hadn't.

"Um... It can cause paralysis of the optic nerves, spasms in the facial muscles, and... and... spontaneously shouting out random things."

"Correct, Mr. Potter. Five points to Slytherin."

"What? But I-"

"Yes, you did get it right. No doubt due to my excellence as your instructor. Open your mouth and stick out your tongue."

Harry stuck out his tongue alright, but it wasn't to obey the man's order. Pulling a vial from his robes, Snape placed two drops of the truth potion on the boy's ornery appendage. It tasted of vinegar and alcohol. He cringed at the taste, but as it faded away a strange detached feeling fell over him. His eyes wandered about the room until they fixed on the only bright spot.

"My god, you're an ugly toad of a woman," he said, smiling pleasantly. Umbridge said nothing, but her eye twitched visibly. A hand on his chin guided his gaze back to Snape, where he immediately found

himself stuck even after he was released. The man was smirking, but didn't really seem amused.

"We will take that as a sign the potion is working. Now keep your eyes on me. Madam Umbridge's presence in the room is irrelevant."

"You're funny," Harry said, smiling vapidly to prove his point. He didn't look away though. Not even when the man gave a very tasty glare.

"Now Mr. Potter, explain to me the set of events that lead you to the boundaries of the werewolf territory, Brittlewood Forest."

The story he told fell out his mouth before he could even think to edit it, telling of not only actual events but the feelings and motivations he'd experienced. There was a vague sense of embarrassment when told of the pride he had felt at having his first job and the loneliness of the summer, but he was still feeling mostly detached and Snape didn't take the time to sneer at him.

"Just to be absolutely clear," Snape said, as Harry finished his first answer, "You did not take the job at Wibble's Wards and Boundaries, Inc. with the intent to reach the werewolf boundary?"

"No. I didn't know I'd end up there."

"And you were not made aware by Mr. Wibble or any of your supervisors that you were working along a werewolf territory?"

"Nope."

"Were you ever in contact with a werewolf while you worked there?"

Now Harry tried to stop speaking, to hold back the answer that would doom him and possibly his godfather and Remus as well. He tried to hold it back with all his might, but it was pulled from him as easily as if he hadn't resisted at all.

"Yes."

Snape's eyes suddenly became more intense, a strange feeling wormed its way through the detachment. It wasn't fear or hatred, but something alien ... and yet familiar.

"Describe to me the circumstances of the encounter and the encounter itself," the man commanded. Again, words were pulled from him without his consent, but this time they were not his words, not his tale, not his truth.

"I was working alone, laying down warding posts... I think it was late morning. I was approached by a man I didn't recognize. He startled me, I was afraid, but he never came too close to me. He said he lived on the property I was helping to ward, and that he wanted to observe to make sure the company was doing a proper job of it. He never said his name."

Snape spoke again, "Did you tell anyone you saw this man?"

"No. I was afraid if I told them one of the clients was skeptical of the company's work, they'd get an adult to lay down the posts and send me home."

"Did you ever see this nameless man again?"

"Yes. I came back the next day and he was there again. He came and went throughout the day, but never said a thing. He was kind of frightening. It was the same everyday until the fifth day."

"What happened on the fifth day?"

"I came to the spot I'd left the day before, and one of the warding posts had been pulled up and was lying on the other side of the boundary. The man was there and said I had laid it wrong, and expected me to replace it 'properly'. The foreman had said I wasn't to step onto the land no matter what, so I thought I'd just lay another one, but the man became agitated and demanded I pick up the fallen post and lay that one. I got frightened, and I started to walk away.'

'He followed me. He kept yelling at me to pick up the post. Over and over he kept yelling that. I started to run. He chased me. He caught

my cloak, and jerked me onto his side of the property. I slipped out of my cloak and started running again. I tried to grab hold of my emergency portkey, but I tripped and fell in some mud. He jumped on top of me and held me down by my arms, said if I tried to run away again he was going to break my legs."

"How did you escape?"

"Another man came," Harry continued, his voice steady while his mind was reeling, wondering what was going on. This wasn't a tale he had conceived, or even could have conceived, but it flowed out in a perfectly believable lie. All the while that alien sensation seemed to wiggle and squirm just behind his forehead. "He was bigger than the first man, stronger. He grabbed him and pulled him off me. He started yelling at the smaller man, calling him all sort of names and then ordering him to go home. The smaller man left. The larger man grabbed me by my arm and dragged me back to the other side of the boundary. He told me not to tell anyone about what had happened. He said if he anyone knew, then I would have to come back and become a werewolf. I didn't ask any questions, I just activated my portkey and got out of there. I ended up just outside the office building. One of the other employees found me, and the foreman took me to the hospital."

For the first time since the interrogation started, Snape looked away and the alien sensation retreated. Without the older wizard demanding his eyes and his thought on him, Harry could think clearly enough to realize he was the source of the lies. But why? Why would Snape be...helping him?

"I believe that is all we require," Snape said, looking back at Umbridge, who had been taking notes through the entire ordeal. "A clear case of child endangerment on the part of Wibbler's. I trust this interview will be forwarded to the appropriate authorities?"

The woman smiled condescendingly. Quite a feat considering she was dressed like a demented Barbie.

"Just a moment professor. I have a few questions of my own, if you don't mind. , why didn't-

Whatever she asked, Harry couldn't hear. Snape's hands were suddenly over his ears. Harry gave the man a questioning look, but he was glaring at Umbridge. The woman herself looked startled by his action. When it was apparent she wasn't going to finish her question, Snape removed his hands.

"Madam Umbridge, you have been sent to this interview to act as a non-partial witness to ensure the rights of Mr. Potter are not violated while under verisaterum and that all proper protocol is upheld for when his testimony is submitted to the Court," the man lectured, as if to a very dim student, "As I recall, third party members questioning a witness are strictly prohibited. This should not have to be explained to you."

Harry slapped his hand over his mouth to hide a very obvious giggle.

Umbridge's eye twitched.

"You are correct, of course," she said, "But given your presence here, a WYRA executive rather than a Court legal official, I thought this interrogation would be a bit more... ah... informal."

Okay, now Harry knew something funny was going on. Even Umbridge seemed to know it. In fact, she seemed to think it was something underhanded. Snape did not appear unnerved by her insinuation. He actually looked rather offended.

"Madam, Court business is never informal.. My presence here is because I am a WYRA executive as well as a Hogwarts teacher, and Mr. Potter is still the responsibility of both these institutions until such time as he is adopted or reaches the age of majority. This incident which resulted in his hospitalization is of great concern to us. So much so that Lord Voldemort has personally granted my request for full authority in investigating this matter. And I take personal offense that you believe I would conduct my investigation in anything other than a formal and proper manner."

Harry's giggling, which had died off, returned with full on laughter to the point he was starting to tear up. Snape shot him a venomous look,

and quickly gave him the antidote. It tasted like fish. He sobered up instantly, and made it a point to look at his toes.

"Now Professor," the woman simpered, still smiling, "I meant no offense-

"Well, I do when I tell you that your business is done here and that you are going to leave now."

Harry peeked beyond the length of his toes at the woman who looked on the verge of doing something... dangerous. Like imploding. Good thing they were in a hospital.

Her entire head was starting to twitch now, but still she smiled cheerily.

"I suppose its best to get the paperwork started as soon as possible. Better Mr. Potter had this matter wrapped up before the beginning of the school year after all," she said, and stiffly walked out of the room. She closed the door with exaggerated care, and they could hear her shoes tapping in a slow rhythm until it faded into the distance.

"Friend of yours?" Harry asked, turning to the older man.

"Legilimens!"

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Voldemort liked Fenrir in the same way a person might like dangerous but beautiful animals. He liked watching the man pace and growl and flex his powerful, clawed hands. He liked watching him bully his pack into submission, hunt in the forest, and take his mate, Athena, where and when ever the hell he felt like it. He liked watching him transform, crying to the moon and raging at the world. But most of all, he liked watching Fenrir think.

The werewolf was different from everyone he knew in his manner of thinking, for his thinking was not that of man's but that of beast's made eloquent through human speech. That which motivated him

was not what motivated men, except at the most primal level. Fenrir, like any animal, wanted to live and knew living need not involve 'higher concepts' like love, honor, or justice. At the same time, being a social animal, he appreciated such things as sharing, forgiveness, and protection. Voldemort understood this on an intellectual level, but seeing it played out on practical one through Fenrir was always... stimulating.

At the moment, he was having a splendid time watching the man-beast thinking over the latest events revolving around Harry Potter and his own unexpected reluctance in handing the boy over. Just last year he had easily and willingly handed over two Slytherin students violating their treaty. What made the Gryffindor child a special case? It was not the normal state of things for Fenrir or Voldemort to question each other. Their motivations, if not their methods, were similar, their circle of influence separate, and rarely did they cross or conflict. However, Fenrir was interested enough in Potter, and more importantly his hold over Blackbone, that he was willing to have a meeting with the Dark Lord in order to settle the matter.

The lodge house, normally filled with pack members, was empty and freshly cleaned for their meeting. It was still very crude and rustic, but Voldemort was quite comfortable lounging in his fur laden chair and sipping on strong herbal tea. Around the wizard's feet, Nagini looked rather happy as well, rolling about on the many fur rugs and leisurely hunting the nooks and crannies for rodents. Fenrir's own chair across from the wizard, was empty, as he had taken to standing near the window in order to watch some of the pack's youngsters play football (English version). Such things were calming for him.

"This shouldn't be an issue," the werewolf growled out, finally looking towards the wizard. "He violated both our laws. He trespassed into my lands and his life belongs to me."

Voldemort took a sip of his tea, looking considerate.

"No, he never did," he said finally. "I had one of my people perform legilimency on the boy this morning. He did indeed meet with Blackbone and Slivermoon, but he never crossed the barrier until you

and your men dragged him into it. It would seem to me, you are in violation of the treaty more so than Mr. Potter.”

“They’re liars!” Fenrir snarled, “I could smell that boy all over Blackbone’s and Slivermoon’s clothes, and they would not dare break their probation by stepping out of the boundary. He was inside my territory. I don’t care what your people say.”

“Are you saying then, that you did not step out of your territory in an attempt to collect the boy?”

Fenrir merely let out an angry growl, showing neither guilt or regret. Voldemort let out a sigh.

“I’m afraid I can not let you have this one, my friend. I have great plans for him.”

“I have plans as well!” he snarled, punching the wall angrily and cracking the wood. His eyes had gone yellow when he turned to the Dark Lord, but the other was not intimidated.

“Oh, yes,” Voldemort said, “You wish to use him to keep Blackbone in line. If such extreme measures are needed to ensure his obedience, wouldn’t it just be better to kill him? I know you have this strange desire to see him inherit the packs after you, but with his seditious attitude towards me I will be forced to kill him anyway.”

Fenrir grunted in acknowledgment and finally took the chair across from him.

“He is the only one with the balls for the job,” Fenrir said. “Everyone else is either too weak in will or too weak in body. He’s an alpha by nature, by the will of the Goddess, and my bad fucking luck. Anyone else and the packs will fall into disorganized factions again. His hatred for the both of us does nothing to change that.”

“Hhmm... that is quite the conundrum.”

He took another sip of his tea, and looked thoughtful. Fenrir let him have his moment to think. The wizard was better at plotting, and he

was not above letting him find a solution for the both of them. The Dark Lord lifted his cup, but stopped abruptly, and the werewolf knew he had an idea.

“Perhaps Mr. Potter might still be of use to both of us,” he said slowly, thoughts still flying about in his head, this time with a definite goal in mind. “After all, if I should retain direct power and influence over the child, Blackbone will be forced to make concessions to me and you in order to remain in contact with him. Yes... I think that might work. Even after you pass on, he will still be forced to behave himself so as not to endanger or make an enemy of his Godson.”

He took one last sip of his tea and then stood, beginning to pace the breadth of the room. Fenrir watched him curiously, almost amused. He knew Voldemort never indulged in pacing while amongst wizards. Such a thing would be considered a lack of self control and dignity. Whilst visiting the werewolves (he did so once or twice a year, supposedly on diplomatic visits, but really because it was a vacation to him) he tended to care very little about appearances.

He slept late. He didn't bother shaving or brushing his hair. He ate with his fingers and drank too much. He swore. He kept his shirt untucked and walked around barefoot. He flirted with everyone. In general, he acted as young as he looked, and as uncouth as his muggle upbringing inclined him to be. The only reason he wasn't degenerating at the moment was he would have to return to his usual duties within the hour and it took time to fall back and forth between behaviors.

“It will be tricky of course,” Voldemort continued, “I will have to make sure their interactions do not result in the boy adopting Blackbone’s traitorous thoughts, while at the same time ensuring that they don’t become resentful of the other... But it could work in my favor... a kindness in its own right... How troublesome... Nevertheless...”

Fenrir grinned.

[illegible]

Professor McGonagall picked Harry up from the hospital later that day. She looked very worried when she saw his pale, tired complexion, but he managed a smile for her. There were no questions when she brought him back to Hogwarts, and he offered no explanations. He wondered if she didn't know that anything he told her would once again be a lie. And that really was a pity. Of all the adults he knew including his Godfather and Remus (and he loved them dearly already), he thought McGonagall the most reliable.

But she couldn't have saved him. Strong and noble woman though she was, it was Snape's underhanded tactics that had him safely returned to Hogwarts and not Fenrir Greyback's clutches. It was also Snape's underhanded tactics and his skills in legilimency that tore the truth from his very mind, and left him feeling sicker than he had upon entering the hospital.

Harry still didn't know why the man had done it.

He suspected Voldemort put him up to it. While he didn't believe it was beyond Snape to do something altruistic, he didn't think he would do something that would risk himself in the process. But then why would Voldemort save him? Did them both being parselmouths make the Dark Lord some how protective of him? Was this the evidence of a bond he believed the two shared? This wouldn't be the first instance where Voldemort had shown him extra attention. He had occasionally talked to Harry in a casual manner and even given him Elsbeth as a gift.

It wasn't something he wanted to think too hard about.

He just wanted to go back to the Sleuw's house, sit down at his desk, write a letter to Hermione about their arithmancy homework, and not think about Voldemort, Snape, Greyback, or Sirius and Remus possibly being tortured (since the full moon had come and gone, hopefully Athena had told the truth and their punishment was over by now).

Harry and McGonagall arrived at the Sleuw's shortly after sunset, and her good bye was the first thing she had said to him since she'd

checked him out of the hospital. Mrs. Sleuw clucked and fuddled about the kitchen, while Harry sat numbly beside Mr. Sleuw and thought them quite a pair at the moment. After dinner, despite what Harry had thought he wanted, he pulled out the charmed journal and quill.

He sat by the window, and lighted more by the light of the nearly full moon than by his single candle, he wrote his first real entry.

He wrote about his Godfather and Remus, his job, his near capture, the hospital, Snape, Umbridge, his suspicions, his fears, and his frustration about not being able to entrust the entire truth of his life with anyone. He wrote for several hours, long after the headache had settled in and his fingers had started to cramp. He wrote until finally, magically and emotionally drained he collapsed out of his chair and fell unconscious.

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1. Lycanthrosis is related to lycanthropy. It's caused by being bitten, having sex, or exchanging blood with a werewolf who wasn't transformed at the time. Symptoms include growth of fangs and/or claws, increased aggression and strength, affinity for raw meat, and strange behavior centered around the cycles of the moon. A person won't transform during the full moon, but they're still considered dangerous to uninfected people. In Voldemort's society, anyone who gets it is sent to live with werewolves and usually turned into a full werewolf eventually.

Chapter 23: Tribute to the Prince

Harry did not go back to work at Wibble's Wards and Boundaries, Inc. In fact, no one went back. According to the Wizard Weekly, Mr. John Wibble was being cited for child endangerment and exploitation as well as other shady business practices, and had been suspended from business until the investigation was over. Harry assumed they were referring to him, but since no one ever questioned him about the werewolf incident again, he was never completely sure. He felt rather bad for the other employees losing their jobs, but knew if it hadn't been him it would have been some other child who was lied to, and the law still would have been broken even if the Court never learned of it. After all, it was common knowledge that minors were not allowed within half a mile of werewolf territories.

The entire fiasco had left him frustrated, anxious, and feeling lonelier than before. No one brought up the incident, but Harry felt it marked everything he did and said. His thoughts often wandered to Sirius and Remus, wondering if they were ok and if they missed him or felt guilty for what almost happened. His dreams were filled with nightmares, some about werewolves, but mostly about Snape or Voldemort or even Umbridge coming to punish him. He did not attempt to find another job. He had a strange fear that McGonagall would refuse him. He hadn't told his friend about being fired either, and hoped they didn't read the business section of the newspaper. He didn't want to have to lie to them. Again.

And if all that wasn't bad enough, his diary, one of the few magical items he owned, was broken. He had woken up late the next evening in his bed, with Mrs. Sleuw chiding him for getting sick after he left the hospital. She had said she couldn't wake him that morning and he looked so ill, she let him sleep. Once she had left him alone, he had found the book in his desk, his writing still clear as day in it. After testing it with a few scribbles, the writing didn't disappear and he could feel no magic from it. He suspected he had over used it the night before and somehow short-circuited it as well as himself. He didn't remember what happened after that, but he must have woken up briefly to change and get into bed.

Days passed uneventfully, marked only by his chores, his school work, and his letters until August 1st. His birthday arrived on a sunny Thursday, and the first to greet him were a motley flock of owls outside his room. As soon as he opened his window for them, Elsbeth charged in and dumped a parcel on his bed and quickly claimed her rightful perch. She was followed by six other owls who behaved similarly, dumping their parcels and letters before finding various places to land in his room.

It was probably the most birthday presents he had ever received in his life (his parents usually only gave him one present each and he didn't have many friends in Germany), and his only regret was that the givers couldn't have been there in person. He opened the parcel Elsbeth had been carrying first, knowing she was returning from Hermione's. Inside was a small book of spells titled, 'One Hundred Spells They Should, But Don't, Teach You In School' and a dark red card with a golden Snitch zooming about the outside.

Dear Harry

Happy Birthday. I wish I could be there to give this to you in person. I know you're not exactly bookish, but you'll love this one, I promise. There's even a spell in there for animating drawings. Since the school year is coming up soon, I wanted to know if you'd like to try to come to Daigon Alley with me and Draco. We said we'd show you around last year, and I think you'd have a grand time. I know you're probably still busy with work, but if you could write any convenient dates or times than we can try and set something up. Can't wait to see you!

Sincerely,

Hermione

Ah, he'd almost forgotten about their promise to show him around. It sounded like a wonderful idea. The first thing other than the start of term he had to look forward to in a while.

The next one he opened was a small package, but when he took off the postage wrap, a large sketch pad and colored pencils grew out of

it. On it was a very short note in Natalie's elegant silver script on green paper.

Your pictures of me are much too small to hang on my wall, and black and white hardly does me justice. These should work much better. Oh, and Happy Birthday.

He chuckled in amusement, although he was rather touched that she had thought to get him anything. Next was Clyde's present, involving a lot of junk food and a catalogue of quidditch supplies. His card had an entire quidditch team fighting it out, and inside he wrote about seeing him in Daigon Alley before the start of term as well. With those three out of the way, he was completely uncertain about who else may have sent him something and he didn't recognize the owls either.

He opened the one with only a letter first, which turned out to be his school supply list. The next one gave him pause. There was an address on it, but he couldn't believe that it was correct, so he reluctantly set it aside for a moment. He didn't recognize the address on the other letter either, but he did recognize the seal. A skull with a snake slithering through the eye sockets.

And this man lived nine months out of the year surrounded by school children. Geh.

He opened it to reveal a plain black card, with a golden 'V' on the outside. When he opened it a small gold band fell out. Gold script was also on the inside.

Dear Harry,

Once again you have misplaced yourself. As I am rather fond of you, I have enclosed a device to help keep you on the proper course. Simply insert the ring into your pocket watch, say the name of the location you wish to go, and the hands of your watch will point you in the right direction. I hope this helps you with your New Year's resolution. Happy Birthday.

V.

"Well," Harry said to Elsbeth, "At least he doesn't seem to be mad at me."

The last item was a package, the sender listed as a catalogue company in Sussex he had never heard of. He opened it, and inside found a letter and a wooden box. He tried opening the box, but the latch wouldn't budge so he went back to the letter.

Dear Harry

I apologize in advance for the deception. Smuggling letters, let alone packages, from outside of Britain is a tricky business these days, but I think this worth the risk."

Uh-oh. At this point, Harry knew he should stop reading and hand everything over to the proper authorities. He was in enough trouble as it was without excepting contraband from strangers in other countries.

At the same time, it couldn't hurt just to read the letter.

Right?

I am an old acquaintance of your father and mother, and James left in my charge something very valuable. Your family fled Britain before I could return it and then disappeared completely. I have just recently received news of your return to Britain and Hogwarts itself. My condolences on your loss, they were both some of finest people I ever had the privilege of meeting. I know that they would be very proud of you. That being said, I return this to its rightful owner and apologize for not getting it to you sooner. It is a one of kind item, so I recommend being discreet in whom you tell about it and when and how you use it. Happy Birthday.

Sincerely,

A family friend.

P.S. The password is Lily's favorite flower.

“Smashing,” Harry said to his feathery contingent. “Yet another secret.”

Any plans he had made of turning the package over to someone had left his mind as easily as if it had never been there. Whatever it was, it apparently belonged to his father, and thus him. With his access to his family vault questionable, he decided that risking another family treasure was not in his best interest. Looking at the plain wooden box, he wondered what was inside and tried to recall his mother’s favorite flower. It had been four years since he’d last seen her, and of all the things he tended to recall, flowers were not one of them. Nothing came to mind. It was very possible the memory spells at WYRA had taken the knowledge from him.

“Well, bloody, fucking hell...”

Frustrated, he set the box aside for later. He picked up the package with the impossible address. Since he had already opened a package he shouldn’t have, he was feeling pretty rebellious at the moment. He was still a bit cautious though.

Getting mail from a werewolf territory may or may not be illegal.

Not knowing if the package might contain a dead rabbit or Sirius’ ear or something equally horrible, he opened the letter first.

Hey, Prongslet

Well, that was a promising start.

You have the damndest luck. I heard from Athena what happened. There’s nothing I can say that would tell you how truly sorry we both are. We were careless, and you suffered for that. If you don’t wish to speak to us anymore, we would understand. Having said that, you’re James and Lily’s son so it probably never crossed mind.

Harry rolled his eyes.

Slivermoon and I are both fine, so we don’t want you worrying about that. We’ve also been given permission to write supervised letters if

we behave ourselves. Don't be surprised if there's long silences between letters. We're not exactly known for our 'good behavior'. Anyway, when you write back, you're suppose to give your letters to Snape (insert gagging sounds here), and be aware he'll be reading them first. Takes the fun out of a lot of it, but it's a lot more than I thought possible without breaking at least half a dozen laws (perhaps that's why it's not as fun?). They gave me a whole bunch of rules, but I don't remember half of them. Snape will likely have twenty more, so good luck with that.

Oh, and we made you something. Nothing fancy I'm afraid. We keep things simple around here. No magic either. Remus had his wand taken away for a month and I haven't seen mine in years. I think you'll find use of it regardless.

Happy Birthday, Harry. We're so proud of you.

Yucky hugs and kisses from your overly affectionate extended family,

Sirius Blackbone & Remus Slivermoon

Harry felt a rush a warm as he finished his letter. This was something good, no something wonderful. He had a family that he didn't have to hide. Ok, it was sort of like having a family stuck in prison for life, but it was still something precious. He could finally tell Hermione and Clyde and perhaps even Natalie and Draco.

It was suspicious as hell, he knew, that after all that had happened they would be rewarded like this, but Harry didn't care. If after first nearly being killed by werewolves and then abducted to be turned into one, he was finally going keep them in his life than he would hold no regrets.

The gift they had made him was set of leather arm guards with strips of bronze plating on the outside. The inside of the leather had Sirius and Remus' mark, a crescent moon resting over crossbones. The right guard had a trip spring so if he bent his wrist just right, his wand could pop out into his hand. It was just what he needed. Elsbeth, gentle though she was, had already scratched the hell out of his arms.

From down the hall he could make out the sounds of Mr. and Mrs. Sleuw rising for the morning. Feeling strangely paranoid (and with some of his gifts he had very good reason to be), he quickly gathered up all his presents and cards and hid them in his trunk, then gave all the delivery owls treats or their pay and hurried them out the window (except for Elsbeth of course).

When everything was as it was before, and not a suspicious item in sight, he got dressed and headed down stairs to help with breakfast as if it nothing unusual had occurred.

This was all just another day in the life of the infamous Harry Potter, after all.

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Harry met with Hermione, Draco, Natalie, Pansy Parkinson, and Blaise Zabini a week before the start of term to visit Diagon Alley for school supplies. Clyde and the Weasley twins had said they were going on the same day with their grandparents, and said they'd keep an eye out for them. Having seen hardly anyone but the Sleuw's for weeks, he was ecstatic to be among other students again, and not even Snape glowering at them could dampen his enthusiasm.

The potion's master, being Hermione's and Draco's godfather, had been roped into escorting them all by Mrs. Malfoy. He had already completed his first trip to Diagon alley with Hogwarts new muggleborns, and was not looking at all pleased to be going again. Neither of the young Malfoy children looked particularly concerned, so Harry just took it in stride.

He'd met with Snape in Hogsmeade, portkeyed to Malfoy Manor to pick up everyone else, and then taken their floo to a dingy little pub in Diagon Alley. The man stepped out onto the street, pointed to the bookstore and told them to meet him there at an appointed time, then stalked off towards a rather shady looking street. Harry blinked stupidly at the man's back.

"I thought he was our escort?" he asked, turning to the others. The Slytherins chuckled.

"As if we need someone holding our hand," Draco sneered. "It's not like it's dangerous around here. This entire street has enough protection spells and Court sentries to give Hogwarts a run for its money."

Harry shrugged. It was for the best, he supposed. He didn't want this trip to be as rushed and uneventful as his first one was. He caught Hermione giving him a meaningful look, and intentionally fell behind their little group to talk to her in relative privacy.

"Your last couple of letters have been kind of mysterious, Harry. You keep saying something wonderful happened, but you don't go into it. What's the big secret?"

Harry glanced around to make sure no one was paying them any attention.

"Well... I learned my parents were both wizards," he said. Even though he had learned this last year, it was Sirius and Remus who had told him so he had not been able to tell her at the time. Now that he could tell her about them, it freed up this information as well. "And my godfather is also a wizard, and he lives here in Britain. I got a letter from him on my birthday."

"Oh, Harry that's wonderful! I'm so happy for you! Where did they live? Did either of them go to Hogwarts? Have you met your godfather in person yet? Do you think he'll adopt you? Why have you been secretive about all this?"

"Shhh! It's not as simple as it sounds. My parents fought against Voldemort during the war. Their names have a Taboo on them in Britain," he explained, and Hermione instantly paled. Taboos were no laughing matter. Speaking a Taboo name could have you sent to the Court prison for days or even weeks of interrogation, and if found guilty of treason it was Azkaban, lycanthropy, or death for the charged. "And my godfather is a werewolf. He was convicted of treason just after the war, and Greyback took him in. It's taken him

over a year to get through all the red tape just to be able to send me letters.”

All Hermione could do was gape, and then shake her head.

“Only you, Harry,” she sighed. He grinned at her.

“Well I can’t have you getting bored now can I? I’ll tell you more about it when term starts. Lets just pretend I’m normal for once, and see how it goes. If we’re not invaded by a goblin army by tea time, I think the day will have turned out quite well.”

With their Slytherin company, they went from shop to shop, starting with ‘Gamblers and Gook’s Game Shop’, on to ‘Manatoba’s Magical Menagerie’, then an apothecary called simply ‘Apothecary’. They stopped at almost a dozen shops, most of which were only visited briefly to explain to Harry what they sold or just to pick up school supplies, but others everyone lingered in to admire the merchandise for a long time. Harry, Draco, and Blaise all crowded around the sporting goods store, admiring the latest edition of Cleansweep brooms and the many varieties of swords for fencing clubs. Hermione, Natalie, and Pansy let them be to wander about ‘Lord Burkland’s’, a high-end jewelry store. They all had a great time, showing everyone else what they got (Harry got very little compared to everyone else, but what he did get he had to hide away from Hermione for her birthday). When there was only forty-five minutes left before they had to meet up with Snape and Hermione became absolutely insistent, they headed to the bookstore, Borgen’s and Blott’s, for their text books.

Hogwart’s new textbooks are bundled together by year, and the others merely had to select the appropriate bundle and then wandered off to browse. Harry wanted second hand books to save money, so was forced to head from isle to isle searching for them. While looking for Philip Tulip’s ‘A Practical Guide to Impractical Plants’, he bumped into a girl he vaguely recognized as the youngest of the Weasley clan. She was a little elfin creature, with soft features and large eyes, and spattering of freckles across her nose that made her look like a child’s doll. She was glowering at an arithmancy book like it had wronged her some how.

"It's not as hard as it looks," Harry said, startling her a bit, "Professor Vector shows us all the cheats after every section."

"Oh! Hello," she said, blushing a bit. "Do you go to Hogwarts too? This is going to be my first year."

He smiled at her reassuringly. "Yep, this will be my second year. I'm in Gryffindor with some of your brothers, and I play on the quidditch with Fred and George. You're Ginny, right?"

"Oh! You're Harry Potter. They wrote about you in a couple of their letters. They said you were their god. You don't have pockets full of Zonko's trick toys do you?"

Now it was Harry's turn to blush a bit.

"No, no, I leave the pranking to them. I get in enough trouble without looking for it. Speaking of the twins, they're not around here are they?"

"No," she said, "They shouldn't be around until about noon. Why?"

"Last year they said they'd have to beat the boys off you with a broom when you got to Hogwarts. I just want to make sure they aren't coming up behind me with it."

She giggled at that and turned even more pink. Soon they fell into a discussion about Hogwarts, as Harry explained to her some of the ins and outs of the school and helped her find her books while he looked for his own. She asked him all sorts of questions, about the school, about him, her brothers, and finally in the most timid of voices she asked about Voldemort.

"Does he really live at the school?"

Harry wondered that sometimes himself.

"I don't really know. He probably has a room there somewhere, but I don't think he lives there all year. He comes to dinner a couple times

a week and he has an office in the highest tower of the school. It's a nice office, but I don't think he could run the entirety of Britain from there."

"You've been in his office?"

"Well, yes..."

She gaped at him. "Wow."

He chuckled at her. "I've been crucio-ed by him too, but we've been getting along much better since then."

If her mouth hadn't been hanging open already, her jaw surely would have dropped. He laughed.

"Oh, you're teasing me!" she grumped. "You'd think I wouldn't be that gullible with brothers like mine, but you really had me going. Now I see why Fred and George like you so much."

He decided not to correct her. When she got to Hogwarts she would hear all sorts of rumors about him, and it would be funny to see her surprised all over again.

"Harry, do you have all your books yet?"

He turned around to see Natalie striding towards them. He couldn't help but notice that her relaxed manner had receded into something predatory, a measuring look in her eyes. She came to stand right next to him and took his arm in hers. She smiled sweetly at him and it looked all wrong.

"If you don't hurry we'll be late and Snape will throw a fit," she said, and then glanced over at Ginny who was looking at her rather nervously. "Why Ginerva, I haven't seen you in a while. So you managed to get into Hogwarts after all."

There was something not at all friendly about her words, though she kept smiling pleasantly. The youngest Weasley didn't look happy. Harry decided to spare her the discomfort by taking Natalie's advice.

"You're right," he said, "we better hurry. It was nice meeting you, Ginny. I'll look for you at the start of term!"

The girl made a odd hand gesture that might have been a wave, and Harry walked with Natalie to the checkout counter.

"Old acquaintance?" he asked when they were out of ear shot.

Natalie snorted.

"We were in the same primary school. Draco used to have the silliest crush on her, but thank God he grew out of it. They were a lousy match. Prim and proper Draco wouldn't even stoop to finger painting, and she was practically rolling in the mud on most days." She glanced over at the redhead now looking for the remainder of her books, sneering. "I see not much has changed."

Harry peeked over as well. Her clothes definitely weren't the finest, being a little faded and of a style favored by the less ostentatious ranks of Wizarding Britain, but she looked tidy and clean enough to him. She was pretty, in a different way than Hermione and Natalie. A warm and homey way that made you unafraid to approach her in ways you never would upper crust girls like them.

"You know, I am even poorer than she is, don't you?" he said, lifting an eyebrow. She grinned, squeezing his arm affectionately.

"That maybe so, but you have something that she doesn't."

"What's that? An excess of lives?"

"No, darling. You've got class."

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Ginny Weasley watched Natalie Cypher with a familiar loathing. The blond witch (and she didn't mean 'witch' in the literal sense) was just as she remembered her. Beautiful, cold, and a complete snob.

What a boy as nice as Harry Potter saw in her, she had no idea. She could see Natalie whispering things in his ear, and had no doubt about her subject. Still, when the boy at her arm caught Ginny's eye, he smiled at her the same way he had before. She had to duct her head so he wouldn't see her blush. Fred and George had written that, in addition to being their god, Harry was the cutest boy they had ever met. She thought that meant he'd be short and girly, but he wasn't.

He was slim and a little shorter than most boys, but he held himself in a way that made you over look that. He was friendly, but not presumptuously so. His appearance was neat and tidy, but his messy hair kept him from looking overly prim like her brother Percy, and instead made him look both dignified and approachable. And he had the most incredible green eyes she had ever seen.

Oh, this was bad, she knew. When she started fixating on the eyes, she knew she was already knee deep in a crush and sinking fast. What chance did a poor little nobody like her have with someone like him? He was handsome, the youngest Hogwarts Seeker in a century, hung out with some of the richest kids in school, and had Natalie Cypher as a girlfriend.

It was impossible.

And yet... he was still smiling at her.

[illegible]

Chapter 24: The Serpent Prince

Harry boarded the train quickly in order to avoid the crowds and their pointing. He hadn't thought about his short stint through the newspapers last November, but apparently it hadn't been completely forgotten. Wherever he went a least a few of his fellow students would point him out to their parents or younger siblings and say something like 'That's Harry Potter. He got kidnaped last year. He's in my arithmancy class' or 'That's the kid who broke Slytherin's winning streak in Quidditch. I heard he's got two girlfriends and two boyfriends'.

It was ridiculous.

If anyone had heard even half the story of what had happened to him this summer, he imagined they'd have just about mobbed him. Well, thank God for small miracles. His wand, although promised back to him shortly after his return from the hospital, had not reached his person until the day before. He was almost giddy to have it back and unharmed, but the crowded station was not the place to ogle his magical conduit so he kept it tucked safely in his robe.

The train was not yet over run with students so most of the compartments were empty. He ambled along until he came to a door that for one reason or another felt right to him. Opening it, he found himself face to face with a boy who could have been his older brother. He had black hair, a slender build, and the same amazing green eyes. There was something vaguely familiar about him, yet Harry couldn't recall ever seeing him before. Perhaps he was from another House?

"Why, hello," the boy said, setting down the book he had been reading, "Are you looking for somewhere to sit? I could use some company and you have a friendly face."

Harry felt himself blush, but moved into the compartment. He hadn't been looking for a stranger's company, but this boy seemed friendly enough with his charming little smile and curious eyes.

"Thanks," he said, taking a seat across from him and reaching out his hand. "I'm Harry Potter, but just Harry is fine."

The boy shook it and said, "Thomas Matthew Rook, but you may call me Tom."

Harry's face became even warmer.

"You don't have any luggage," the boy pointed out. "But you are wearing your school robes."

"Oh, that. Well, I live at the school year around. They have me take the train to school for tradition's sake, you know," Harry said, "What about you? If you went Hogwarts you would have recognized me, and you're too old to be a first year."

Tom chuckled. "Both of our circumstances are unusual then. I will be attending Hogwarts as a fifth year student, even though this will be my first year going there. I was home schooled due to a childhood ailment that I have only recently overcome. I must say I am rather looking forward to it."

At that Harry couldn't help but grin.

"You'll love it. Everyone does."

Tom invited Harry to tell him about Hogwarts, which Harry did with just as much enthusiasm as he had with Ginny Weasley. The older boy was an attentive audience, laughing at the right moments and asking many curious questions, and never taking his eyes off the second year. Fifteen minutes passed before their conversation was once again disturbed. Natalie peeked in, took one look at them and grinned.

"Oh, Harry, you've grown an older brother over the summer. Now I know what I want for Christmas."

"Natalie! Don't be rude, he's a new student."

She glided in, and held out her hand to the older boy with perfect confidence. "Natalie Cypher, second year Slytherin."

Tom accepted her hand and kissed it. "Thomas Rook, man of mystery."

"Oh, that's smooth. You'll be Slytherin for sure," she said, giggling a bit. "I see you've already found, Harry. Don't let the Gryffindork badge fool you, he's got enough Slytherin in him it's a miracle his tongue hasn't forked yet."

"Hey! It took a lot of Gryffindorkishness to sow that fork closed, I'll have you know!"

"Mind if we join you?" came Draco's 'friendly' sneer, "The Humfmumper's tears of friendship are getting my shoes wet out here."

He stomped in, followed by Hermione and Blaise. He ordered his two goons, Crabbe and Goyle (Ron was absent, likely sitting with his brothers), to stand watch outside the door. To guard against what, Harry had no idea. Harry introduced Tom to them, and soon after Hermione began shooting questions at him about his education. The elder boy took it in stride, listing off the many subjects he had been tutored and self studied in, and assured her his scores on his placement exams more than qualified him to attend Hogwarts even so late in his schooling. Draco, who had been rather reserved, seemed to lighten up a bit when it became apparent that Tom was from a wealthy if not well known family, but only a little.

Finally, Hermione settled back and they moved on to more casual affairs.

"I'll be trying out for Quidditch this year," Draco said. "The Seeker position opened up again since Harry off'ed the last one."

"He off'ed himself. Not my fault your house picks blind goons for their Seekers."

"You won't be so cocky when I'm flying circles around you, Potter."

"Bring it on, Malfoy."

Natalies and Hermione rolled their eyes at each other.

“Boys and their games,” Hermione lamented. “It could be worse, I suppose. They could have joined Fencing club. Bravado and pointy objects.”

“Oh, that reminds me, Ginerva is coming this year, can you believe it? Finally, the last Weasley. I thought I’d never see the end of the line,” Natalies said.

“How did bravado and pointy things remind you of Ginny?” Harry asked.

“A Slytherin’s mind is a twisted maze, Harry. You can’t go in too deep without getting lost and possibly eaten by something,” Hermione said, and moved the conversation on to other things.

They kept the conversation going for several hours, until after they’d gotten lunch from the trolley car and fallen into an easy silence. As they neared the last leg of their journey, the sky turned grey and it started to rain.

“Bother, I hope you don’t have to take boat with the other first years,” Harry said. Tom just smiled faintly, and it suddenly occurred to Harry that the boy hadn’t looked away from him for the entire length of their journey. He felt himself blush yet again and hastily looked out the window.

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Tom did have to take the boat. Harry gave him an apologetic look, but the older boy just shrugged and headed towards the lake. When Harry saw what was to take the rest of them to the castle, he wished he could have gone with him.

Thestrals shifted anxiously in their harnesses, their leathery wings secured uncomfortably to their sides. They huffed and snorted, their seemingly skinless bodies trembling in the rain. Most of the students didn’t seem to mind, and others seemed completely unaware of them.

He briefly recalled what Kyle, the lawyers assistant he'd met at the first adoption party, had said about only those who had seen death would be able to see them.

"Come on, Harry. You're going to catch a cold," Hermione said, leading him reluctantly to their coach, where Draco and Natalie waited.

"So what do you think of Tom?" Harry asked, once the carriage started moving.

"He seems quite knowledgeable," Hermione said, "Although his arrival is a bit suspicious. I've never heard of a late transfer before."

"He'll definitely be Slytherin," Natalie said, "I bet he charmed and possibly bribed the school board."

"He's a pedophile," Draco stated with a dead expression. "I'm amazed he didn't rip off Harry's clothes and molest him in front of us."

"Draco!"

All three of them yelled it at the same time and with the same amount of outrage. Hermione crossed her arms and scowled at her brother.

"Jealousy is very unflattering on you, Draco."

The blond boy merely sniffed and looked away.

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Harry made it a point to stay extra close to Hermione on their way to the Great Hall. He didn't fancy a repeat of last year's incident, however unlikely. They found their seats and were soon joined by Clyde and the Weasley twins. Fred and George, ignoring the social pecking order as usual, looked rather like giants among the second years but no one questioned it. They'd likely move three or four times during the feast anyway.

“Good evening, our most High and Divine Lord of Chaos,” Fred said by way of greeting, “Was the rain your idea or did Snape’s foul disposition moved ahead of you?”

Harry rolled his eyes. “Must have been Snape. I would have thrown in lightening and a thestral stampede.”

“Well, there’s always next year, your Lordship,” George suggested.

“Don’t encourage them, Harry,” Hermione pleaded. “And don’t insult my godfather. I’m sure you wouldn’t like me insulting yours.”

Harry smiled, showing her he understood her hidden message. When the feast was over, they would find a nice quiet place and Harry would explain everything he had discovered ‘that summer’. Undoubtedly, she had been dying to ask him the moment they saw each other.

The hall slowly filled until everyone but the nervous first years and a curious looking Tom were seated. Headmistress Lestrangle took the podium, which struck Harry as kind of odd. Wasn’t Voldemort the one who usually addressed the students first? It wasn’t as if he could remember much from his first welcoming feast, being cursed and all. He turned to Hermione to ask.

“Oh, yes,” she agreed, not taking her eyes off the stage, “He enjoys playing Headmaster quite a bit. I truly believe he thinks the only wizards worth his time come through Hogwarts so he takes a lot of initiative with the students. But I overheard mother talking about her, and that Voldemort was displeased with her recent running of the school so she’s taking on the full responsibility of it now to show she’s fit for the job. If she blows it, Professor Snape will have her job for sure.”

“Welcome,” Lestrangle began, “to the beginning of another school year. As always, I and all those present here expect great things from each of you, as befitting of the most prestigious Wizarding School in the world-”

“And I thought the Dark Lord was pretentious,” Fred muttered. Hermione hushed him.

“- and remind all returning students, the Forbidden Forest is strictly off limits. If you are lost in there, there will be no search party to retrieve you-”

George grinned. “Good, we’ll know where to escape to when she finds that nest of Skitzles we put in her-”

“Sshh!”

“And I have some unfortunate news. Professor Quirrel, our Dark Arts and Defense teacher for several years now, was injured while researching acumantulas and will not be returning to teach this year. Your new teacher, however, is more than qualified. May I introduce Professor Anthony MacNair.”

Beside him, Harry heard Hermione gasp and it wasn’t in pleasant surprise. She looked positively pale when she spotted the man, who had been slinking in a shadowy corner in a black cloak. He was a gaunt and wicked looking man, and did not smile or acknowledge the polite applause in any way.

“Now, because this is Professor MacNair’s first year as a teacher, Professor Snape has graciously offered up his time and expertise to start a Dueling Club to help practice DA&D’s practical applications.”

“We’re going to die.”

If the twins had said it, Harry would have taken it in stride, but coming from Hermione it was a tad bit worrying.

“In addition to our usual contingent of first years, we will be having a fifth year transfer. Mr. Rook is attending public school for the first time so I expect you all to be helpful and studious-”

The twins grinned at each other.

“-let the sorting begin.”

McGonagall brought out a stool and a hat and set them at the front of the hall. The hat immediately burst out into song. Harry thought it one of the most ridiculous things he'd ever seen that didn't involve the Dursley's laughable attempts at being 'classy'. It was over soon enough, and McGonagall started to call first years to be sorted. Every table greeted their new additions enthusiastically, quickly making room for them.

Harry felt suddenly deprived. His own sorting had gone all wrong, and it had taken months and a great deal of luck for him to be welcomed anywhere at his own table. Even now, he realized, he didn't have the same attachment to his own house that all the other students seemed to possess. He likely never would either, and that was so utterly unfair.

"Rook, Thomas!"

Harry returned to the present to watch his new acquaintance stride forward confidently. The Sorting hat barely touched his head before shouting out a resounding 'Slytherin!'. Harry bit back at the feeling of disappointment, reminding himself that half his friends were Slytherin anyway. As if hearing his thoughts, Tom caught his eye on his way to the Slytherin table and gave him a mischievous wink.

Harry wasn't the only one to notice it, for Fred and George each put their arms protectively around him.

"No way!" cried George, "He'll have to get his own adorable Master of Mischief. Harry's ours!"

"Here, here!" agreed Fred. Harry rolled his eyes.

It wasn't until almost the very end that another familiar name was called.

"Weasley, Ginerva!"

Her name immediately perked Harry's attention, and he gave the nervous girl a friendly wave as she made her way to the front. She

smiled timidly back. In a matter of seconds, the hat called out her house and she practically skipped over to Gryffindor table. She paused briefly before sitting to wave to Ron, who managed a little smile and wave. Beside him, Draco gave him a pat on the back as if to say 'I know exactly how you feel'.

She ended up sitting between George and Harry, looking the happiest girl in the world.

"Oh, I was nervous!" she said, "But you all were right. Gryffindor all the way!"

"Told you," Clyde said, as if the outcome was obvious. Hermione elbowed him in the ribs.

"Welcome to Gryffindor, Ginny. It's been a while."

"Only a year! How is Draco, by the way?"

"He's now the official overlord of the first and second year Slytherins. By Christmas he'll have completed his coup d'etat against Avery and taken the third years as well."

Ginny laughed, not realizing Hermione wasn't actually joking.

"Congratulations," Percy said, wandering over, "Mom will be so pleased. Sorry, I can't stay long. Prefect responsibilities, you know."

"Thanks, Percy," Ginny said, even as the older boy was wandering off again, pulling out and discarding the dung bombs the twins had snuck into his pockets.

"Prefect duties, my arse. He's going to flirt with Clearwater," said Fred.

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"So, what is this about your parents being wizards and your godfather is a werewolf?" Hermione finally asked, once they'd finally found a moment alone after the Welcoming Feast. They'd found a quiet little

nook in the common room, both dressed comfortably in their nightclothes, to speak.

“His name is Sirius Black. He was my father’s best friend. They went to this very school together. His mate is Remus Lupin, who also a good friend of my father’s in school, but he was a werewolf already by then. My father and Sirius both figured it out, and helped him get through his time at school. All three were the very best of friends. My mother was also Gryffindor and attended the same years as them, though I don’t think she hooked up with my father until their last year together.”

Hermione blinked. “But how would Remus have gone to school? It would have been illegal at the time...”

Harry shrugged. “The Headmaster at the time was rather... open-minded? Only he, McGonagall, my father, and godfather knew... and maybe my mom figured it out later, I’m still a bit unclear on that.”

She sat back and considered what he had told her and several questions seemed to come to her, but she held her tongue. Finally, she spoke again.

“So your parents have a taboo on their names? What did they do to get those?”

“I don’t know yet. I know they fought against Voldemort during the war, and left shortly before he took control of Britain. They must have really pissed him off, because after they reached Germany they withdrew from the wizarding world completely.”

He ran a hand through his hair in frustration.

“They never told me any of it. I don’t know why they kept it from me. It’s not like I wouldn’t have found out eventually. It’s kind of hard not to notice once you start setting things on fire and levitating the family pet across the room.”

Hermione nodded.

"It must have been really difficult for them. By then, they were probably so sick of the war and magic in general, they just left it all behind to start over. I'm sure they would have told you once you started performing accidental magic."

Harry shrugged. "We'll never know will we? But you know what really gets me? What really pisses me off?"

"Harry, language."

"Everyone knows. Voldemort sure as hell knows. McGonagall... god, I don't know how I missed it. She practically blurted it out to my face when she first saw me. She called me 'Harry'. Not 'Harold' or 'Mr. Potter', but Harry. Snape knew the instant he saw me, and he's in WYRA so he had to have reported it. Everyone at WYRA must have known. All the teachers here must too. But they all just pretend I fell out of the damn sky. Like none of it matters."

It was clear Hermione didn't know how to respond to that. She had no idea what he must be feeling. Any similarity between their circumstance was made moot by the fact that everyone knew her origins and they really didn't matter, except in the context of her adoption and eventual marriage.

When no words of wisdom were forthcoming, Harry just shrugged.

"At least I have Sirius and Remus. I know I won't actually be able to meet them until I'm seventeen, but at least I can write them and get some honest answers."

"Harry, you have to be careful. I know they're your family, and precious to you, but they're also known traitors to the state. If people were to learn that you're in contact with them, it could seriously damage your reputation. If they expressed anti-government sentiments in their letters, there would be physical evidence for a treason charge against you. You have to be very, very careful."

Harry just rolled his eyes. "Why do you think I only told you? I thought about telling Clyde or even Draco and Natalie, but I don't think I could trust them that much. Voldemort gave the go ahead, and Snape

already knows and has to proofread my letters, but I'm not going to go blabbing about it to everyone. Hufflepuff is known more for its loyalty than Gryffindor, if you haven't noticed."

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"How is the brandy, Tom?" Voldemort asked, taking a sip from his own glass.

"Smokier than I remember, Brother, but still good," the boy replied, stroking the head of his much grown familiar. Nagini was large enough now to smother him easily, but her coils remained comfortably snug around his arms and shoulders as she practically purred under his fingers.

"Enjoy it while you can. After tonight, you'll have to do without till the end of term. Your new Head of House is considerably more competent than your last, and he despises rule breaking."

"You couldn't have a word with him?"

"I could" Voldemort agreed, "But I wouldn't over something so trivial. Plus it will arouse his suspicions, and he's already suspicious enough as it is. Your role here requires discretion."

Tom tilted his head in acknowledgment, and took another, slower, sip.

"I met him," he said, once the flavor had faded, "He found me on the train almost immediately. I wonder if he sensed his own magic in me."

"I hope not. With a body of your own to anchor your magic, his should have faded until only yours remained." Then the elder wizard smirked. "Unless you're keeping some? A little memento from your 'mother'."

Tom gave him a smirk of his own.

"Why not? 'Mother's milk' made me grow tall and strong. His drawings provided me the comfort of the world that his juvenile thoughts could not, until his passion finally gave his words enough

power to give me form. He has the length and breadth of my affections, and the depth of my gratitude.”

This sentiment seemed to irritate the Dark Lord. It was no wonder, he thought to himself, that I would splice this particular section of my soul into something as sentimental as a diary.

“Do not get too attached. Young Mr. Potter’s future will take him beyond the walls of Hogwarts, and out of your reach. I have great plans for him.”

“And who am I to get in the way of such plans?”

The irony of that statement was not lost on Voldemort.

“Don’t get cheeky, little brother. I freed you for a purpose. One which you have already agreed to fulfill. With Britain’s government stabilized and measures for expansion under way, I will not be able to oversee Hogwarts to the extent I would like. Lestranger’s absolute loyalty is the only thing that makes her increasing incompetence tolerable, and Snape’s great competence is the only reason I allow him authority which requires absolute loyalty. Only you can I entrust to watch the school and its occupants in my absence. And I am willing to grant you those positions you desire in exchange for your assistance...and your compliance.”

And what if I want more? Tom thought, but did not say. He had tried his counterpart's patience far enough. If he were to ask for more now, then the man would kill him. It was as simple or not so simple as that.

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Chapter 25: The Ogre

Second year started in a manner exactly the opposite of the way first year had started for Harry. For one thing, everyone seemed quite glad to see him. For another, Harry had a family again, albeit an odd one in the form of two werewolf godfathers who were convicted of treason. And lastly, Hermione Granger of the Malfoy's was actually dreading a class.

"You don't understand," Hermione tried to explain at Monday breakfast, "He's a monster. He shouldn't be allowed anywhere near children, women, animals, or anyone without advanced knowledge of defensive magic."

"So then how'd he get hired?" Clyde asked, looking less than impressed with Hermione's description so far. "There's got to be some sort of standard."

She shook her head.

"Most of the truly awful things he done were under the authorization of the Court, so he doesn't have a criminal record. Plus, he's a former Death Eater. That gives him a lot of push and shove in the system. Chances are he bribed Lestrangle and together they bullied the school board to hiring him."

Harry was only half listening. He had the feeling he was being watched. This wasn't an unusual feeling lately, but the uneasy tingle at the base of his neck was. Discreetly, he tried to determine the source. Ron was his first suspect, but the redhead was too busy shoving eggs into his mouth to bother with Harry. Following the line of Slytherins, he inevitably found Tom. The older boy seemed to be doing well for himself, chatting up several other fifth years as if he'd known them since their first. After a moment, Tom glanced his way as if sensing him, and he moved along to study the teacher's table. Voldemort was absent, as was Lestrangle. Snape was glowering at a couple of Hufflepuffs. Beside him, however, was McNair.

And he was looking right at him.

Geh.

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They had all of first period Herbology to prepare themselves for DA&D, but it wasn't enough. When they got to the second period class, they found the room transformed. All the windows had been closed, and the only light was a series of faerie lights floating about the room. There weren't enough, and the entire room was thrown into shadows and strange looming shapes. More than one student had to cast a Lumos charm to find a seat without hurting themselves.

Despite the gloom, those Gryffindors who hadn't been warned seemed positively chipper, hoping for a teacher with a little more passion for the subject than their last. Most of the Slytherins seemed to know better. They didn't appear as apprehensive as Hermione, but they were tense and Draco favored sitting beside Hermione for once instead of with his House mates. Harry took up her other side and kept his wand in his lap, wishing he's worn the arm guards with the pop latch for his wand Sirius had given him.

The time for classes came and went, but their teacher did not appear. Hermione didn't look relieved at all, and when Harry turned to her she hushed him with her finger and shook her head. Minutes passed and the students became increasingly restless. The more time that passed the more impatient they became, until they were muttering mutiny.

“This is bullocks,” muttered Seamus Finnigan. “If he’s not going to show, why do we have to stay? I’m going to fall asleep soon if someone doesn’t turn the bloody lights on.”

“If he’s not here in five minutes I’m going to leave,” bragged Ron Weasley.

This was the general talk for the next five minutes, after which everyone looked towards Ron expectantly. The redhead shifted

uncomfortably under their combined expectation, and finally stood and made his way to the door.

He gave them all a contemptuous sneer and grabbed the door nob. Then he stopped. Slowly, he let go of the door and lifted his hand to look at it. He stared at it, seemingly mesmerized, for a moment before he started to scream.

“Get them off! Get them off!”

Ron was now smacking his hand against his robes, becoming increasingly frantic. Hermione and Draco came to his side. Calling forth a Lumos charm, they inspected his trembling hand but there was nothing there but clean flesh over bone.

“Get them off!” Ron kept crying, “Bloody hell, they’re climbing up my arm!”

“There’s nothing there,” Draco insisted.

“I can feel them!”

“It’s only a spell, you need to calm down,” Hermione said, her mind reeling with possible curses and counter curses.

“Fuck you, you bloody cow! Just get them OFF!”

“What do you see, Weasley? What’s crawling up your arm?” Draco demanded.

“Spiders! Hundred and thousands of spiders.”

“Aracnisortia?” Draco suggested to Hermione.

“No, that summons actual spiders. He’s only hallucinating them. It’s an illusion spell, I think... I don’t know. I don’t know!”

“Well, there’s a first time for everything,” Natalie said at her desk, looking vaguely amused. It was no secret that she loathed Ron

Weasley (the feeling was mutual), and a little freak out was no reason for alarm in her opinion.

Draco suddenly looked thoughtful. "I wonder... Crabbe, go look for a teacher."

The beefy Slytherins who had been chuckling stupidly during the entire event, did as he was told. Hermione was about to protest, but Draco covered her mouth with his hand. The moment Crabbe touched the door, he let out a surprised yelp that soon became full out screaming.

"Stop looking at me! Go away!"

He kicked and stomped at the floor.

"Is it spiders?" Draco asked, finally releasing Hermione.

"No, it's eyes! Eyeballs everywhere!"

"Draco, come on! They're starting to spread!" Ron pleaded, nearing hysterics.

"Keep your mouth shut, Weasley," the blonde Slytherin hissed, "Or they'll get in your mouth. It's a type of fear curse, not a illusion curse. Phobius Nostica!"

Ron stopped flailing and Crabbe followed soon after, looking around themselves in growing relief.

Someone started clapping from the other side of the room. The windows suddenly burst open, flooding the room in light and blinding everyone. The clapping continued, moving about the room until it was at the very front. A deep, gravelly voice began to speak.

"Well done, Mr. Malfoy. Not only were you able to determine the sort of curse, you knew the counter curse while under pressure. Twenty points to Slytherins. And you, Ms. Granger..." His voice was suddenly contemptuous. "Flailing about like a fool and throwing out random assumptions. You're counter curses for hallucination curses or

Aracnisortia would have only made things worse. Thirty points from Gryffindor!”

Harry could still only see vague shapes, but it was enough to see his friend was ashamed. He seriously wanted to point out that Draco’s first suggestion had been wrong and only Hermione’s correction had prevented him from casting the wrong counter-curse. Additionally, Crabbe was beyond stupid to touch the door and Ron hadn’t exactly been helping himself. No one else in the entirety of the room (and reluctantly he admitted that included himself) had any idea what to do, so why was he picking on her for trying? What was the point of this whole fiasco?

“Now get back to your seats, I have a lecture to give. Not there, Granger! You obviously need extra attention. You’re sitting up front.”

The students started to return to their seats and rearrange themselves, and Harry used the confusion to move his seat beside her again. His vision was now mostly clear and he could get a better look at Hermione. She was sitting stiffly, focused on not crying or ducking her head in humiliation. He wanted so badly to comfort her, but he didn’t dare bring down another wave of McNair’s scorn.

It was all for not.

“Potter! What is the name of the curse I placed on the door?”

“I do not know, professor.”

“I thought you were the school’s shining new star? Surely, you know something so simple?”

The man’s mouth was filled with sarcasm, and as he leaned in close to sneer, Harry could see it was full of rotten teeth as well. Harry eyed him cautiously, his hand tightening on his wand.

“No, I’m afraid not, professor.”

The man gave him a rotten grin.

“Well, we can’t have that, now can we? A two foot long essay on The Phobia Curse due by Wednesday, Potter.”

The man turned stalked back to the front of the classroom, and Harry hoped that the worst was over. No such luck. There was very brief, very rude introduction by McNair, who basically stated he was the government’s torture expert and if they didn’t do well in the class they were soon going to understand what that meant. There was no syllabus or assigned reading. If you came to class and didn’t automatically know what he wanted than it was going to be on your head. The one foolish Slytherin who said it was unfair got detention for a week.

And then there was the lecture. The very least that could be said was that the man knew his material. He went into curses in great detail. He seemed particularly fond of the Bludgeoning curse (self explanatory) and the Internal Fire curse (which melted one’s insides without touching the skin), and had a whole series of visual aids to demonstrate to the entire class. When everyone was finally released, it was with no homework, but a promise of practical application that Wednesday.

In a very subdued manner, everyone made their way to the dungeons for third period Potions. Snape’s usually intimidating presence was positively tame in comparison with McNair’s, and he seemed none too pleased with their lack of fear. He was even less pleased when the blubber worms they were to be slicing for their potions resulted in over half the class vomiting into their cauldrons (if they were lucky) and the other half unable to even attempt to poke at the slimy creatures that rather resembled one of the illustrations of McNair’s lecture.

Harry (who had removed his glasses during DA&D to avoid traumatizing himself after the first three or four illustrations), Hermione, and Draco (who had both wisely avoided eating at breakfast) were of the few the had managed not to vomit and at least attempted to dice their worms. They were held in class after the Potion’s Master banished everyone from the room to complete the class on Saturday morning.

“What is going on? Is there some sort of contagion going around? Have the Weasley’s been giving you candy?” the man demanded.

The three students shared an uneasy look. None of them were certain if they should say anything. McNair was a teacher and a former Slytherin, and Snape hardly seemed the type to hold terrorizing students against someone. But Harry was feeling bad for not being able to help Hermione, and if there was anyone who might actually have the compulsion and the power to protect her than it would be her godfather. He looked the man directly in the eye... an invitation that would not force him to reaccount Hermione’s humiliation in front of her.

Snape took him up on the offer, and Harry felt his presence slither around his mind. He tried to call up the events of a mere two hours before, but his thoughts jumped about randomly until the master legilimens managed to pin down the ones he wanted.

His expression turned positively evil.

The Potion’s Master stalked away from them, Hermione and Draco baffled over what had overcome their godfather. The man stalked into on the of the back rooms and a moment later he returned, wearing a completely different set. Unlike his crisply pressed teaching robes, these new robes were layered in plates of stiff leather similar to protective gear under Harry’s Quidditch robes. Somehow Harry didn’t think the man was going to go play Quidditch.

“The three of you return to your common rooms until lunch,” he commanded, and then disappeared again.

“What’s happening?” Harry asked, looking to the two siblings. They were sharing a worried, although hopeful look. Then Draco actually smirked.

“I think our godfather’s gone to straighten out McNair, personally.”

“Oh, no, this is bad. He could get fired for this!” she said, beginning to pace. “Lestrangle will use this as an excuse to sack him for sure!”

“Don’t get your knickers in a twist,” Draco said, still smirking. “There’s no way she can fire Severus with out You-Know-Who’s go ahead, and there’s no way he’ll side against Severus over McNair. He’s been on the outs with the Dark Lord since he started questioning his muggleborn policies. Father says its only a matter of time before McNair’s given to the werewolves, and Greyback will kill him for sure. They’ve been trying to kill each other for decades.”

“That’s all well and good, Draco, but Voldemort’s not here. He’s organizing some new project down in Bristol.”

Draco just shrugged, unconcerned.

Harry placed a comforting hand on her shoulder.

“Hey, don’t worry about it. Snape’s a Slytherin. He wouldn’t do something rash. I bet he’s come up with at least half a dozen ways to blame the whole thing on Lestrage, McNair, or me.”

She smiled a little at that, but soon went back to fretting.

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McNair and Snape were absent from lunch. So were many of the first year Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs who took DA&D first period, and the second year Slytherins and Gryffindors. Those third year students who had the already infamous class reported it as extremely boring, as they’d been forced to read their books through the entire period while their teacher sat glowering at everything from his desk.

“What do you think Snape did to him?” Harry wondered out loud. “Do you think it’s Imperius?”

Hermione shook her head. “Who knows? Regardless, this can’t go on forever. We won’t learn anything.”

“At least we’ll still be alive. Besides, Snape’s starting that Dueling Club, remember? I bet we’ll learn lots of stuff... lots of painful, humiliating fun will be had by all... all Slytherins at least. Cheer up.”

He went on to distract her with absurd speculations about their other classes. Would McGonagall teach them how to transfigure people into furniture? Would Toure make them read Merlin's chronicles... all two thousand pages of it? Could Snape brew a potion that let him go without sleeping for a week? It wasn't long before she was pointing out the implausibility of such things and then going to full out lecture mode. The more she talked the less she worried and the less depressed she seemed. It was what Harry wanted; for Hermione to realize that, despite McNair's hurtful words and her own moment of ignorance, she was smart and competent and a good witch.

He was even willing to sit through her endless monologues to achieve that.

"Excuse me."

They both turned to see Tom standing behind them, a book in one hand.

"I apologize for the interruption, but I was wondering if I might borrow Potter for a moment?"

"Oh, of course," Hermione said, and turning back to her friend she smiled, "Thanks Harry. I needed that."

He blushed, knowing she'd seen right through him. Escaping to the corridor just outside the Great Hall, he and Tom found a place to speak in relative privacy. Harry had to admit he was surprised the Slytherin had sought him out. Even though Slytherins tended to overlook him being a Gryffindor (except during Quidditch matches of course), they rarely overlooked that he was still a kid. Aside from Morgenson and Whitehall's attempted murder, few of the older students wanted anything to do with him, and was Tom already becoming so popular he had assumed he would follow that trend. After all, what could he possibly have in common with a muggle-raised Gryffindor three years his junior?

"I heard some of the second years talking about your Dark Arts class this morning," Tom said, "They said he took a lot of points from the other Gryffindors, but only assigned you an essay."

Harry frowned.

"Yeah, a two foot essay due on Wednesday."

"Do you know why he did that?" It didn't sound like a question, but an expectation. Harry wasn't sure what he wanted, so he just shook his head.

"Students receive a tally in their school records for the number of points earned and lost and from what classes. He didn't deduct points because he knows you have the Dark Lord's favor, and if he deducts too many points than he will be seen as tormenting you. Essays won't go into your record and he can assign as many of those as he wants, tormenting you that way."

Harry hadn't thought of that. It actually seemed pretty absurd. Why would the Dark Lord be interested in his student file? Of course, logically, the man shouldn't have any interest in him at all. Damn parselmouth ability. Damn Nagini.

He sighed.

"It doesn't matter. House points or essays or detentions, the man is a sadist and he'll find a way to torment me along with everyone else."

"You could always tell the Dark Lord," Tom pointed out.

"No way. I'm not going to go running to the dictator of Wizarding Britain every time someone is mean to me. Half the school will be dead by the end of term. I can handle this on my own."

The elder boy smirked and handed him a book.

"This is from my personal library. I book marked the section on the Phobia Curse. It should help you on your essay."

“Oh, thank you, but... Isn't it valuable? It looks really old.”

“Don't worry, I have plenty of protection and preservation spells on it. It was just sitting in my trunk getting dusty anyway.”

Harry ran his fingers over the aged leather binding, feeling and smelling the age of it. It was well over three hundred years old. He looked up to find Tom smiling at him with some amusement, and he was struck with this intense feeling of déjà vu. He had seen that exact expression somewhere before, and though he couldn't remember where exactly he knew it hadn't been from someone he trusted.

“Tom, why are you being so nice to me? I don't have anything against Slytherins in particular, but I know their relationships outside of family are always more practical than friendly.”

Tom blink, then smiled sheepishly. It was cute, and Harry knew it was fake, but couldn't help but be charmed nonetheless.

“You're right, Harry, I am very much a Slytherin. I do not befriend just anyone, and having said that I think you should understand that you are not just anyone. You have a destiny. I have one too. When our fates intertwine, and they inevitably will, I would not have it be as enemies. I rather like you after all.”

With that, Tom gave him a friendly pat on the shoulder and wandered back to the Great Hall. Harry stood in the corridor, staring dumbly at the door. He looked down at the book, opening it to the marked page. Sure enough there was six pages worth of material on the Phobia Curse. More than enough to complete his essay. He shook his head and smiled.

“Slytherins.”

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That evening, Severus was just freshening up for dinner in his private quarters when Bellatrix showed up at his door. The tone of the wards she set off suggested she was irritated. He took his time answering

the door, noting with some amusement that the longer he delayed the more beautifully the flutish sound became.

He finally allowed her entrance, and she stormed in. She was ready to rage at him and threaten him and tell him he was fired, but the tea set placed on the coffee table made her pause. There were two cups set out.

She gave her rival an assessing glare, but he ignored her in favor of making himself comfortable in one of the sitting chairs.

"Would you like some tea, Bella? It's almost as black as your heart, just how you like it," he offered. She sneered, but took a seat across from him. For all her anger at him, she had not come here to cross wands, and when it came to wit he would always outmatch her. The pretense of civility was necessary for the games they played.

"No thank you, Severus. I do not intend to stay long. I trust you know why I am here?"

"I imagine it has something to do with McNair's brief stint through the hospital wing. How's his kidney, by the way? I admit I got carried away with that particular curse."

"Still turned to stone last I checked. That silly medi-witch is such a fool when it comes to such curses. He managed to finish the school day, though he wasn't much use to the students."

"Madam, his deficits as a teacher ensured that before I ever sent a curse at him. Are you aware of his curriculum?"

"Of course, I am. I reviewed his syllabus myself. It was perhaps a little ambitious, but after Quirrel I thought that would be a welcome change of pace. Why, Severus? Have our little darlings come whining to you about their big mean teacher? How dare he make them think?! How dare he make them work?!"

"How dare he send them on to my class incapable of brewing a simple potion without vomiting? Either you're as inept at judging

suitable class subjects as you are teachers or the old ghouls lied to you. Regardless, once again you've left me to handle your mess."

Bellatrix stared at him, stunned. Never before had he dared to talk to her in such a blatantly disrespectful manner. Not since she'd become headmistress at least.

"Why you impudent little grease spot. I should have you flogged and thrown into the moat," she hissed. Severus lifted an amused brow.

"No doubt you'll join me there shortly after. Oh, Bella, I don't know what McNair gave you or what he promised or what he has on you, but you never should have let him into the school. After all your mistakes with Potter last year, our Lord already sees you as a fool and now in your incompetence you hire a man not only unsuited to the position, but also in disfavor."

"McNair was a loyal and dedicated warrior during the war—"

Severus knew he had just won the battle. The moment she had gone on the defense, she had lost perspective on his mistakes. He could easily have been reported and punished for attacking McNair, even temporarily suspended from the school with Voldemort's approval. The Dark Lord may hate McNair, but he deplored lack of self control even more. And that was what had happened with Severus.

He had seen in Potter's mind the emotional violation of his goddaughter and then the unforgivable mutilation of knowledge. The disgusting neophyte introduced the Dark Arts as some sort of torture device, required only for the suffering and pain it inflicted. He neglected totally the discipline, the medical benefits, the protection, and the beauty of the material. If the man continued to infect the students with his notion of the subject they would grow up with a deep spiritual aversion to or twisted concept of it.

And in his anger and indignation, he had adorned his battle robes, unused since the war and had gone to teach him what a man with the true understanding of Dark Arts could do. He had succeeded too. McNair had sworn, under the extreme throws of pain and the promise

of worse, to change his teaching technique and he would not so much as glare at his goddaughter again.

He held little hope for the class, but that was why he was holding Dueling Club. Listed as a club, he could not force the students to attend and being who he was he knew he could not compel them with his personality either. But if he could gather enough of them, endue them with the knowledge and appreciation that McNair never could, there would still be some hope for the future of the art at and beyond Hogwarts.

“- and he has extensive practical experience-”

“Bella, just stop. I’m more than willing to overlook McNair’s many failings, if in exchange you allow me some leniency in... mentoring him. He’s a new teacher after all. A few mistakes in the beginning is perfectly understandable.”

She wanted to say no. McNair was her responsibility and she wanted to handle the matter as was her right as headmistress, but in doing so she would have to admit her knowledge of his lack of qualifications. That would give weight to Severus’ accusation of bribery and blackmail. If Voldemort learned of Severus’ increased responsibility with both potions, the Dueling club, and the dark arts class, that would count once again in his favor and in her disfavor. But it was the only option. At least if she gave him what he wanted, Severus was in a position to make a mistake and ruin himself. If she had to help him along with one, she wasn’t going to object.

“Fine. Do what you want, but be discreet. I will not have the students believing their teachers are not united, and attempting to play them against each other. Who told you about McNair in the first place?”

“Someone I know that has experience with discretion. You needn’t know their name. Cheers.”

He relaxed back into his chair, taking a sip of his tea to hide his smile as Bellatrix stormed out of his quarters. He would have to be extra careful from now on, he knew. He was in open war with the headmistress, and though he knew himself her superior in wit and

planning, she had the benefit of power and position and popularity. She would try something before the year was through.

There was a familiar and thrilling sense of danger lingering about.

Someone might very well die.

It made him nostalgic.

Chapter 26: The Duel

Wednesday came too soon it seemed. Though none of the other classes spoke of anything more horrifying than some snappish reprimands by McNair and eye strain from reading for too long, Harry and his friends had been promised a practical. Given the curses they'd been studying there was no way the day was going to end well.

"Hurry up and sit down, all of ya ninnies," Professor McNair growled as everyone started crowding in. His beady eyes lingered on Harry and Hermione as they walked in and followed them to their seats. Once everyone was seated and waiting in a tense quiet for the horror to begin, McNair spoke again. "Potter, do you have that essay?"

"Yes, sir."

"And did you understand the material?"

"I think so, sir."

"You think so? Why don't you know so?"

Harry hesitated. "It wasn't something I could practice."

"Not practice? Of course you can practice. This is a wizarding school, you don't learn nothing worth knowing without trying it out. Get up here."

Reluctantly, Harry stood and moved to the front of the class. McNair sneered down at him and then turned back towards the class.

"I'll award ten points to whomever volunteers, regardless of how well the curse is performed."

No one moved.

"Come on, then, fifteen points," McNair said. "Either someone volunteers or I pick someone and they don't get any points."

Hermione shifted in her seat. Draco saw her and stood.

"I'll do it. It's a pretty pathetic curse, as such things go," he said, smirking arrogantly at the rest of the class.

"Good lad, Malfoy. Fifteen points to Slytherin. Stand in front of the door. Now, Potter, show us what you learned."

Harry looked at Draco, asking permission with his eyes. The blond boy's arrogant expression didn't falter, but as Harry raised his wand he did tense. It was enough for Harry.

"I'm sorry, Professor, I can't seem to remember the wand movement."

McNair smiled nastily, and Harry knew he was in for it now. His only consolation was that what ever happened to him wasn't going to hurt Gryffindor. Tom had already explained that the foul man wouldn't have house points from him (at least not a significant amount at once). For someone with only a vague sense of loyalty to his own House, this was a very small comfort.

"I'll demonstrate it to you, Potter. Via phobius!"

Harry tensed, but nothing seemed to happen. Nothing jumped out at him. There were not creepy-crawlies or monsters stalking towards him. He wondered if the man had been playing a trick on him or even managed to fail his own spell. He turned a questioning glance towards Hermione.

She was gone.

Confused, he searched the room. She was not there. And neither were the others.

Natalie and Clyde were no where to be seen. He turned to the door, but Draco was gone too. The class was now dappled with empty seats where once his friends had sat. They were gone and all that was left was room of full of cold stares and malicious delight.

He was alone.

Again.

His breathing became rapid. He searched the tables where he'd seen them last, looking for evidence of their existence, but their bags and their books and pens were all gone. Or perhaps they'd never been there? Had he made them up? Had they all been the dream of a lonely mind?

"He asked you a question," McNair said, his voice mocking. His presence brought Harry back to the solidity of the moment.

"Who?"

"Malfoy, you clod. Pay attention when someone is speaking to you!"

The moment was solid, and McNair's mockery had inadvertently made the past solid as well. Malfoy existed. Everyone else had to have existed as well. This was only a curse. A pathetic curse. Isn't that what Draco had said? Speaking of what Draco had said-

"Phobius nostica!"

Before his eyes, his friends reappeared, staring anxiously at him. He wondered what he looked like to them. His breath still wasn't quite normal and his hands felt clammy. A chill lingered in his arms and spine. He wonder if this was what it felt like to stand before a dementor.

"Good to see you remembered something, Potter."

And McNair seemed pretty disgruntled over that.

He was still a bit disconcerted, so Draco grabbing him firmly by the arm and totting him back towards his chair was more helpful than annoying at the moment.

"Bloody hell, what did you see? Most people freak out like Weasley. You just stood there like your soul had been sucked out of you."

Again Harry was reminded of dementors. Perhaps that's what he should say he saw. The truth... the truth was not his friend in this room. From the corner of his eye he could make out their grungy professor glowering at him. He tilted his head a bit so the man could see his mouth moving, even if he couldn't hear his words.

"Snakes."

Draco gave him a disbelieving look. Then rolled his eyes.

"So that's why you're not really in Slytherin," he muttered. "God, that's just pathetic."

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After that, the class became exceptionally boring and no one could have been happier (except perhaps McNair). They spent the rest of the class reading out of their books. They were expected to write a twelve foot mid term paper on some aspect of the Dark Arts and their first proposal was due Friday. Hermione managed to spark a bit of her old enthusiasm and was already writing down ideas. Still feeling a bit depressed from the curse, Harry flipped through the pages and stared at the pictures (considerably less graphic than McNair's private collection).

After class, Draco gave him a chocolate frog.

"What? No flowers?"

"Stuff it, Potter. It will help with the curse's after affects. A sulky Gryffindor is almost as bad as a lovesick Hufflepuff."

It did help. Draco's solid punch to his arm, a powerful (albeit painful) proof of his existence, helped more. Hermione watched the exchange closely, but let him finish his chocolate in peace.

No one got sick in potions, although Nott spilled his hair growth potion on Crabbe and made his feet look like an angora rabbits. They were once again reminded they still had a class to make up that Saturday

morning as well as a potion's essay. So groaning and muttering, they made their way up to lunch. Snape caught his attention on the way out, interrogating him with his dark eyes alone. Harry avoided his gaze, shrugged and walked off. Let the man interpret that as he would. He wasn't going to let him stalk around his head like it was his classroom.

He might have been safely out of Snape's reach, but Hermione was a different matter. As soon as her brother and their class mates were ahead of them, she pulled him quietly into an empty classroom and cast a silencing charm on the door.

She held him with a dark look and demanded, "Spill it."

Harry just blinked at her stupidly.

"The truth, Harry. For once, just tell me the truth."

"Um... I don't..."

"Stop. You've been keeping secrets since we've known each other. I can tell, you know. You get this flippant attitude whenever you're lying."

Oops. He dropped his gaze. He had many, many secrets. As time passed he had collected more and more, an ever growing collection. There was no doubt in his mind that it would only continue to grow.

He wanted to tell her so many of them. But she had said it herself:

"For both our sakes, be careful what you say."

Now Hermione was caught off guard. "What?"

"Don't you remember? On my eleventh birthday, when I carelessly said things you told me that."

"I... yes, I remember."

He looked her squarely in the eye.

“Every lie I ever told you was to protect you. I swear.”

She was quiet for a moment.

“Even about what you saw today?”

“Oh, that. I didn’t lie to you, I lied to Draco. A completely different matter, altogether.”

She rolled her eyes.

“I figured. So what did you really see?”

“...Do I really have to tell you that? I mean... it’s kind of personal.”

“Well, it felt kind of personal when you kept looking at me during that spell as if I had somehow betrayed you.”

“What? No, no that wasn’t what I saw. I’ve never even considered that you’d betray me.”

“Then what was it, Harry? Please, tell me. I don’t ever want to see that look on your face again.”

“... You were gone.”

She looked confused.

“You had disappeared. Well, not just you. Clyde. Natalie. Draco. You all just vanished as if you’d never been there. For a moment, I thought you really hadn’t ever existed. I thought I was alone again.”

He’d been looking at his shoes as he explained, feeling so stupid but unwilling to give her yet another lie. Her arms were around him suddenly, hugging him tightly.

“I keep forgetting,” she said softly. “You’re always so brave, I keep forgetting how I like we are.”

His eyes felt suddenly wet, so before he made a total girl of himself he pulled away from her. He shuffled around a bit, mentally searching for something to distract them both from his sudden vulnerability.

“There’s something else. Something I’ve never willing told anyone.”

“Is this about your kidnaping?” she asked, her look knowing. “If it is, I know that you were threatened to keep silent about the truth.”

“What? How did you-?”

“Well, aside from being entirely too flippant about being kidnaped and probably beaten, there were some inconsistencies with your story.”

“Inconsistencies? All I ever said was ‘I don’t know, I was confunded’ or ‘It’s still under investigation’. Where did you find inconsistencies in that?”

“Well the first clue didn’t come from you, but from my godfather. I heard from some Hufflepuffs that he stormed out of class for seemingly no reason and then didn’t return until the next period. What could have possibly sent him off in such a hurry that day except for your return? And then, if you’d been found the night before and scheduled to return like you said later, why was he acting as if you’d come so unexpectedly? Why didn’t he tell Draco or me about you being found before?”

“The next clues came when we spoke before the rest of the school knew you were back. You told me that Madam Pomfrey had given you a very thorough check-up already, but then told the reporters that you’d been taken to St. Mungo’s just before being brought back to Hogwarts. Why would you have gone to Madam Pomfrey if you’d already been to St. Mungo’s? For that matter, if you had been to either Madam Pomfrey or St. Mungo’s, why would you have a bruise around your neck when we spoke to you?”

“What bruise? I didn’t have-”

Oh. Voldemort had grabbed his neck after he’d tried to get the dark wizard to stop torturing Whitehall and Morgenson. He hadn’t even

thought about. It probably wouldn't even have shown up until after he'd left the office so no one else had thought to hide it. His shirt collar would have covered it most of the time, except of course during study hall when he loosened his tie to get more comfortable. A study hall where he sat directly across from the most observant girl in the school.

"I figured something happened and Lestrangle or Voldemort didn't want any one to know the truth so they came up with that little fairy tale and threatened you to keep quiet."

Harry let out a huff.

"Yes, you're right about all of that. And I still can't tell you what really happened. If Voldemort didn't kill you, Snape would kill me. I'm rather fond of the both of us, so I hope you don't mind?"

She made a dismissive gesture.

"Good, because that wasn't the secret I was talking about. I'm a parselmouth."

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Hermione snapped her third quill that day. Beside her, Harry glanced cautiously in her direction. She ignored him in favor of looking for another quill. If she had looked at him, he might have spontaneously combusted.

Never had she been so angry with him.

This said quite a bit about how angry she was, for despite her usual calm reserve she was angry with him a lot. He was brave and kind and she loved him like a second brother, but he was also secretive, stubbornly proud, and short tempered. She had many of the same short comings, so bickering wasn't uncommon. They had their fair share of spats, and even more arguments left unsaid. Affection and friendship endured through a mutual understanding of their pasts, a deep love of magic, and an implicit trust of the other.

But he hadn't trusted her.

For over a year he had been keeping this incredible secret, one that so easily could have been shared and explored together. Why? She still didn't understand. He hadn't been able to explain. He seemed ashamed some how. Was it because he had lied to her, even if it was merely a lie of omission?

Or perhaps he thought she would feel ashamed?

Did he think that because he had this prestigious talent that she wouldn't think herself good enough to hang out with him?

Alright, that sounded a bit convoluted, even to her. The chances were she was angry at him for entirely the wrong reasons. It was his secret, and it was not imperative that she know it immediately. One day or one year, he had still told her when he didn't have to.

She tried to tell herself to just let it drop. He hadn't really done anything wrong.

She made a cursory glance at her lying friend, muttering under his breath the charm of the day and wondered if that wasn't a little bit of hissing she heard...

Hermione snapped her fourth quill that day.

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Tom discretely cast his gaze across the Great Hall to the Gryffindor table. He found Harry almost immediately, and was pleased to note that the earlier gossip seemed accurate. Harry was still fighting with Granger. The boy was sulking over lunch, while the girl resolutely ignored him and everyone else.

That was good.

Let her withdraw from Harry on her own, and perhaps he wouldn't have to do anything too... drastic. Once she left him, her brother and his friends would soon follow suit. Harry should never have been associating with such filth to begin with. Malfoy was tolerable, but his weakness for his mudblooded sister and friends made him unsuitable company. No, the only company Harry would require was his. Without the others, the boy would inevitably turn to him- they always did, after all- and he would guide him to more appropriate company and activities..

Voldemort had been right. He was the only one who could be entrusted to safe guard the school, and protect the child who had become his 'mother'. He knew so little about Harry, but he knew he was destined for great things. There was just something about him. A mysterious intensity to the way he lived. A resolve directed at the world he only half understood. It was everything that had been absent in what he knew of Merope, that stupid weak cow who had sullied him since his conception with her love of a disgusting muggle.

He hadn't lied to his counterpart. He felt both deep affection and gratitude towards Harry. The child, though of mixed origins, was pure in the way of magic, allowing for Tom's own rebirth to be what it never was with Europa.

Beautiful.

Joyous.

Blessed.

So he would protect Harry. He would make him great. He would love him as best he knew how, like any grateful son should. And if those around the child had to suffer to make it so, well... no one could say he had any aversion to the suffering of others.

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By Thursday, Hermione was actually looking at him. This was an improvement from Wednesday, when she not. Harry took it as a sign

that she was coming around, but he did wish she would come around a bit faster. Draco kept giving him the evil eye and Natalie was teasing them both horribly. Clyde didn't seem to notice, but he had developed a sudden crush on Catherine Wicket, a new first year Hufflepuff, and wasn't noticing much of anything.

When it was finally time to attend Snape's Dueling Club, he felt like he was going to battle without a single ally in sight.

The Dueling Club was held in a large chamber that took up a quarter of the third floor of the Western wing. There were windows on either side, and most of the place was illuminated with natural afternoon light. One end of the chamber was taken up by a large 'I' shaped platform from which individual duels and demonstrations would be held. The other end on the west side held a series of human shaped dummies, standing straight and ready for hexes and curses. The east side was covered in mats, some were shaped like the 'I' platform, but mostly a wide range of sizes and shapes.

By the dueling platform, Professor Snape stood waiting for all the perspective students to arrive. His dark robes closely resembled the set Harry had seen the man wear just before he'd gone to face McNair, but there was less armoring and the leather looked less stiff. Still, he made for an intimidating sight. If everyone else weren't similarly dressed as Harry, the young Gryffindor would have thought himself rather silly looking in comparison.

There were not many students. This was the junior Dueling Club so only first through fourth years attended on Thursday, but with only thirty members out of more than two hundred and fifty students it clearly wasn't going to be the most popular place to be after classes. Almost half the members were Slytherins, another quarter being Ravenclaws, and the rest were Hufflepuffs and Harry, Hermione, a very reluctant looking Clyde, and Ginny who was looking as if she expected to be thrown out at any moment.

Swell.

Snape didn't look pleased with the turnout, but neither did he look surprised. He didn't bother waiting past the appointed meeting time for stragglers.

"Welcome to Dueling Club, ladies and gentlemen. Let me take a moment to applaud your decision to supplement your education. You will find in due time that it was a wise and lucrative choice."

Harry assumed Snape was addressing his Slytherins when he said this, possibly Hermione too, and didn't put much weight in the wizard's assurance. But he wouldn't quit. Not yet anyway. Snape was offering something he had been unable to find in the apathetic Quirrel, and perhaps too much of in McNair.

He offered power.

Now Harry never thought of himself as power-hungry person. He was more than content to live his life without lording over others, but at the same time he could not tolerate the idea of anyone lording over him. And too many people were deciding his actions against his will. Voldemort. Snape. McNair. WYRA. Whitehall and Morgenson. There were others, less dangerous at the moment or perhaps not yet introduced, that would attempt to hurt him or manipulate him.

He would never be able to defeat them all. He would likely bend long before he broke. Or perhaps he would just die. However, the more powerful he became the fewer there would be who could hurt or control him, and the less twisted he would become.

He hoped so anyway.

His parents hadn't held much respect for power. Having survived a war with one of the most powerful wizards in the world, Harry supposed they had good reasons for this.

"I will not only be supplementing your knowledge of DA&D, but will also provide you with basic medical skills to assist you or your comrades after an attack. These skills will likely prove more value than any hex or curse, as they are applicable to both peaceful and dangerous situations."

From there, Snape went on to outline what exactly they would be doing. It was a lot more than Harry had counted on. It turned out hexing and cursing made up only about half of what they would actually be practicing. There would be the medical training Snape mentioned, but also basic training with traditional styles of weaponry (a sort of pre-fencing club since you had to be at least a fourth year to join), basic occlumency (although not legilimency), form and decorum, and equipment design and maintenance. Then Snape led them around the training area, pointing out the purposes of oddly shaped mats, the dummies, and the large storage closet they hadn't noticed. He laid down safety procedures, the consequences of ignoring these procedures, rules, responsibilities, and chores.

Then things started to get fun. He had them each pick out a dummy and inscribe their names on it. He introduced a set of spells to protect the dummy, to strengthen it, to keep others from touching it, and to repair the slight damages it would accumulate over repeated use. They would each be held responsible for the care of their own dummy, and if it was damaged because of neglect they would have to make a new one from scratch to replace it. Harry named his Rolf.

Then they were marched to the supply closet where they set about putting together their dueling uniforms. They all came in a range of styles and colors and sizes, and they all had a heck of a time figuring out what would fit, what one was willing to wear (Draco was the perfect fit for canary yellow padding but traded it for a slightly oversized dark blue to go with his dark grey leather armor), and how to put it all on.

Harry got through it with beige padding and dark brown armor, and considered himself lucky. Hermione in a black and red checkered padding and black armor, looking rather devilish. Ron was stuck in the yellow padding with white armor and looked completely absurd. Ginny, being the smallest one there, was stuck with the pink armor and white padding. She looked about as threatening as the Easter bunny.

"You may, and likely will, purchase or create your own dueling robes, but you must have them approved by me first. Shoddy workmanship will cost you more than a split seam here."

Harry thought immediately of his arm guards in his trunk. They were softer, stronger, and a better fit than the ones he had on and had the added bonus of a wand holder. Could he perhaps convince his godfather to make him a complete set of armor?

There were some additional instructions on the care of their armor and more spells for their upkeep. By the time they were done with the orientation almost two hours had passed.

"That will be all for today," Snape said finally, "Place your armor on your dummies before you go and cast a cleaning charm on them. Next Thursday, I will introduce you to dueling etiquette, basic dueling form, and some common disarming spells. I expect you all to be dressed and ready before we begin. Dismissed."

As they did as they were instructed, all of them chatted excitedly. Even the Gryffindors and Hufflepuffs who had only reluctantly decided to accept more of Snape in their lives were delightfully surprised. The man hadn't snapped or insulted them once, and seemed genuinely interested in them learning what he was teaching.

"I'm so glad I decided to come," Ginny said, placing her robes on her dummy beside Harry and 'Rolf'. "Everyone was saying Snape would be just like he was in potions and we'd only be learning those awful things Professor McNair teaches, but it's really different, isn't it? Professor Snape wasn't that bad at all."

Harry grinned. "If that was all that you heard about it, then why did you come? It wasn't exactly a rousing endorsement."

She blushed and floundered a bit for a reply.

"Oh, just... well, you know... all my brothers are joining, I didn't want to be the only one who chickened out."

“Well, I’m glad you came. We’ll need as many Gryffindors as we can get to keep the Slytherins in line. I’m told they were insufferably arrogant before they started losing Quidditch matches. I can’t imagine this will be any different.”

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Next Thursday, Hermione was talking to him again, albeit in monosyllables. Of course, by that point Harry was irritated enough with her not to care. So he hadn’t told her all his secrets. They were his secrets, after all. He doubted she told him everything about herself either.

They went through the usual motions of their friendship, keeping each other company during classes and study periods, but their usual warmth was cooled and people noticed. There were suddenly a lot more boys flirting with Hermione. If Harry weren’t so irritated with her, he might have noticed a lot more girls (and quite a few boys) were flirting with him as well. He was snappish with anyone who pointed this out to him and scared more than a few students with sudden outburst of German swear words.

He wanted nothing more than to vent his frustrations in a letter to Sirius and Remus, but the realization that he hadn’t told them he was a parselmouth made that impossible. He wasn’t quite ready to tell them that their best friend’s son was anything less than the model Gryffindor his father had been. There was no way he could withstand their rejection like he did Hermione’s. He knew her well enough to know she’d get over it eventually, after all.

After the final class of the day, he dropped off his school things and went to the Dueling Hall with the hope that he would be able to vent his frustrations there. Snape was there alone, vanishing dummies. There were more than there had been last week and some of the extra were clothed in armor, and Harry realized they must have been for the Varsity Dueling Club. Harry counted twenty two and wondered which ones were George and Fred’s.

Snape glanced over at him.

"If you're expecting extra points for being early, I'm pleased to disappoint you. As this is a club and an extracurricular activity, you will not receive any additional points unless it's in a competition."

"And will there be competitions?" Harry asked curiously. He doubted he would do as well in Dueling as he did in Quidditch, but it was worth a shot.

"Maybe," Snape said dismissively, "Why are you here, Potter? We don't start for another half an hour."

"I have nowhere better to be."

"How flattering."

"Hermione's mad at me."

He didn't know why he said it. Snape was not someone he should be laying out his problems to. The man was involved with at least half his problems to begin with. But, perhaps that's why he could say it, for as much as he disliked the older man, he knew almost all his secrets.

Snape snorted. "If she were mad at you, your hair would be falling out and your toenails would have grown through your shoes. Miss Cypher can attest. Likely, she's just irritated."

"Well, she's been irritated for over a week."

"She might just be menstruating. She should be about the right age for that to start."

Harry gave him the most horrified look. He never ever wanted to think about his best friend in those terms. Emphasis on 'NEVER'.

"So what perceived slight have you committed to irritate her?"

More than happy to move on to a subject that didn't point out to him that his best friend was one hundred percent female, he told the truth.

"I told her I was a parselmouth."

"Told her, or she figured it out and you confessed?"

"I told her. I could have said nothing at all, but..."

Snape snorted. "You dug your own hole, you can lay in it."

Typical.

He started to change into his dueling uniform. Snape continued to dismiss the unclothed dummies.

"What if someone else wants to join today?" Harry asked, quickly bored of the silence.

"Then they're out of luck. I will not repeat last Thursday's orientation every time some bored little fool wanders in. They all had their chance and they let it slip by. I will not reward their laziness and cowardice by allowing them to join late and thus hold up the rest of the members. They'll have to wait until next semester."

"That's harsh."

"You should be pleased, Potter. You and your friends have a distinct advantage now. By next semester all of you will far surpass them in knowledge and skill, and it will take them years to catch up if they ever do. You will be among the elite."

Harry rolled his eyes. "I'm not an elitist."

"And yet, it is amongst the elite that you find your company," Snape said, smirking wickedly. Harry wanted to refute that statement, but couldn't. It was true after all. It might not have been intentional, but somehow he had ended up among the creme de la creme of Wizarding Britain. Hogwarts, the finest wizarding school in Britain. Hermione and Draco, children of the Dark Lord's right hand man. And Voldemort himself, peeking over his shoulder and into his head whenever the opportunity arose.

Ugh.

He was spared attempting to find a paltry defense by the arrival of some club members. He finished getting ready, and started chatting with some of the others until Hermione, Draco, and his Slytherin cohorts finally arrived. She favored Harry with an irritated look, and he gave her with one of his own.

Practice started and Snape began by having Draco, who had attended a few dueling tournaments, climb onto the platform and to help demonstrate proper form and etiquette. The rituals were stylized, but Snape explained their very pragmatic origins.

A duelist kept their wandless hand behind their back at all times, unless to catch their balance. Originally, the free hand was tied there to keep a wizard from using an alternative weapon, an extra wand, or even wandless magic.

You saluted, only bowed slightly, and turned your body sideways before facing your opponent, careful to minimize the area of exposure and maintain eye contact for an incoming attack.

The victor never aided the defeated in standing after a match, and always allowed them to walk or be carried off by their second. The second was not allowed to carry a wand onto the platform. Deceit and vengeance were prevented in this manner.

“Many of these rules were re-introduced after the overthrow of the Ministry,” Snape informed them, pacing the length of the platform and watching his students eyes follow him raptly. It had been years since he held such sway over his students. Potions was a delicate and subtle art, unsuited to most wizards until they’d reached the patience and maturity of their thirties and to have to teach it to children with the attention spans of a poodle was beyond frustrating. But here was something that could penetrate their thick skulls. Something they could comprehend and thus strive for with the enthusiasm few would ever have for potions.

Violence.

Ritualistic and socially excepted, but violence none the less.

“Before that, dueling as a sport had been declining in both dignity and honesty for almost fifty years. Hundreds of spells had been banned, year after year, until finally they allowed only a selected list of about a hundred, quelling creativity and study in favor of pandering to the whining of the ungifted masses who were too stupid, too weak, or too uneducated to strive for more than the most common of hexes. Safety rules were added. Then more rules. Every year, every tournament, every match there would be a new rule added until the only way to win was to blame your opponent for some sort of rule violation. The sport went into decline. The true enthusiast went underground, and the honor and prestige of a thousand year old tradition became little more than plebeian death matches in the slums of Knockturn Alley.”

He paused for dramatic effect, watching as even the jaded Potter boy leaned forward just a little to catch his next words.

“The practice has undergone a recent revival, but it is still severely lacking in numbers and experienced duelists. It is my hope that when you graduate Hogwarts you will continue with it outside these walls, and bring a new standard of quality magic and creativity to every match in which you participate.”

There was applause. Snape scowled as his student’s attentions were suddenly diverted away from him and to the two interlopers standing at the door. Headmistress Lestrangle and Professor McNair stood side by side, clapping their hands in open mockery.

“Bravo,” Lestrangle said, “A rousing speech. I felt so moved.”

“Aye, it was that,” McNair agreed. “I don’t think I’ve felt so moved. Makes me long for a good match. It’s been years.”

“It hasn’t been that long,” Snape said pointedly, the reminder making McNair hesitate, if only for a moment.

“Ah, but it does stir the blood. Come now, Professor, why don’t we introduce them to real dueling, eh?”

The potion's master lifted a regal brow. Certainly, McNair wasn't suggesting they duel in front of all these students? Snape would not lose, they both knew it, unless McNair cheated and that wouldn't gain them anything.

"Come on. Bring up a bonnie lad or lass for a demonstration. They'll get a kick out of it."

Snape could not help but reveal a little of his surprise. So this was what Lestrage intended. If something happened here, with these children under his supervision, there would be little mercy shown to him. Especially if the something that happened involved-

"Potter, why don't you come up? You've shown some skills in my class."

Harry blinked stupidly at McNair for a moment, before turning his questioning eyes to Snape. Snape hated it. There was an implicit statement of trust in the gesture. A blind, unconscious belief that the potion's master would not intentionally allow harm to befall him.

But he could not protect the boy... not unless there was a serious threat of permanent injury or death. He'd sworn that he would show no dissension between him and McNair, and blatantly refusing him before their students and the headmistress would break that oath. Promises meant little to him, but treaties were another matter altogether. Break a promise and you lose trust. Break a treaty and you could lose a great deal more.

"I have not yet begun teaching them counter curses-"

"Don't worry so much, Profess'r," McNair said, climbing onto the stage. "He's learned some from last year, no doubt, and I've taught a few myself. I won't use anything too nasty. I promise."

Snape glared daggers at the man, before stalking off the platform.

"Potter, get up there."

Anxious whispering broke out among the students, but it quickly fell silent as Harry steeled himself and moved forward. This was bad, he knew. Voldemort was not in the castle to protect him. Chances were, no matter how badly injured he was, he would be healed by Madam Pomfrey and returned to classes long before the Dark Lord returned.

Fear made his hands shake. Pride made his feet move forward. Anger kept his gaze on McNair. The wizard leered at him, lifting his wand. Harry shifted his stance and raised his wand in salute. McNair jerked up his wand.

“Res-”

“It’s customary to salute a wizard before attacking them, Professor,” Snape interrupted, throwing the other man off completely. McNair glowered down at the man, but raise his wand for the required salute.

“Expeliarmus!”

The disarming spell knocked McNair clean off his feet and very nearly off the platform.

“Potter!” snapped Lestrangle.

Harry smiled, hoping it looked apologetic at least. “Sorry, Professor, but since I already saluted I thought I was allowed to start.”

Snickers ran through the watching students, and even Snape’s mouth twitched just a bit.

“I haven’t gone through all the rules with them either,” the potion’s master said, maintaining a straight face, even as some of the snickers broke out into full out laughter.

“Resputia vigi!”

Harry managed to dodge most of the spell, but it brushed against his left arm, tearing through leather and flesh like tissue. There was a moment of shock, followed by a splatter of blood on the platform, and soon after came pain.

“Harry!” someone cried.

“FUCK!”

That really hurt.

Snape turned to the Headmistress, “I think that’s enough for-”

“Espitalitus!” Harry shouted, sending the wind hex flying towards his attacker.

Bellatrix smirked. “He looks ready and willing enough.”

“Sagori malicta!”

The unfamiliar curse tore through Harry’s, hitting him directly and tossing him up in the air like a doll. He landed heavily on his already injured arm and felt the wound tear further. He let out a choked scream, curling over his injured appendage instinctively.

Pain and hatred filled him as he turned his burning green eyes to McNair, finding him raising his wand for yet another curse. It was too late for Harry to realize that despite his obvious defeat, he had not released his wand and by the rules of the sport the match had to continue until one of them lost their wand or fell out of bounds of the platform. McNair sent him a malicious grin.

“Serpentortia!”

From the tip of his wand flew an enormous king cobra. Summoned so violently, it immediately reared up before Harry and flared her hood.

“What’s this? What’s this? I kill you for treating me this way. How dare I be treated this way. Queen of the Nile I am, not fucking confetti to be tossed around. I kill you all!”

Harry stared at the agitated serpent in surprise. He had not spoken to another snake since his trip to Moaning Myrtle’s bathroom last year, and he had forgotten how bad tempered snakes were. She slithered

towards him, the one closest to her and thus the likely source of her ill treatment, and made to strike him.

“Wait!” he cried, falling into parseltongue without conscious thought, “I’m sorry. I’m sorry you were thrown so carelessly, but I didn’t do it. I would never- I would never disrespect the Queen of the Nile!”

The cobra stopped, she hovered over him a moment as if uncertain.

“Princeling,” she said, finally, “King’s little princeling... sweet tongued child... No, no, little princeling would not treat Inana this way.”

She spun around to face the crowd of students at the platform’s edge, hissing angrily.

“Who is it? Who must Inana kill?”

“There,” Harry hissed, pointing his wand at McNair, staring stunned at them both. “There is the enemy of Inana.”

She was after the man in a flash. At almost eight feet long, she could not only reach him before he could lift his wand, but raise her body up high enough to strike his hand, his face, his neck. In these three places she struck him in lightening succession, before retreating to leave him to his fate. She moved back to Harry. From the corner of his eye, Harry saw Snape lift his wand. He rolled quickly, blocking the serpent from the man’s attack.

“Potter, get out of the way!”

“Don’t! Leave her alone! She didn’t ask to come here!”

“Potter, you’re speaking gibberish! Move out of the way!”

He didn’t move out of the way. Instead, to the surprise and horror of all, he pocketed his wand and pulled her gently towards him. She did not resist, curling around his uninjured arm and around his neck and shoulders.

"It still moves," she hissed angrily, indicating McNair struggling to shout out yet another curse while his air way began to slowly constrict.

Harry stood, Inana tangled around him and his bloody, useless arm hanging limply by his side. He looked at the man who had done this to him, pointlessly, maliciously and then summoned from her home a creature meant to terrify and poison him. He stalked over to the man, now barely able to breath, let alone talk and kicked him squarely in the face and clean off the platform.

From the floor, Snape made a dramatic, almost satirical gesture towards Harry, but his eyes were fixed firmly on a still stunned Lestrangle.

"The winner."

Chapter 27: The Prince's Gift

Harry awoke in the infirmary. The first thought that came to him was not 'oh, no, how badly am I hurt?' but rather 'oh, bother, not again'. He sat up, and after a few moments of blindly groping for his glasses, took a good look at himself. The arm that had been cut near to the bone yesterday felt perfectly fine, and only a strange scar vaguely resembling a sword marked the existence of the first curse. He felt a wave of anger as look down at it.

How dare that bastard leave such a mark upon his body while carrying the title of teacher? How much worse would McNair have done if he hadn't bungled it at the end with the snake summoning spell? It some how seemed worse than what Morgenson and Whitehall had attempted the year before. McNair might not have intended murder, but he intended harm with the assumption that his title as teacher would allow him to get away with it.

He hoped he broke the bastard's nose.

A movement in the corner of his eye drew his attention to the night stand across his bed, and he nearly jumped out of his skin. There, curled rather snugly in a large glass jar was a great big snake, flicking her tongue at him.

"Inana! Are you alright?" he hissed, going over to open her jar. She slithered out of it and into his welcoming arms, curling about his shoulders.

"Why mussst humanssss be sssooo unpleasssant? You left me to take a nap, and I'm put in a jar. It'ssss very rude."

"I'm sssorry, your majesssty. I'll will try my bessst to have you sssent home as sssoon assss possssible."

"You're welcome to join me, princeling. The other humanssss don't ssseem to treat you any bettersss," she offered. Harry smiled.

"Perhapsss when I am a bit older I will come to visssit you, my Queen. For now I have to deal with the rude people."

He set her on the bed as he changed out of his hospital pajamas, and into a fresh set of clothes that had been placed on a chair by his bed. On top of the pile was a note.

Potter,

Find a place for your limbless friend and get to class.

Professor Snape

Harry rolled his eyes. At the end of his bed was a cluster of cards and candy. According to his watch, he was suppose to be having DA&D at the moment, so he took his time perusing his cache. Fred promised him his first born child if he could teach him how to say 'I promise you my first born child' in Parseltongue. Draco made serious threats about strangling him for getting sorted into Gryffindor. Natalie said his new language was sexier than French. Ginny wrote that he fought really well against McNair. Hermione told him to get well soon

Harry sighed and silently gave up the hope of a perfectly normal school year.

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With Inana comfortably situated in one of Professor Sprout's greenhouses (a heated one that the teacher had given him permission to use), he had just enough time to slip into potion's class without his watch setting fire to his robes. The class, which had been chattering away, went silent as he stepped into the door. He paused briefly, a wave of discomfort washing over him under their curious and mistrustful stares.

Oh well, he thought to himself, I expected this.

He found an empty seat beside Clyde.

"Hey."

To this Clyde merely grunted, glowering at his notebook. Taking the hint, Harry busied himself by studying the potion instructions on the black board. Something bounced off the back of his head. He turned to glower at Seamus Finnigan, who was leering at him. The boy let out a series of hissing sounds.

“So what did I say there, Potter?”

“You said ‘I’m a king of the fairies. I have the pointy shoes to prove it?’,” Harry replied, looking perfectly serious even if his answer was as nonsensical as the boy’s attempt at parseltongue. Seamus flushed as several nearby Slytherins snickered. Draco and Ron weren’t among the amused.

“Geez, Potter, why the hell did you end up in Gryffindor when no one likes you but Slytherins,” the embarrassed boy snapped.

Harry couldn’t come up with a witty reply to that. It was perfectly good question. Hermione hadn’t spoken to him days, Clyde was now following her example, and none of the other second year Gryffindors looked ready to defend him at the moment.

“Shut up, Finnigan. Just because you said something stupid, don’t take it out on Harry.”

Hermione was sneering at Finnigan like he was something distasteful. It was the first time Harry had seen such an expression on her face in almost a year, and it was jarring how scary it looked on her. Lestrangle would have even been impressed. Finnigan looked momentarily disconcerted, but he was still angry enough to foolishly keep talking.

“How can you defend him? He’s been lying to us for over a year!”

Hermione sniffed. “He hasn’t done anything of the sort. So what if Harry didn’t tell anyone about it first year? Everyone was just so understanding and friendly with him, I suppose he should be spilling his guts about every little thing? Besides, he told me about it the summer we met, and McGonagal knew too. If our own Head of House didn’t think it was anyone’s business, than obviously it wasn’t.

For Merlin's sake, he's just a parselmouth. It's not like he's suddenly turned into a vampire or something."

Everyone just stared at her stupidly, Harry being among them.

"That's... Well, he...it's a Slytherin trait!" Seamus struggled to find a retort.

"Circumstantial. It's a blood line trait. Just because the few parselmouths we know about were in Slytherin, doesn't mean they all were or that such a trait determines their House. In fact, Harry just proved that isn't the case. And just for the record, I am rather fond of Harry, so keep your presumptuous statements to yourself."

Finnigan looked too thrown to say much of anything. Clearly, he hadn't been prepared for his teasing to be turned into a full out debate. He was spared having to respond by Professor Snape stalking in.

"Mr. Potter, how good of you to join us. Since you should be particularly well rested after your nap in the infirmary, you can help me demonstrate the proper way to prepare cattails for boiling. You remember how to do that, I hope? I do recall you spending over two hours on it in your last detention."

Harry turned a bit pink, but moved to the front to do as instructed while the potion's master lectured. From the front he could look directly at Hermione, and tried to convey with his eyes alone a sincere 'thank you'. Hermione nodded in acknowledgment, and after making sure no one was observing her, she gave him a little smirk.

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No one in the second year class was talking to Harry except Hermione. This was fine with Harry since the only second year he truly cared about talking to him was Hermione. Oh it definitely stung to be on the outs with his classmates again, more so since Draco and consequently Natalie (who didn't really look upset with him if her wicked smile was anything to go by) were avoiding him as well. Clyde,

the only Gryffindor Harry felt was entitled to feel betrayed wasn't even looking to him. It sadden Harry a bit, but he'd never regarded Clyde as a steadfast friend like Hermione. His willingness to abandon Harry for the crowd last year had not been forgotten.

A multitude of harmless pranks started occurring shortly after his release from the infirmary; garden snakes in his desk, his black school robes being turned green, whispered hisses as he passed groups of students, and a barely avoided hex that gave Percy Weasley a forked tongue for half a day. The Weasley twins had a few pranks of their own, but mostly things even Harry could laugh about. The stuffed snake wrapped around his broom singing 'I may not have armsss, but I can still hug youuu... I may not have wingsss, but I can still flyyyyy... I may not have lipsss, but I can still ssssing' was pretty funny. When the pranks persisted into next week, however, they seemed to take it as a personal affront.

"I'm all for a good prank or two," George said, "But it's bad taste to stick to one person for a long time. That's just bullying. We better set these blighters right, yeah Fred?"

"You are correct, my devilishly handsome brother."

The pranks had quickly diminished, but the silence and accusatory looks hadn't. Conversely, those Slytherins that had been rather distrustful and resentful of Harry before had become positively congenial. Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw were just curious mostly (particularly Ravenclaw, where several students had requested demonstrations he had sternly refused).

Only Hermione's forgiveness and support made it all tolerable.

"They're just embarrassed," Hermione explained while looking over Harry's potion's homework. "They were so convinced they figured you out by now, that they're embarrassed to have missed something so important. They think you were laughing at them."

"If that's the case, then they're going to be hating me routinely. They don't know anything about me."

The only good thing to come out of the entire dueling fiasco was Madam Umbridge. The toady woman whom he'd met only briefly at St. Mungo's last summer had been called in to 'help' supervise the class... or rather, to supervise McNair. The poor man had very nearly died from Inana's several bites, and spent several days in St. Mungo's. When he'd finally returned it was with his new assistant, who did very little to assist in any thing. Every barb, every instruction, every choice of subject, every little thing the man attempted to do in the class was met with a disparaging little 'hmm-hmm', that had him cringing every time.

Nothing was getting taught, but no one was getting hurt either, so Harry considered it a major improvement even if the woman did annoy the hell out of him. Harry had no idea who summoned Umbridge to look after McNair. He wanted to say Snape, but he didn't have the authority. He doubted Lestrage would bother putting a leash on the man she had known was a monster before she'd hired him. That only left Voldemort, but how much could he know about what was happening in Hogwarts? He hadn't been seen since the Welcoming Feast, and his only contact with the school would have been through the Headmistress, right?

He was entertaining the possibility of somehow asking Snape on his way to Dueling Club when Tom stopped him in the hall.

"Hey, Harry," the older boy said, looking quite serene.

"Oh hey, Tom, I haven't seen you in a while."

"Yes, and I feel quite bad about that, what with you being hurt and all. I meant to visit earlier, but you seemed busy every time that I saw you."

"Don't worry about it. Madam Pomfrey is good at her job. I'm fine now."

"Just the same I thought I should check on you. Your House doesn't seem to be very understanding lately."

Harry ignored the stab of pain that statement made, and smiled reassuringly.

"I don't care what most of them think anyway. Everyone whose opinion really matters has already forgiven me or never held it against me in the first place."

Tom didn't look very convinced, but he smiled back anyway.

"Yes, I suppose a situation like this is best for determining who your real friends are. I take it Granger and you have made up?"

"Yeah- hey, how did you know we were fighting before?"

At that Tom chuckled and his smile became a bit more natural. "You Gryffindors are hardly subtle. Everyone can tell when you two have had a row."

Harry ducked his head and shuffled his shoes, feeling unduly embarrassed. While it wasn't something he thought about consciously, he admired Tom. He couldn't put his finger on it, but there was something about the Slytherin boy's attention that was so flattering. It wasn't just that he was older or even that he was quickly becoming the most popular boy in his House, but there was something about his self confidence that made his confidence in Harry seem so much more reliable. He felt he was capable of things he hadn't been when Tom spoke to him. Even his teasing sounded like encouragement to Harry.

"Well, we are best mates," Harry admitted, moving the conversation along before he started blushing like a ninny again. "We spend so much time together I guess it's hard to pretend when nothing's wrong."

Tom placed a hand on his shoulder. "I'm glad you made up, Harry. You two seem to have a special connection and it would be a pity to lose that. But next time you two are on the outs, remember she's not your only friend. I'm here if you ever need to talk."

The older boy's eyes were suddenly so intense, Harry felt frozen, unable to do anything other than nod in agreement until Tom removed his hand started to walk away.

"You better hurry or Snape will make you do demonstrations."

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Tom listened to Harry's footsteps as the boy hurried on his way. Briefly, he wondered if he hadn't over done it. Harry didn't know that much about him after all, and their conversations had been extremely limited. Had he thought Tom presumptuous? Or even a little creepy? He dismissed these ideas quickly. The boy had been smiling, albeit timidly, so obviously he had been flattered like was suppose to be.

Satisfied that Harry wasn't suspicious, Tom decided to consider this meeting a success. He had provided Harry future opportunities to seek out his company of his own volition and Harry, still being a bit naive, would take his words regarding that mudblood Granger at face value.

The smile he had been wearing fell like a ton of bricks, leaving his expression cold and cruel.

Granger.

Harry's best mate.

That simply would not do.

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September passed into November. As Quidditch season rolled around, most of the Gryffindors seemed to forget that they were supposedly mad at Harry and started giving him encouragements like 'Good luck on your first match, Harry!' and 'Show those Slytherins how to fly, Potter!'. It was very tempting say something like 'Aren't I too Slytheirn to be playing for Gryffindor? If I won, wouldn't it still be a

Slytherin victory?'. Hermione pinched him whenever he seemed on the verge saying something so pointless.

"Just let it drop, Harry. They were wrong, they know they were wrong, and they'll continue to be wrong until you start acting like they said you would."

So he let it slide, but once again ignored any further attempts at friendship. It was just like Snape's view of dueling club stragglers: They had their chance and let it slip by. Clyde was still ignoring him, and Harry let him. It would be a lie to say he didn't miss the other boy's company, but some things were more important. Draco got over it pretty quickly, although Harry suspected it was because he wanted help with some of the snake-related objects scattered around the Slytherin common room. Harry didn't make any promises. Natalie kept teasing him to 'hisss sssweet nothingsss' in her ear. Ron was Ron, and there wasn't much that could be done to improve that.

Harry found he was even busier than last year. In addition to Quidditch practices and tougher assignments, there was now Dueling Club as well. Practices were only held once a week, but Snape had been promising them matches soon and Harry was going the extra mile to make sure there wasn't a repeat of his last duel (his blood splattering the platform, not the winning part). His duel with McNair was quite infamous (and not just because he blurted out parseltongue either), and though half the club was too afraid to stand on the platform with him there were still a few Slytherins looking forward to earning a reputation by defeating him. Draco and Ron were the most eager to try, although a cocky fourth year was probably the biggest threat.

"Maybe you should just lose," Hermione said during one of their practices, "If you keep winning then people are just going to keep trying harder and harder until they beat you. You could get seriously hurt."

"It's not that different from what I have to do in Quidditch. I face serious injury every time I climb on a broom, but I can't let fear keep me from doing my best. Besides, being a lousy duelist sounds more dangerous than being a good one."

She wasn't convinced, and truthfully he knew his example was unsatisfying. She hated him flying on the Quidditch team as much as she hated him dueling. He knew it was because she cared more about his safety than his pride and he didn't fault her logic, but neither could he bring himself to adopt her philosophy. The pride was there to stay..

So when he wasn't practicing Quidditch, drawing, or doing regular homework he was studying spells for future matches. This wasn't something he could do during normal study group, since so many of his potential opponents were there as well. He usually ended up studying with the Weasley twins. They too were in Dueling Club, although at varsity level, and despite their goof ball personas, they were a veritable library of curses, hexes, counter curses, tricks, and techniques. He felt a bit bad about taking up their free time, but they seemed so happy that their 'god of chaos' was actually accepting a bit of their tutelage that he quickly got over it. When Draco had seen some of the spells he'd been taught used on dummies during Dueling Club, his cocky smirk dimmed a little. Even Snape had raised a curious brow.

With Voldemort at the other end of Britain and no one else able to offer him a solution, Harry had no means to send Inana home and had to content himself with making her as comfortable as possible. She seemed to enjoy the heated green house well enough, and he occasionally brought her to his dorm room for conversations (and to freak out his dorm mates when they were being particularly bothersome). Bilgerat, who had been rather scarce lately to begin with, disappeared for almost a week the first time he brought her up.

All of this Harry related in a letter to his godfathers, including the fact that he was a parselmouth and had known about it before he'd met them. As much as he would have liked to keep it a secret, he didn't think he could bare it if they'd learned he had pretty much lied to them from a little snippet in the gossip column of Wizzarding Weekly. They deserved better than that. At the same time he was terrified about what their reply would be.

His next letter, he resolved, would revolve heavily around his next Quidditch victory over Slytherin... and perhaps a request for a full suit of armor for Christmas. First though, he had to get down to the pitch for practice before he was late. After handing off his first letter to Snape, the potion's master had shamelessly read it and proceeded to check it over as if though it were an essay, complete with little red marks pointing out spelling and grammar mistakes as well as any material the man didn't think his godfathers should be privy to (this included the dueling incident with McNair and Voldemort being in Bristol). Then he had Harry rewrite the whole thing, proofread the second version, and made him do it again. By the time he had finished a letter to the man's meticulous specifications, his watch was already starting to grow uncomfortably warm.

"Bloody, rotten, big-nosed..." Harry muttered as he stalked his way through the dungeons. "Just wait till he and I have a duel... turn him into a real vulture..."

He passed Moaning Murtle's bathroom and pondered stopping in for a quick 'hello', but decided against it. He was late enough as it was, and if he showed up now she'd likely go into a long monologue about no one liking her and how he never visits.

Well, it's not like she couldn't leave. It would certainly be easier for her to visit him up in Gryffindor tower than it would him visiting her in the girl's lavatory. There was enough gossip flying around about him as it was.

"Stupid little girl..."

Ok, he wouldn't go that far. She was just...

Wait a second.

Harry turned around. He looked at the ground and the ceiling. There was no one there. Had it been him who really thought that? It didn't feel right, but...

"Ouch!"

His watch was starting burn in his breast pocket. As much pain as the silly thing caused him, it was a wonder he was so fond of it. He cursed under his breath and made a dash for the stairs, forgetting the strange incident entirely.

Dear Readers

I know you have been enjoying consistent updating of this story for the last several month, so I thought it important to let you know I will be temporarily suspending this story. I am NOT abandoning it, but events have made it difficult for me to write and fulfill personal obligations. I hope that I will be able to continue this story some time as early as mid February. I do have some chapters already written, but I think this is the best point to stop for the moment, since we're between plot movement. I hope to see you all next month and hope you don't forget about me. Thanks to everyone whose reviewed and offered their support. You all been wonderful!

Sincerely,

Mizuni-sama

Book II

Chapter 8: The Prince and the Phantom

“Still no reply from your godfather, yet?” Hermione asked, looking over at the glum expression of her friend. Harry, who would normally be in high spirits after his Quidditch victory over Slytherin last Saturday, had been growing steadily more depressed.

Harry glanced around the potion’s lab to make sure no one was paying them any attention. Class hadn’t started and everyone was busy finishing conversations before Snape arrived.

“Yeah. I want to say it’s all just red tape making it take so long, but I can’t help but think he’s mad at me.”

“Harry even if he is mad at you about the parselmouth thing, I’m sure he’d write you back, even if it was to scold you. I mean you’re his godson, for Merlin’s sake. Didn’t he say in his first letter that he’d probably only be able to write infrequently?”

Harry nodded, but didn’t look any happier. Everything she’d said he’d thought of before, but there was no real way of knowing until he got another of Sirius’ letters. If he ever got one again. And the not knowing made it exhausting to think about. Hermione gave him a worried look.

“Perhaps you should ask Professor Snape,” she suggested, “He might know what’s taking so long.”

As if on cue, the man appeared, stalking to the chalkboard and snapping out instructions. Everyone immediately set about to follow his commands, and Harry wasn’t about ready to stop and ask him anything at the moment other than where he kept the cedar ashes and eye of newt. As things settled down into the more mundane processes of brewing (stirring), Harry considered Hermione’s advice. Snape was an unpredictable man. He might answer Harry’s questions, he might snap something sarcastic at him, and he might just lie. No response was more or less likely than the others.

What Snape felt for him, other than the standard irritation he felt for everyone in general, was a mystery to him. There had been times when Harry was convinced the potion's master wanted him dead, but every so often he'd say something that made him sound almost... fond of him. There was no telling which way his questions might be met. He thought of asking Hermione to come with him when he talked to Snape, as he almost definitely seemed fond or at least protective of his goddaughter..

But he couldn't. Snape had said if he dragged Hermione into any of his troubles, particularly regarding Voldemort and his godfather, he would make him regret it. Well bother. He'd have to do this alone. After finishing the assignment, he dawdled with his clean up and suggested to Hermione that she go ahead and save him a seat at the Great Hall.

"Was there something that you wanted, Mr. Potter?" Snape asked, not bothering to look at him as he wrote out instructions for his next class.

Now alone with the man, he felt particularly foolish for asking him for anything. He supposed he'd feel even dumber if he just left without asking, and went ahead.

"Um... I was wondering... do you know why it's taking so long to get a letter back from Sirius?"

The chalk in Snape's hand suddenly snapped in half at the mention of the werewolf's name.

"Never mind!" Harry blurted, and rushed out of the classroom. The door slammed shut behind him without his touching it, and he wondered briefly if it had been Snape or his own accidental magic flaring in panic. He sighed. So much for that idea.

The corridors were empty as he made his way back towards the upper levels. He came to the girl's lavatory and remembered he hadn't spoken to Myrtle yet. He imagined she would be quite peeved with him for not visiting since they'd first met, but he thought she deserved knowing she hadn't been forgotten.

He scanned the hall, and confirming that no one was around, walked in to the bathroom. He hadn't gone two steps before he saw something that gave him pause. He blinked once. Twice. Rubbed his eyes.

Still there.

He walked out of the bathroom. He took a deep breath and exhaled. Another. One more. He went back into the bathroom.

The body was still there.

It was a girl. A fifth or sixth year. He couldn't see her house badge as she was laying face down, but he did not recognize those wide blue eyes staring out at nothing as someone he'd met in Gryffindor. Her dark brown hair fanned out around her head, floating in a shallow pool of water around her body.

There was no blood.

There should have been blood. There had been blood last time. Bits of inside on the outside. On the walls, the floor, the photographs on the mantel. Blood on his shoes as he stepped closer to touch the smooth cheek still warm-

Her cheek was cold. There was no blood. This wasn't last time, but the girl was still dead. He needed to call the police.

Wait, there were not police here. No telephone to call them with. A sudden reminder that he was wizard and had no idea what he was doing. Who did you go to for help?

"Snape."

He walked briskly out of the bathroom and back the way he'd come. The door was still closed, and he knocked quickly before stepping inside. Snape favored him a rather unwelcoming look.

"I don't have a clue why your godfather doesn't write you back. Perhaps spending all day bashing heads with Greyback means he's finally forgotten how to read and write."

"There's a dead girl in the bathroom."

Snape blinked at him. He said nothing for a moment, frowning. Something seemed to occur to the older wizard, and he rolled his eyes.

"Yes, Myrtle's been dead for some time now. She hasn't been invading the boy's lavatory now, has she? That girl's almost as big of an annoyance as Peeves was."

"No," Harry said, evenly, "In the girl's bathroom."

"Why were you in the girl's bathroom, Mr. Potter?"

Ok, perhaps he should have prioritized his statements better.

"There's a dead girl in the girl's bathroom," he repeated. "I don't know who she is."

Snape's expression suddenly grew bored.

"Her name is Myrtle Tetherwood, Mr. Potter, just as I said. She is just another resident ghost of Hogwarts. Since you were so curious, you'll be happy to know you'll become well acquainted with her during your detention tonight when scrubbing out her toilets. I expect you at seven. Now go away."

"But- she's not- Myrtle isn't-"

"Mr. Potter, if you're not out of here in the next two seconds you'll clean every bathroom in Hogwarts."

He left. He went to the bathroom again. She was still there. Nothing had changed. Her unblinking eyes still regarded him dispassionately. Stepping forward, he stared down at her. There was nothing he could

do to help her. She was already gone and nothing could be done about that.

But he couldn't leave her here. How long had she been left here already? He had heard nothing about any missing students, but her skin was already cold to the touch. Someone had to be looking for her by now. Her friends had to be looking for her. He couldn't let them find her like this. He had to hurry and tell Snape, but how could he make the man listen? How could he say what needed to be said when he himself couldn't seem to move beyond that single statement of fact: There's a dead girl in the bathroom.

He tried to alter that statement and say it aloud. There's a dead girl in the bathroom and she isn't Moaning Myrtle.

"Nngh..."

He couldn't. Not when she seemed to be looking at him as if ready to did he say what needed to be said?

He knelt down, his hands trembling as he reached for her.

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Snape considered making good on his threat to have Potter clean every bathroom in Hogwarts. Technically, it had taken two and half seconds for the little snot to leave the classroom. It would serve the boy right if he not only made him clean the bathrooms, but let everyone in the school know why he was being punished. It would certainly take the wind out of Gryffindor's sails if it turned out that their star Quidditch player was some sort of closet pervert.

He dismissed the idea. Voldemort would not be pleased with such rumors circulating about his protégé. Besides, Potter was one of the best chances for his dueling club's success. He was doing rather well, and his stunt with McNair had garnered a lot of publicity. His own decision to not allow others to join until the next semester had given the club an air of exclusivity, a prestige that could only work in his favor when promoting his teachings.

Although it would be nice if the brat weren't so much trouble. He did not enjoy being a post office for his familial exchanges.

There was a knock on his door. Snape snarled, throwing down the papers he had been grading. He had no doubt who his visitor was. Potter hadn't been gone five minutes, and who else was dumb enough to stick around during lunch hour? Was he trying to infuriate him or was this all just apart of his natural charm?

He threw open his door, prepared to send the idiotic Gryffindor to clean every toilet in Hogwarts, the owlery, and the stables.

"Potter! What is wrong with-"

In the dim light of the corridor, he suddenly realized how pale the boy looked. Those brilliant green eyes stood out too vividly, conveying something he had been too busy being angry to notice before. Potter took advantage of his momentary hesitation, lifting his hand out to the older wizard. There, laying in Potter's trembling hand where his wand should have been, was a tuft of long brown hair.

"There's a dead girl in the bathroom."

This time, Snape knew what he really meant.

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Harry sat in an empty classroom, nursing a cup of hot chocolate. He'd overheard Madam Pomfry mention to a Court Sentinal that he was in shock and the chocolate would help. Perhaps it did, but he still felt cold, like he had just after his escape from the werewolves that summer. This was not a feeling he cared for, but he supposed it was better than the alternative.

A major freak out wasn't going to help anyone.

Someone had taken his statement earlier, while Snape had kept watch with a handful of vials in his robes should he suddenly realize

that he might just as easily have been killed and start to panic or cry or feel the need to hex something. Snape was gone now. Off to make sure the Headmistress didn't bungle the whole investigation. His words, not Harry's. Harry wondered if the man wasn't in shock as well, having let slip such a thing.

Now McGonagal was there to look after him. He was glad she was there. She'd reheated his chocolate twice for him already. While he looked into the foamy swirls in his drink, taking the occasional sip, she explained what was happening. That was something no one had bothered doing in the last three hours.

The dead girl was Cassandra Sweet, a fifth year Hufflepuff. She'd had potions during her first period that morning, and must have been killed shortly after class. All of the students and staff were accounted for, and there was no sign of any other victims. Classes had been canceled. Most of the school had been in the Great Hall during the lunch period, and it was decided that for safety's sake no one would leave it until the school had been searched and everyone was questioned. Chances were no one would be returning to their dorms that night.

When she seemed to run out of things to explain, she sat there and looked at him for a long time. He took a sip of chocolate and waited.

"Are you alright, Harry?"

Oh...Oh god, why did she have to ask that?

He suddenly wasn't cold anymore. In fact, the chocolate he'd been drinking made him feel too hot. It swirled around in his empty stomach, making him nauseous. He set the cup aside, and threw off the blanket he'd been given. He walked to the far end of the classroom, staring at the empty shadows and reminding himself he had to breathe more slowly. If he kept breathing so quickly, he was going to end up hyperventilating or worse, he might cry. He couldn't go upstairs while crying. Everyone would see him. They would always remember and they would never let him forget this day or the feeling that left him, although briefly, broken.

Besides, he didn't want to worry his friends. He was already worrying McGonagall.

"I'll be fine," he managed weakly, "When can I go up with the rest. My friends must be worried. Do they know what's happening?"

The elderly witch sighed, and smiled ever so slightly. James and Lily's son really was a brave child. Any other child his age would have broken down by now or else have lacked the heart necessary for sympathy. Such a brave boy, but she couldn't help worrying about him.

"I'm sure your friends have some idea about what's happening. Secrets don't stay secret long around Hogwarts as I'm sure you've noticed."

He smiled a bit at that.

"I'm not entirely sure how much longer they'll be. If you don't mind being alone for a few minutes, I can go and ask to escort you up now?"

"Yes... I'll be fine."

Once she was gone, Harry used the privacy to think. The shock had worn off, and now he was left with this feeling of dread. A girl was dead. Someone or something had killed her. The castle wasn't, if it had ever been, safe anymore. The Court was investigating, and he hoped they found the culprit, but what if they didn't? Myrtle hadn't ever found out... where was Myrtle? Surely, she must have seen what happened!

He made toward the door, thinking to call McGonagall back to ask her about Myrtle, but he never got the chance. The door slammed open and Lestrage stormed in. Harry took one look at the wand in her hand and leapt to the far end of the room. She smiled grimly at his retreat.

"Why am I not surprised that you're involved in this grim affair, Mr. Potter?"

Involved?

As far as Harry was concerned he wasn't involved in this matter beyond being unfortunate enough to find poor Cassandra first. He hadn't done anything wrong, and he didn't like her implying that he had. Particularly with a pair of investigators following right behind her.

"Nothing cheeky to say?"

"Cheeky," he said, glowering defiantly.

Her face twisted into something ugly, and she stalked over to him and seized him by the arm. Her grip was brutal, and he bit his lip to keep from crying out as she dragged him out of the room and into the hall. There were easily thirty wizards in official looking robes loitering outside the bathroom, many with notepads and strange looking instruments. They all stopped whatever they were doing to stare as he was forced into the girl's lavatory and thrown to the wet floor. Harry scanned the room frantically for the dead girl, but she was gone and only a glowing green outline on the floor marked where she had fallen.

He scrambled to his feet, backing further in as Lestrangle stalked in after him, followed by Snape and a greying wizard in even greyer robes that Harry assumed was the chief investigator. The Headmistress crossed her arms and stared at him expectantly. Now cold, wet, and with an aching arm, he felt no more inclined to obey her. He mimicked her stance and stared back at her, mockingly.

Lestrangle's grip on her wand tightened noticeably.

"Potter," Snape began tersely, drawing both wizard's attention. "In order to end this matter as quickly as possible, Sentinel Mallory here has requested the use of your 'special skill'."

Harry looked at Snape and then Mallory dumbly. How could playing Quidditch help an investigation?

"Parseltongue, you nitwit," the potion's master growled, pointing to the sink faucets with the ornamental snakes.

Oh, that special skill.

He glowered at the lot of them, but dutifully approached the sink. He leaned in close, studying the immobile fixture and briefly wondered what it was doing in the girl's bathroom anyway.

"Hey," he hissed. This close, Harry could see it's tiny silver eye open and turn to him. It's tongue flickered out to show he was listening.

"Did you see what happened to the girl over there? Did you see who killed her?"

Behind him, he heard a gasp, and figured it was Mallory.

"Which girl?"

Harry's eyes widened in horror. Which girl? There was more than one?

"Potter, what did it say?" Lestrangle demanded.

"There's another... another girl," Harry said, his voice faint and weak, not looking at her.

No one said anything, and after a moment he was able to collect himself enough to continue.

"The Hufflepuff girl who was laying on the floor. Did you see what happened to her?"

"It got her," replied the snake. "It got her, just like the other one. It got them both. Got the annoying one twice. Tee hee hee..."

Harry didn't understand what it meant. How could you get someone twice. Assuming get meant what he thought it mean. The only way you could kill someone twice was if the person was revived the first time or...

“Myrtle...”

“The King will be so pleased,” the faucet hissed as an afterthought, falling into its own version of laughter. It sounded a bit like it was choking.

“Please, don’t tell me a ghost did this, Potter. Especially not that little twerp,” Lestrangle said, sounding as if this was all a bad prank and not a murder. He glowered at her, but looked to Snape when he spoke. He may not like the man, but he trusted him somewhat and he seemed to be taking the matter seriously.

“Where is Myrtle? She would have seen what happened. She’d be bragging about it.”

Snape said nothing for a moment, then looked over at one of the bathroom stalls intently. Harry swallowed thickly, and walked slowly over. Lestrangle made an impatient sound.

“We brought him here to talk to the faucet, not run rampant around the crime scene. This is pointless.”

“No,” Mallory said, the first time Harry had heard him speak, “I want to see this.”

Harry’s hand was resting on the stall door, hesitating while he listened to them speak, unsure if he wanted to see this. But then they remained quiet, and he had no excuse to hold back. Gently, he pushed open the door.

Myrtle stared right through him, her face caught in a tableau of surprise. She would have looked rather funny if she weren’t so still. She was pale, or rather more transparent, than she had been before. She floated in the air, bobbing faintly, and looked as if she would move to yell obscenities at him any moment now for coming into the girl’s bathroom. He stepped back out of the stall and quietly closed the door.

“She’s not dead...” he said, without thought.

“Technically, she is... she’s a ghost after all,” Mallory informed him. “We think the culprit may have tried to exorcize her to eliminate witnesses, but didn’t perform it properly. She’s in a fugue state.”

Harry nodded, not really listening.

“Did the snake say anything about who did this?”

He thought for a moment, trying to make sense of what the faucet had said. He couldn’t make heads or tails of it, so finally just decided to repeat it and let them figure it out.

“He said an it got them, not a who. He said it got Myrtle twice. He said the King would-”

The rest of his sentence went unheard, though his lips kept moving. He paused, confused and tried to speak again, but nothing came out. He looked to the others, and noticed Lestrangle had her wand pointed at him, though he hadn’t heard her cast a spell. But Snape had mentioned in Dueling Club that some witches and wizards could do that. Why was she casting Silencio on him in the first place?

Mallory hadn’t seen her wand, and looked confused by his sudden cut off. He didn’t have time to figure it out as Lestrangle turned to him.

“I think the rest can wait until another time. Mr. Potter should really return to his classmates, and I must prepare for Our Lord’s arrival.”

Voldemort was coming back to Hogwarts?

Harry wasn’t certain how he felt about that. On one hand, it was strangely comforting having the formidable wizard looking over the school and keep the inevitable press at bay. On the other hand, the man would want to speak with him. Really, this constant misplacement of himself was bound to grate on Voldemort’s nerves eventually.

Mallory was protesting, clearly agitated with Lestrangle’s interference. While they were busy pulling rank on each other, Snape took him

lightly by the shoulder and led him away. Not knowing what else to do, he followed the man meekly and hoped for some sort of explanation.

As they moved past the score of wizards and witches milling about the dungeons and up the stairs to the upper levels, he began to feel the effects of the day's excitement. He'd missed lunch and had been in shock for several hours, and after the confusing and troubling events in the bathroom he was starting to feel exhausted. He let out an enormous yawn, still silenced by Lestrangle's charm, and felt his eyes droop.

Snape said nothing, but Harry knew what to expect next. As soon as they were out of sight and hearing of the investigators but before they had reached the Great Hall, he pulled Harry aside.

"Do not speak of what the snake said to you. In fact, I highly recommend you forget it ever occurred. There was a flow of water from the bathroom which you went to investigate and found Miss Sweetie. You then informed me and spent the day being questioned by investigators. That is as far as your involvement of this investigation goes. Myrtle Tetherwood doesn't exist. Is that clear?"

Harry simply nodded. This was his what? Second? Third? incident where he had been told to censure what he knew or had seen and heard.

There was a slew of information being given to him just by Snape's choice of things he wished him to keep silent about. He imagined it was somehow related to Myrtle and 'the King', who ever he was, but he was too tired to sort it all out at the moment or to consider if it was worth the trouble wondering about. Snape stared at him for a moment, assessing his willingness to cooperate, but finally lifted the charm.

"What happens now?"

Snape considered for a moment. "That is up to the Dark Lord."

Why wasn't he surprised? He sighed and followed Snape the rest of the way to the Great Hall. There were two wizards standing guard outside, and they regarded Harry and Snape suspiciously as they

approached but didn't stop them. From inside, Harry could hear the voices of many excited students and steeled himself. Snape opened the door for him, letting him inside but didn't follow. Harry watched the door close and wished he hadn't been left behind.

The tables had been removed from the Great Hall, but with so many students it was still too full. The houses were mingling without consideration, stopping to talk and gossip and make conjectures with whom ever would listen to them. He spotted a couple of Hufflepuff girls crying, and his heart ached for them.

Everyone was so loud and busy, no one noticed him and he slipped through the crowds trying to figure out what everyone knew or thought they knew. It soon became clear that they knew someone or someones had died. It surprised him somewhat that they all seem to think he was the one who'd kicked the bucket. There were already wild rumors that Ron Weasley had finally finished the job Whitehall and Morgenson had failed. Harry briefly caught a glimpse of the redhead hiding amongst a protective circle of Slytherins, clearly trying to avoid the accusations. Cassandra Sweety's absence didn't seem to register with anyone except her own house mates.

He searched the crowd, keeping to the dark corners of the Hall in hopes of finding his friends before the rest of the students noticed him. He spotted Clyde first, sulking in a corner and not talking to anyone. Though they hadn't been on very good terms lately, he decided to let the other boy know he was alive.

"Hey."

Clyde's eyes, which had been fixated on his shoes, shot up to meet unmistakable green.

"Har-!"

A hand over the boy's mouth quickly muffled his cry of surprise. He gestured to be silent and removed his hand.

“Harry,” he whispered, still awed by his sudden appearance, “Everyone keeps saying your dead. There are Court Examiners and Sentinals all over the place! What happened to you? Are you ok?”

“I’m fine, but someone has died. Where’s Hermione and the others? They’re probably worried sick.”

Clyde blinked several times, trying to wrap his head around his friend’s sudden resurrection. For the last two hours, when everyone’s insistence that Harry Potter was truly dead had finally convinced him, he had been absorbed in his own regrets. Looking back he realized what an ass he had been to Harry. The other boy had never done anything to him, had even befriended him and helped him with his school work. He’d been a good friend, and Clyde couldn’t say the same. So what if Harry hadn’t told him about his Parselmouth abilities? It wasn’t like he’d murdered someone!

But now Harry was back, raised from the dead, and he had come to him first. It might have only been convenience, but he’d been such a jerk lately and still Harry had come to him first to let him know he was alive. It made his past resentment feel ridiculously insignificant.

“She’s... she was here a moment ago. I think she saw McGonagall and went to ask her what was happening. I’ll help you find her.”

Harry couldn’t help but smile. Somehow he knew their past grievances had been forgiven, and he was glad. Together they scanned the hall for Hermione and finally located her near one of the side doors, talking earnestly with McGonagall. Ginny was standing closely behind her, chewing her fingernails nervously and clearly distressed.

They made their way to them quickly, Harry partially hidden behind Clyde so no one else would notice him. McGonagall spotted them first, and smiled in relief. Hermione turned quickly to see why.

She was pale and teary eyed, but she hadn’t cried it seemed. Not yet anyway. She broke out into a brilliant smile when she saw him, and quickly grabbed Ginny to point him out to her. The little redhead’s eyes became enormous.

“Harry!”

Instantly, the noise in the great hall ceased.

Over four hundred pairs of eyes suddenly landed on the most lively looking dead boy they had ever seen.

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Author’s Note:

Court Sentinel: Sort of like the Russian KGB and an auror combined. Their job is basically to make sure that wizards and witches behave themselves, but their job has some sinister implications.

Questions? Leave them in the review and I should get back to you in a day or two.

Chapter 29: Serpents at Play

Tom turned towards Harry the moment the Weasley girl cried out his name. He had spotted the younger boy the moment he entered the room of course, but had not wanted to alert anyone else to his presence until he was ready. Judging by the vaguely panicked look Harry was sporting at the sudden rush of students towards him, he clearly hadn't been ready yet.

Stupid Weasleys.

The girl was a useless little fool. The prefect was a pouncy fool. The twins were laughable fools, and no doubt proud of it. Even the single Slytherin Weasley was an irritation, suited for little more than being Draco's cronie. At the moment, Ronald Weasley wasn't even suited for that, cowering behind a ring of Slytherins who were not inclined to handing over one of their own to a presumptuous mob.

To hell with the lot of them. The only one Tom had been worried about was Harry.

He had expected something like this to happen eventually. He'd even callously tricked Cassandra to the lavatory to wash some imaginary potion's residue from her robes on the off chance that it would happen today. She was a muggleborn and a rather stupid one at that. She had the nerve to pass notes to him in class and even request a date within the last month, and though he'd stayed in character and declined her politely he had wanted nothing more than to...

The chances that she would have found...it... were fairly slim. It had merely been a way to take the edge of his annoyance. Indulging in an amusing possibility really.

He hadn't even conceived of Harry getting involved. The boy shouldn't have been near the girl's lavatory, except in passing on his way to lunch with his classmates. Could something have happened to draw Harry's attention to the bathroom? Had his beautiful pet been inside and lured the boy with a hunting song? Had it perhaps broken his orders and entered the corridors, finding Harry there?

A thousand possibilities ran through his head, trying to explain the absence of his young friend. All the while he cursed his carelessness. He knew Harry had potions three morning a week, so why hadn't he left express orders to his pet not to be out in the open during that time? If something happened to Harry, he didn't know if he could forgive himself. All he had wanted to do was protect and nurture him.

Precious Harry. Mother. Brother. Friend.

His only family aside from his counterpart.

Voldemort. Father. Brother. Ally... competitor?

But there Harry was, a little pale and flustered but perfectly alright.

He wanted to rush over to him, but the crowd was too thick and he refused to take part in a rabble. Draco was already near Harry. He'd question the young Malfoy later about what he learned, and then wait for his opportunity to approach Harry in private.

For now, he would have to content himself with Harry's continued health and plan for the ramifications of today's incidence. No doubt his elder would be summoning him for an explanation, and he had to prepare some reasonable replies.

His life was in greater danger than Harry's at the moment.

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Harry was surrounded. On all sides the four Houses of Hogwarts had crowded around to verify that he was, in fact, not dead. Once this was confirmed, they immediately set about shouting questions at him. They spoke all at once, repeated each other often, threw out conjectures, and demands until Harry couldn't tell what anyone was saying. He tried to find his friends amongst the horde, but older students had crowded round and blocked the shorter ones from view. He felt claustrophobic, unable to move as everyone demanded his attention with shouts and cries and tugs at his robes.

He was tired and hungry, and their demands made his constant underlying resentment for the majority rise to the forefront of his thoughts. A particularly overbearing sixth year Gryffindor came right up to his face.

“Who tried to kill you now? Did you get them first this time?”

The boy was bigger than him, at least fifteen kilos, but in the tight confines of the crowd he had no room to catch his balance when Harry punched him in the face. It was an awkward hit, as Harry didn't have much practice with fist fights, but the boy fell backwards into the crowd, knocking over half a dozen others. The space his fall left was soon filled with more students, and Harry panicked as he realized at least some of them had to be the older boy's friends.

“Contorno parete!”

The crowd was suddenly forced back two feet from him in all directions, again causing several students to fall over. Through the chaos, the Weasley twins stalked determined through the mayhem. Harry had never seen them look so angry, or angry at all for that matter. They were some of the tallest boys in the school, taller than most of the seventh years even and muscular from Quidditch. Their physical presence alone was enough to send everyone creeping away from them, but if that hadn't been enough their unusual animosity would have. Fred (George?) breeched the empty ring Harry stood in first, while his brother turned to the crowd to keep everyone else at bay.

“You alright, Harry?”

Harry closed his eyes, bringing his hand up to push through his messy hair. He took a deep breath and exhaled slowly.

“Don’t ask me that,” he said, his voice soft but clearly audible in the sudden silence. “Just... ask me anything but that.”

[illegible]

Voldemort entered Hogwarts shortly after midnight, and was met by a nervous Mallory. His temper was foul and he did nothing to hide it from anyone. His plans for organizing a wizarding army, something larger and more specialized than his private Court Sentinels or his former Death Eaters, had just gotten past the basic command structure and starting on actual personnel assignments, when he had received word of the killing at Hogwarts. That a child, even a muggleborn one, had died in his home was unacceptable. That the child had been murdered was just plain insulting.

As the details became known to him, the matter went from infuriating to something almost worrisome. Harry, his insufferably unlucky protégé, had been a witness of sorts and why did that not surprise him? He doubted the boy would intentionally harm let alone murder anyone, but his involvement was inconvenient. It was likely his parselmouth abilities would provide him with knowledge he would rather the boy remained ignorant of.

The location and circumstances of the girl's death was uncomfortably familiar. The basilisk still lived in the school after all. He had never considered removing it. It was a part of his ancestor's, Salazar Slytherin's, legacy to Hogwarts as well as important reminder of his misbegotten youth.

Speaking of misbegotten youth...

He stalked into his office and slammed the door shut in Mallory's face. Closing his eyes, he murmured the soft whisper of an ancient spell and felt his mind submerge itself in the corporal realm of his spirit. A dark and twisted place, interlaced with webs of brilliant reds and oranges and whites that held his rendered soul within his body. He 'moved' towards a web of red strands and carefully pulled a small section of them free so that he dripped ever so slowly out of the confines of his flesh. His mind, freed and immersed in a spirit form, flew from the tower unseen and undetected.

Through the halls, the classrooms, the secret passages he made his way towards the Great Hall where the energy of hundreds of souls, and one familiar soul in particular, resonated. Moving through the walls was like moving through a curtain of water, but once inside he

had to be cautious. It was crowded and he had no intention of alerting the students of his presence. Luckily, it was unlikely they would be able to understand who or what he was, and even less likely to acknowledge him as most of them were fast asleep.

The entirety of Hogwarts was sheltered within the confines of the Great Hall, like the refugees of The War he had since assimilated into his society or scattered years previous. Rows of bodies packed tightly together, reminded him of the fields outside the camps where they'd lined up the corpses of their allies and enemies and innocent bystanders to eventually be claimed by their families or incinerated with a few flicks of the wand.

He shimmered, sending the memories away like a dog shaking water from it's coat. Hogwarts was home, and though he remembered the battles and the struggles with fondness and a sort of dark thrill, he recognized that they held no place in his home.

He stopped briefly near McGonagall, observing as she paced quietly between the rows of students, all four houses, and seemed to count each and every one of them. In a dark corner, he felt Snape watching her and everything else, aware of everything (almost) in the room even without moving. Good. These two fierce guardians were more than enough to safeguard the students for the time being.

He circled the room, searching for Tom, his most likely suspect, but found Harry first and couldn't help but linger. The boy was sandwiched between the Weasley twins, while Granger slept across from him, the tops of their heads pointing towards each other. He recognized several of Harry's friends sleeping around him, most with their wands in their hands, like somnolent guards to an equally somnolent prince.

Despite their protection, the prince was clearly troubled. He was pale and restless, clutching tightly to his blanket despite the heat of the surrounding bodies. His brow was furrowed and every so often Voldemort thought he heard the faint hiss of parseltongue. It made him wonder what Harry had seen and if it had damaged the boy some how.

He felt a sudden rush of anger at the thought.

Harry was his. No one's, not his friend's or teachers' or Greyback's or Tom's, but his. No one else had a right to hurt him in any manner without his consent, and he would make this known to any and all transgressors.

He found Tom amongst the older Slytherins, his back to Snape and staring into the darkness. His eyes slid immediately to Voldemort's wandering spirit, and after a moment he closed his eyes. With that, Voldemort left. There was no need to explain himself. Tom would find him as soon as he was able to slip away unnoticed, which more than likely wouldn't be until the morning.

It was just as well. Voldemort wasn't sure he would be able to hold off from breaking the boy in half at the moment.

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Harry and the rest of the students were woken at the ungodly hour of six o'clock in the morning. Disoriented and sleepy, they were herded to their respective common rooms and finally to their private dorms in order to prepare for the school day. Most of the other boys in his dorm went immediately to their beds to sleep for another hour, but Harry reluctantly dragged himself to the showers. Clyde followed him quietly, and Harry admitted to himself that he was glad for the company. He didn't think he'd want to be alone for a while.

He was a bit surprised to find all his friends awake in the common's room when he headed down. Hermione and Ginny were sitting next to each other at one of the tables, going over Ginny's homework while Fred and George were talking quietly to Percy, who for once wasn't checking his pockets every thirty seconds. There were a few other students, mostly prefects and habitual early raisers, but they lacked their usual energy and purpose. The room was held in the quiet suspension of a funeral parlor.

"Harry, Clyde," Hermione said, beckoning them over. "Did you finish your herbology essays?"

Harry felt a rush of relief when she didn't ask how he was feeling. He had told them Snape's pre-conceived story, and though Hermione seemed to suspect something was amiss she hadn't prodded. He knew that it was only a matter of time though. She knew him for a perpetual, if not exactly habitual, liar and he doubted any event she was not present for wouldn't be cause for thorough cross examination. He didn't resent her for it, but it wasn't something he was looking forward to.

"Do you think we'll even have classes today?" Clyde asked, sounding hopeful. Hermione glared at him.

"They might cancel potion's class for a few days, but I don't see why they'd stop us from going to our other classes."

"But," Ginny said, her freckles more brilliant than ever against her pale skin, "isn't that a bit dangerous? I mean, there's a murderer running around the school!"

"We don't know that," Hermione said firmly. "We still don't know for certain how Sweetie died. Harry said himself that he couldn't tell what happened to her, only that there wasn't any blood. It could have been a magical experiment gone wrong or an accident or who knows what? Even if there was a murderer, what are the chances they stuck around?"

"I don't like it," Clyde said, "It sounds like a Killing Curse to me no matter how you look at it."

"Don't, Clyde. There's going to be a million rumors running around as it is, there's no point in adding to the collection. I mean look what happened yesterday? Everyone thought for sure Harry was...was... I was scared to death for him, but he's fine!"

Certainly better off than Cassandra, Harry thought morosely, scanning his DA&D book incase they had a quiz that morning.

“Percy says the match against Hufflepuff will probably be cancelled,” Fred said, plopping glumly beside Harry at their now over crowded table.

“Dueling Club practices too,” George said, dragging over another chair. “I bet they’ll be canceling all extra curricular activities until they catch who ever did it.”

“We don’t know anyone did anything!” Hermione insisted, although no one looked at all doubtful that foul play was involved.

Having offered nothing to the conversation so far, Harry made a feeble attempt.

“Classes?”

“Percy says the prefects will be escorting the younger students between classes and meals. There’ll definitely be a curfew, but at least we’ll be able to sleep in our own beds,” Fred said.

“That’s good,” said Clyde, “I don’t fancy sleeping on the floor again. I think I got a crick in my neck from last night.”

The conversation turned to trivial complaints after that, and Harry tuned it out in order to read through his textbook. His friends formed enough of a barrier to keep most of Gryffindor from bothering him, and he sat quietly amidst his human sanctuary until it was time to head down to breakfast. Everyone had been brought to the Great Hall at the same time, and with the addition of the tables it made the hall as crowded as the Welcoming Feast, but still depressingly quiet. All of the teachers were present, as well as several Court officials standing guard at the entry ways. There was a chair at the teacher’s table where Voldemort normally sat when at Hogwarts, but it remained conspicuously empty.

Harry was relieved to note that the press hadn’t clawed their way into the school yet.

Food appeared on the table, and Harry ate on autopilot, ignoring the probing looks of his schoolmates. He finished quickly and was surprised when Snape came up behind him.

“Come with me, Mr. Potter.”

The man walked off without further explanation, and looking to his friends Harry saw they were just as baffled as he was. Sighing, he gathered up his things and followed after the potion’s master.

He felt the eyes of the entire hall mark him as he exited.

It didn’t take long for Harry to realize where Snape was leading him.

“Voldemort is in the castle? He summoned me?”

“The affairs of Hogwarts have always been of great interest to our Lord,” Snape said, not bothering to look at his young charge. “The same might be said about your affairs, as well, Mr. Potter..”

“ ... ”

The Dark Lord was sitting behind his desk when they arrived at his office, his hair slightly mused as if he hadn’t slept and therefor hadn’t fixed it that morning. The stacks of reports on the man’s desk seemed to support this theory. Mallory was sitting anxiously in one of the sitting chairs and regarded the new arrivals tiredly. Snape escorted him to the empty chair closest to Voldemort, and then took up his usual position near the bookshelves in order to watch the proceedings.

The Dark Lord studied Harry intensely for a moment, making the boy fidget self consciously.

“Mallory, you are excused.”

The Court investigator looked ready to protest, but quickly bit his tongue and got up to leave. His eyes lingered suspiciously on Harry for a moment before he disappeared through the secret entry way.

"I am pleased to see you are undamaged, Mr. Potter," Voldemort began, regarding him coolly.

"... Thank you?"

Voldemort sighed, tired and already impatient. He decided it was best to get their meeting over with as soon as possible lest he do something regrettable to the boy.

"Let us get straight to the point. I am going to legilimens you, and I would prefer if you tried to relax and not struggle. It is easier to find the memories I'm looking for in this manner, and avoid those memories that are... personal and unrelated. Do I have your cooperation?"

Harry scowled at him. Voldemort scowled back.

"A girl has died here, Mr. Potter. At the moment, you are the prime suspect. Believe me when I say this is as much for your benefit as my curiosity."

Harry grit his teeth, and got to his feet. Voldemort gestured to a spot on the floor right in front of him, and Harry reluctantly complied. He knelt before the Dark Lord, who gently but firmly took his head in his hands and locked their gazes. Harry tried to relax and call up the memory of the day before, but his own mind struggled against the recollection, escaping the pain and horror of that moment which so resembled a day over four years ago.

"I can cast Imperius to calm you, if you like," Voldemort offered, skimming only lightly at his surface thoughts, testing the waters for a deeper plunge.

"No," Harry insisted, "Just do it."

There was an immediate pressure, not exactly painful but Harry felt himself jerk at the initial shock of it. His previous experience with legilimency was a pale comparison to this forced intrusion, a tsunami rather than a gently rising tide. The first wave of memories was of this morning, and his mind reluctantly gave way to the previous evening;

the anxious feeling of being surrounded by too many curious bodies, of the punch to the fifth year boy, and the eery silence of the walk from the dungeons to the Great Hall.

Anything before that his mind resisted, choosing instead to jump around to random moments of time. The day Natalie approached him by the Whomping Willow. The first Christmas party with the Dursley's. A hot summer day at the lake, water up to his knees and a fish eyeing his feet curiously. Voldemort watching him from the VIP section of the stands during his first Quidditch match. Sitting in his mother's lap as she pointed to the sky, a hundred hot air balloons in a hundred different colors floating by.

The pressure increased, forcing his mind back towards the shallows of recent memory. Tom on the train, smiling at him. Sirius's letter. Finding out his Quidditch robes were now an inch too short at his first practice. Ron's half transfigured glove running away like a mutant crab during last Monday's classes.

A sharper pain, and suddenly he was alone outside the girl's lavatory recalling he hadn't visited Myrtle in a while. From there his thoughts flowed out linearly, retelling the event each painful moment at a time. Harry felt a mixture self-depreciation and nausea at his own bungling upon discovering Cassandra and the cold feeling of shock soon after. As he came to the part where he questioned the serpentine faucet and found Myrtle, he was struck by how dangerous these discoveries seemed to him now. He had forced the memories out of his mind the day before, but now Voldemort wouldn't let him discard them, forced him to recall and analyze the moment in excruciating detail.

"It got her. Got her, just like the other one. It got them both. Got the annoying one twice. Tee hee hee..."

A moment later

"...King will be so happy..."

An earlier memory forced it's way through, this time of Inana standing erect on the dueling platform her hood flared in anger, but her words calm.

“Princeling. King’s little princeling... sweet tongued child... No, no, little princeling would not treat Inana this way.”

Princeling... if Harry was the princeling, then the King would have to be-

The pressure receded abruptly, leaving Harry lightheaded and dizzy. The hands on his head were the only thing that kept him from falling over. Carefully, his head was guided downward until it rested against Voldemort’s knee, and one hand removed itself while the other stroked his hair. Harry remained still, gasping for breath and staring out at nothing. His world was spinning, and he tried to reorient himself and determine what he should do with this earth-shattering revelation that the man he was currently resting against may have some how been responsible for Cassandra’s death.

“Careful, Harry,” Voldemort hissed, almost affectionate, “Your thoughts are running into dangerous territory.”

Harry shoved himself away from the man, forcing himself weakly to his feet and back towards his chair. He leaned against it heavily, but refused to sit down to face the Dark Lord again. From the corner of his eye, he saw Snape make a step towards him, then hesitate. He looked towards his master, and though Harry couldn’t see what Voldemort did, Snape stepped back again.

“What now?” Harry managed at last, still not turning around.

Voldemort’s reply was smooth and innocent.

“Now? Now you go to class, Mr. Potter. This matter should be resolved shortly.”

“And Cassandra Sweetie?”

There was a pause.

“There’s nothing that can be done for the late Miss Sweetie, aside from the usual ritual. Her foster family has already been contacted

and will arrange her funeral. There will be a memorial service this Sunday so that her friends and classmates might attend and pay their respects.”

That all sounded distinctly unsatisfying to Harry. There was another pause.

“I did not harm that girl, Mr. Potter,” Voldemort said matter-of-factly. “Why would I? I have more important things to do than terrorize school children.”

Harry glanced back at him cautiously, and after a moment he nodded. It was true. There was no conceivable reason why the Dark Lord would hurt a student. But there were many things about what happened that suggested this had happened before with Moaning Myrtle, so for whatever reason the ghost had died must likewise be the reason why Cassandra had. It didn’t necessarily have to be a reason that made sense now if had made sense when Myrtle had been killed. When had the bespeckled girl died again?

The Dark Lord mentally sighed. He could practically see Harry’s thoughts rushing around in his head, though the boy was careful to avoid direct eye contact. He was inclined to cast Imperius on the boy or even perform an obliviation, but he ultimately decided to leave him alone. Harry would need his wits about him for the next couple days, and running around in a daze was likely to arouse suspicions.

“Severus, escort Mr. Potter to his first class, and then report back to me,” he ordered, turning back to his paperwork. He wanted to speak with Snape about what he should do about Potter, but there was another matter he needed to attend to first that required privacy.

The two wizards were gone less than a minute when the portrait of Salazar Slytherin above his desk suddenly turned black, then rippled. Tom practically slithered out of the inky substance, black globules sliding away from his face, his body, his robes reluctantly. The moment he was free the picture solidified again, Salazar flicking a bit of black goo from his robes the only sign of what had occurred.

Tom moved to the chaise by the window, unwilling to sit in the chair across his brother's desk like a child waiting to be scolded by the school disciplinarian. They regarded each other coolly, with twin looks of expectation. Voldemort, however, had the benefit of age and the patience it allowed him. Tom broke the silence first.

"You wished to speak to me?"

"What have you done Tom?" Voldemort hissed, parseltongue turning his already dangerous tone lethal.

Tom glowered back at him.

"This is NOT my doing. I would never be so careless or obvious!"

Voldemort sneered.

"And I suppose you were framed? By whom? Potter?"

"Of course not! No one knows who I am to bother with framing me. But you have the right idea. I think who ever did this is trying to frame Potter."

Now that gave the Dark Lord pause. That hadn't occurred to him. Tom was not reckless enough to unleash the basilisk, as his guilt would be instantly obvious... but only to Voldemort and only because he was a Parselmouth with knowledge of the Chamber. Yet the only parselmouth anyone at the school knew about was himself and... Harry.

A list of people was already flitting through his mind who might hold a grudge against the boy. Slytherins were a jealous lot by nature and the attention he had been giving the Gryffindor was more than enough reason for many to feel resentment, coupled with the boy's Quidditch victories, his popularity with two of the prettiest and richest girl's in his class, and his obvious magical talent and it was rather surprising more attempts hadn't been made to damage the boy's reputation before now.

Lestrangle was at the top of the list, as she knew of the Chamber and was clever enough to find a way inside without using parseltongue. He'd brought several Death Eaters down there just before taking the school to perform various dark rituals and the Lestranges were of course among them. She also had an intense hatred for the boy that he had not overlooked.

Yet there were flaws in that idea. Releasing the basilisk to kill students, even if he had never suspected her, would reflect badly on her ability to run the school and she had been desperate to maintain her position as of late. Unless she had meant to kill Harry and make it appear as if the basilisk had done it, and then kill the basilisk in its lair to prevent the truth from being revealed...

Or it may have been one of the students, acting under their own volition or imperius to break into the chamber and steal the many valuable artifacts and lay the blame on Harry...

Could someone have been using Harry to open the Chamber and accidentally let out its guardian, then tried to cover it up by altering Harry's memories? Harry's thoughts had been a bit odd and disjointed, but that could easily be explained by shock or shoddy memory spells equally.

Then again it might just be Tom fucking with him.

There was only one way to find out. There was, after all, another witness who also happened to be the weapon. Muchalinda.

"Get back to class, Tom, and keep your ear to the ground. If what you're suggesting is true, then it won't take long for the rumors to start. I want to know everything they are saying."

"As you wish, my Lord," his counterpart hissed mockingly, rising to his feet with serpentine grace and disappearing back through the portrait once again. Voldemort stared after him for a long moment.

"I don't remember being that much of a prat..."

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In case you're not sure Muchalinda is the basilisk, named after a giant cobra and king of the Nagas (Hindu deities that resemble serpents). Ironical, since Muchalinda is known as a benevolent deity; said to have protected Buddha (and the tree he happened to be meditating under) while he was reaching Enlightenment during a storm.

Any Questions? Leave them in the comments section and I should get back to you within a day or two! Otherwise, have a great weekend!

Chapter 30: The Prince and the Second Quest

The Chamber of Secrets was as beautiful and mysterious as he remembered it. A strange mixture of natural geology and human design; symbolic of an age when practitioners of magic were less apt to differentiate the two. It brought a powerful longing in Voldemort, a nostalgia for a time he had never known yet dreamed of constantly. It had been before Christianity had completely smothered the pagan rites and beliefs of the people, and muggles newly pressed in the idea of monotheism, still held an instinctive fear of something other than the devil.

But he was not here to pay homage to the ancient past nor his ancestor who had made the chamber itself. He was there to find Muchalinda, and so far he wasn't having any luck. He had called to him three times, and though the great serpent was powerful, it would never knowingly defy him. It was gone, and it seemed to have been gone for a while.

The secret entrance from the girl's lavatory was undisturbed, and his questioning of the serpentine faucet/gatekeeper had proved frustrating but not completely fruitless. The chamber had been opened from the inside, meaning whoever had let Muchalinda out had to have entered from the only other secret passage that led here. With neither the gatekeeper as witness nor the guardian present to answer his questions, there was no way he could be certain who had let Muchalinda escape. It did, however, eliminate an Imperius-ed Harry as a possibility since the other entrance was located in the forbidden forest. His choices now seemed limited to only those Death Eaters he had revealed the second secret entrance to over a decade ago. No one else could have known of it and the magical contract binding them to secrecy would have kept it that way.

That eliminated Snape as a suspect, as he hadn't needed to bring the potion's master to the chamber in order to infiltrate the school. He had already done that on his own as a new teacher. Not that he had ever seriously considered Snape. MacNair would have been in class... yet he loathed to drop him as a possible suspect. Lestrangle was capable, but without suitable motive. The six or so still living Death Eaters who knew of the place had to be considered as well. His

minions may have done well for themselves after the war, but he had left more than a few disgruntled enough to pitch a hissy fit in the form of terrorism.

Or Tom really was involved.

Tom had no resources and no conceivable motivation, but he was clever. Clever enough to orchestrate a death or two without leaving a clue and clever enough to hide (or destroy) his weapon of choice afterwards.

He should know. He had killed his father and grandparents before graduation and never been accused. He had killed a lover too. And her other lover. And that pick-pocket from Knockturn alley... or had he only maimed that one?

He shoved aside his useless meanderings and headed towards the exit. There were no clues left to be found here, and he was expected back in Bristol later this afternoon. He had just enough time to inform Lestrage and Snape of what he found or rather didn't find, and perhaps lay a few spells where he felt it warranted.

Time would tell if the threat had passed, disappearing into the unknown with his precious Muchalinda.

Some how, he doubted it.

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Cassandra Sweety's funeral was held on Saturday, and only a few of her closest friends had been permitted to leave the school to attend. Harry was not counted among them. The memorial service Voldemort promised was that Sunday, which Harry did attend.

The service was held in a section of the castle Harry had never been in, which was a pity since it was very beautiful. The ceilings were high and vaulted, with equally tall windows on either side, letting southern light streamed in through most of the day. Gothic arches and columns decorated the chamber and divided the room into partitions, elegantly

drawing a person's eye's upwards to the ceilings, inlaid with golden lief in patterns Harry vaguely recognized as Greek Orthodox with a heavy Islamic influence. Harry wasn't certain if the room was meant to be a church per se, as the only religious icon he recognized was a sort of cross inlaid with runes standing over the memorial altar which easily could have been removed, but it resembled the inside of a cathedral enough to give a divine aura to the place.

The Hufflepuffs had been hard at work preparing for the service, Harry could tell. The room was laden heavily with white and yellow flowers, of many varieties from lilies and roses to marigolds and baby's breath. There were gold banners, not with Sweetie's house crest, but her adoptive family's hanging above them in two rows of six.. Hundreds of white candles in long golden candlesticks glimmered from the dimness of the upper inner sanctum, forming a series of perfect half circles around an altar. The altar was so heavily laden with flowers that you couldn't see the altar underneath, but the framed picture of Cassandra Sweetie was clearly visible from the top.

In her frame, Cassandra giggled and flitted in and out of view so that only one part of her face seemed visible at any given time. A twinkling blue eye. The teasing curve of lips. A wisp of wavy brown hair. Every so often she'd pause and pull back and you could see her entire face, and her hands twiddling with her yellow and black scarf.

Harry thought she looked like a very playful and happy person. The sort of girl who would have done well with children and the elderly. But there was no way of knowing now.

Standing amongst the flowers and the candles and the golden banners, Harry felt like little more than a ornament himself in his own glistening white robes. They were merely his school robes transfigured white, much like everyone else's as no one had thought to bring their funeral robes to school, but they seemed so strange to him. Beside him, Hermione who also dressed in white, looked ready for a marriage rather than a funeral. Draco was somewhere in the crowd of white, but with his pale skin and hair he had all but disappeared. Almost the entire school was there, either out of real sympathy or sense of obligation, from the Headmistress all the way down to the Sleuw's.

"In the wizarding world," Hermione whispered, "White is the color of death, not black. It symbolizes purity and a return to the divine light."

Harry supposed it made more sense than black, which he supposed seemed like a symbolic return to absolute nothingness. Still, in the part of him that still thought as a muggle, all this white seemed farcical for such a somber occasion. Especially since the entire school had seemed in a such a gloomy mood.

The Hufflepuffs were of course, hit the hardest. It wasn't uncommon to have one of the girls spontaneously burst into tears during a lesson or a meal, often dragging a few of their classmate's into an emotional fit in the process. The rest of the time they were withdrawn and quiet, avoiding the company of other houses in favor of clustering together in comforting circles.

Slytherins, which were hardly known for their sympathetic side, were more than likely mocking them behind the closed doors of their common room, but in the open halls they remained respectfully reserved with a few exceptions. A few of the more mean spirited boys and a petty Millicent Bulstrode made the mistake of mocking Cassandra Sweet's former boyfriend, Cedric Diggory, throwing out suggestions that he had knocked up the girl and then killed her to keep from taking responsibility. None of his mockers were in Dueling Club, and if they had been they would have known better than to torment the Captain of the Junior Varsity team.

Diggory received a week's worth of detention for what followed. Many thought he got the worst of it, but Harry had seen the Slytherin's leaving Snape's office after the event. The shame in their eyes and the bright red hand print on their cheeks seemed a greater punishment than polishing trophies by hand to Harry.

The Ravenclaws took it mostly in stride, though a few who had the girl in their study group seemed genuinely upset by her absence.

Gryffindor was handling things the worst in Harry's opinion. Gryffindors were witches and wizards of action, not contemplation, and death was something none of them could really do anything

about. But they tried anyway. There was a great deal of talk about finding the culprit and making that person pay, but it was mostly talk. Harry himself had been interrogated for clues several times, but he had started replying only in German after a while and then cursing them in Parseltongue shortly after.

There were a few whispers about his involvement in Cassandra's death, but after last year most were still stinging from their misjudgment of him and avoided such rumors.

Harry wasn't sure how long their guilt would hold off their need to blame someone, namely himself. Hermione had warned him that since he was well known, he automatically fell under more intense scrutiny and that made him vulnerable to baseless accusations. He didn't know what he would do if that happened. Being unpopular because of a mistake he'd made was one thing, but being accused of murder was something else altogether.

At least the Hufflepuff's didn't seem to be entertaining that nonsense. He had talked with several of them as they had gathered for the memorial service. Their honest grief over Cassandra touched Harry, and the pained look in their eyes when they asked whether it appeared she had suffered in her last moments inclined him to answer them as he hadn't anyone else, not even Hermione.

"She looked a little startled. I think she died before the surprise had even worn off. There was no pain in her expression."

The girls all cried. Every single one of them. A few of the boys too. Diggory had nodded once, taken a deep breath and thanked him.

The memorial service lasted an hour and a half. A few teachers talked about what a hard working student she was, her determination, and the regret that she wouldn't go on to aid the wizarding world with her strength and her character. Her friends talked of less grand things. Of study groups where there was more laughter than actual studying, where comforting a friend had meant more than studying for an exam, and smiles even when things didn't go as planned or perhaps because they didn't.

Afterwards they all walked by her memorial, laying down cards and more flowers and trinkets. Harry hadn't known her, but feeling a strange connection to her, had drawn a picture of a lark for her. One of her friends had said it was her spirit animal.

For the first time since the murder that Wednesday, Harry wanted to be alone. Unable to leave the common room like the rest of his House until Monday morning classes, he had to settle for pulling the curtain around his bed and casting a silencing charm.

Secluded in his new, smaller world consisting only of his bed, the surrounding darkness, and the sound of his pocket watch ticking softly, Harry lay thinking for a long time.

"There really is nothing else I can do for her, is there?" he asked himself, recalling his last conversation with Voldemort.

Cassandra was gone and there was no bringing her back.

But... God, how many times would this happen? Girls dying in that bathroom. Had it happened before Myrtle? Would Cassandra eventually return as a ghost to haunt the bathroom in Myrtle's place? And what about the bespeckled ghost? Being already dead, the chances were she was only paralyzed or stunned or in some sort of stasis. All these things could be undone, given the right spell or incantation or incense. Would she eventually be unparalyzed, exorcised and evicted from the castle, or hidden away like an unwanted painting? Had she been removed from the school already? Should he risk Snape's attention by asking?

No.

Hell no.

But how could he...?

The faint ticking sound suddenly grew louder in his ears. Of course! He pulled out his watch, and climbed out of his bed. Several boys were startled by his sudden appearance but he didn't offer any

explanation, instead retrieving what he wanted from his trunk before scurrying back into his small sanctuary.

He cast a lumos and studied Voldemort's gift. The golden band glistened in the light, a shade brighter than his golden watch. He had been meaning to try it out all year, but hadn't found a suitable target or place to test it on. Slipping the band over his watch, he observed with rapt attention as it glowed white for a moment and then shrank to surround the face.

The hands of the watch, which had indicated it was fifteen minutes til dinner, suddenly moved. The short hand pointed towards Harry, while the long hand pointed towards three. Harry rotated the watch, and the hands changed time but always pointed in the same direction. It took him a moment to realize that the long hand pointed North by default, like a compass, and the short hand always pointed towards himself.

"Where is Myrtle Tetherwood?" he whispered, half a afraid of the answer. The long hand twitched, and then slowly rotated counterclockwise until it reached the number seven. There it stopped. It was pointing further into the castle. Harry grinned.

At least he knew Myrtle was alive...er... not gone anyway.

Now all he had to do was get to the library and figure out what was wrong with not knowing was intolerable. It may have be pointless, but he needed to know what really happened. He needed to know it would never happen again.

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Opportunity presented itself that very night, without Harry having to do a thing.

Clyde had timidly invaded his 'fortress of solitude' when it came time to go to dinner.

"Hey, mate. You hungry?"

Truthfully, he wasn't, but he no longer felt like being alone. He had an idea, a project of sorts that he thought his friends might be interested in helping him with. Now if only he could get them alone long enough to ask them.

"Come on then, Clyde," came Percy's authoritative voice, "There's going to be an announcement at dinner, so everyone is expected to attend. That includes you, Mister Potter!"

"Yes, your Majesty," Clyde muttered, earning a little smile from Harry.

They met Hermione in the common room, already packed with students lining up to be escorted to the Great Hall. She gave Harry's still white and now rumpled robes a disapproving look before muttering a couple of spells.

"Honestly, Harry, you really need to read the book I gave you for your birthday. I can't be doing your laundry every day."

He just smirked. Truthfully, he had read half of it already and it was good, but he tended to skip the sections on 'domestic housework'. He'd lived in his Aunt Petunia's fastidiously clean house for years and it had sort of turned him off of anything that resembled a chore... However, there was another book she had wanted him to read that he was more interested in at the moment.

"Hermione, do you still have 'Hogwarts; A History'?"

Clyde looked horrified. "Bloody hell mate, she just forgot about it this year and you have to go and remind her?!"

She favored him with glare, leaving him cowed, before turning her intrigued eyes to Harry. "I'm way ahead of you, Harry."

Looking to make sure no one was watching them, she pulled the aforementioned book (albeit shrunk to the size of a match box) from her pocket and showed it to him then quickly put it back before anyone else noticed. Harry gave her a surprised look. She rolled her eyes.

“Oh, come on, you think I wouldn’t do a little investigating of my own? This entire thing is too weird.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

Harry couldn't help but wonder if Hermione wasn't still harboring some resentment for the secrets he kept, and this wasn't a way for her to find some of her own. He hoped she realized they weren't nearly as much fun as people made them out to be.

She didn't look resentful.

“Well... you seemed pretty out of it for the last couple of days, and with everyone bothering you about what you saw, I figured you wouldn’t want to deal with it for a while if ever. I mean... it’s not like you’re obligated to. Might even be better if you didn’t, what with everyone from my godfather on up to the Dark Lord breathing down your neck. But since you came to me, well... Merlin almighty Harry, there are some things I’ve found that I just have to show you! It’s incredible!”

“Alright, alright! Calm down,” Harry insisted, noticing that a few people were noticing Hermione’s excitement. “We’ll talk about it later... privately.”

Clyde was looking utterly confused and after a moment a bit angry too.

“Do I get to join this little talk about this thing of which I have no idea what you’re babbling about, or does this ‘private’ party have a two person limit?”

Harry smirked. "Come if you want. Just know you'll probably have to answer to Voldemort if we get caught."

“What?!”

[illegible]

“Why’d I have to open my big mouth?”

“What’s wrong with you, Clyde?” Ginny asked, passing him a basket of rolls. The youngest Weasley didn’t often sit with the second years, feeling a bit naive surrounded by veteran students and her newest crush to boot, but there had been some rather offensive rumor-mongering amongst her fellow first years and she had decided to sit with Harry to demonstrate exactly what she thought of that. Honestly, as if Harry Potter would ever hurt anyone! McNair didn’t count, since that was self-defense in her opinion.

“Ignore him,” said Hermione, trading Harry’s hot potato for a salad, much to the boy’s consternation. “He’s just crying over spilt milk.”

Ginny wrinkled her freckled nose.

“Is this about that first year Hufflepuff? Cathy Ratchet or something? ‘Cause honestly, Clyde, she’s kinda of a nit. Nice, but a nit.”

“It’s Cathy Wicket, and she’s not a nit. Just because she actually acts like a real girl, doesn’t make her stupid. Jeez, you could use a few lessons from her!”

“Next time I want to know many times to flutter my eyes or who the most eligible sixth year is, I’ll remember that!”

“Calm down, both of you,” Hermione scolded, turning to Harry who was prodding his salad with his fork. “Aren’t you going to say anything?”

“I hate salad.”

She rolled her eyes. “Anything useful?”

“I like potatoes... with sour cream... and butter... and cheese...”

“Harry!”

“Well... it’s useful if you want to give me my potato back.”

Hermione rolled her eyes, while the others were now distracted enough from their argument to actually laugh. She was half way through her lecture on the importance of a good diet, especially for a boy as physically active as Harry with his Quidditch and Dueling Club activities, when Lestrangle drew the student's attention by tapping her glass. The resulting chime spread rang like a great bell through the hall, silencing all conversation.

"Good Evening, students," she began, looking the most relaxed she had since the term had started, "I have some good news. After a thorough investigation, the culprit of last Wednesday's heinous crime has been discovered."

Excited murmurs erupted from every table. Harry and his friends shared cautious looks of suspicion and hope. Lestrangle tapped her glass again to draw back their attention, completely unperturbed by their interruption.

"As I was saying, it turns out that this unfortunate incident was not in fact an act of murder by a wizard as so many have come to believe, but the result of an animal attack."

More murmurs, this time rather disbelieving. Who had ever heard of a student being attacked by an animal in Hogwarts? (Outside of Care of Magical Creatures and occasionally DA&D, of course).

"Now, now children, I think it is important that you remember that the school is built beside a very dangerous forest with some of the greatest populations of magical creatures in Britain," the Headmistress chided, "Upon examining Miss Sweetie, it was found that she had been bitten by an arachnid, a very aggressive and very venomous breed of spider. A nest was found in some of the vents and destroyed, and additional wards have been set up to destroy any spiders that may have escaped. Hogwarts is once again safe."

A great cheer rose up through the students, and even the Hufflepuffs looked happy or at the very least satisfied. Harry, however, wasn't. Lestrangle was lying and he knew it. There was no way a spider,

however venomous, could have harmed Myrtle. Hermione nudged him with her elbow.

“Clap, Harry,” she said, smiling stiffly and applauding with everyone else. “We know she’s full of it, but we don’t need to let her know we’re aware of that.”

Reluctantly, Harry joined the others cheer, although if anyone had seen his ‘smile’ they would say it looked more like he’d swallowed something sour. Discreetly, he searched the Hall for anyone who doubted the Headmistress’s words as much as he did. Snape was sitting quietly, neither smiling or applauding, but staring out at the students contemptuously. He moved his gaze along before the man spotted him, found McGonagal looking as reluctantly cheerful as he felt, and McNair grinning a bit too much, likely amused at what he knew was a lie. He found the Slytherin’s table next. Draco was applauding politely with the others, although his expression was neutral. There was no telling if the Malfoy heir believed his aunt’s words or not. Natalie just looked bored, seemingly regretful that all the excitement was coming to an end. Ron... looked constipated... moving on...

Tom.

The fifth year boy was neither smiling nor applauding, but regarding the Headmistress with a thinly hidden veneer of disgust. Harry felt his smile become a bit more real as he realized there was at least one other who questioned what they were being told. He turned back to his own table looking for the Weasley twins. Fred and George were taking the excitement as an opportunity to slip something into Percy’s pockets, while the other was distracted. Harry shook his head. He’d just have to ask them point blank later.

“Yes, yes,” Lestrage said, preening under the applause as if it were meant for her, “This is all wonderful news, but lets settle down. I have a few more announcements.”

Everyone took their seats and stopped clapping, but there was still a dull roar of pleased murmurs. The Headmistress continued.

“Since the school has once again been secured, I am allowing the continuation of extra curricular activities, unsupervised movements between and after classes, and the resumption of Hogsmead Weekends. The Gryffindor/Hufflepuff Quidditch match will be held next Saturday, and the Ravenclaw/Slytherin match will be bumped to Sunday. All other matches will resume as scheduled.”

Another resounding cheer rose through the Hall, leading to such a racket that Lestrage could say nothing more and resigned herself to her seat. She sparred Snape a smug look, but the potion’s master looked less than impressed with the mess of rampant students she’d left in the wake of her announcements.

Harry, Hermione, and Clyde took the flurry of activity to gather up a bit of dinner and leave the Great Hall for their common room. There were half way there when Ginny caught up to them.

“What’s going on? Why did you guys leave?”

The three shared anxious looks.

“Ah... the library,” Clyde stammered.

“What?”

“Oh! Yes, we’re heading to the library,” Hermione picked up, “We haven’t been able to visit since Friday and it was so crowded we didn’t get anything done! We want to get started on the essays we didn’t finish before everyone else gets done with dinner.”

Ginny’s expression was clearly doubtful. She looked shyly to Harry.

“Sweetey wasn’t killed by a spider, so we’re going to try and figure out what did,” he said bluntly.

“Harry!” his friends protested in unison. He glowered back at them.

“If there’s something killing students wandering the halls of Hogwarts I think she has the right to know.”

There wasn't anything they could say in protest to that. Ginny looked curious.

"O-oh... I wondered... C-can I help?"

"Can you keep it a secret?"

"Harry!"

"Secret? Why I don't know... I've never had any secrets before," the younger girl said, laughing nervously as if she'd made a bad joke and knew it. Harry grinned.

"Okay, then."

"Harry!"

"The more who know the truth, the better," was his only response. "It makes it that much harder to kill."

Hermione's expression stated clearly that she didn't agree.

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Snape left dinner early to take refuge in the dungeons. Dinner was always a circus with that many children crammed that closely together in the presence of food, but tonight it was particularly rowdy. He understood their exuberance, but must they all act like screeching monkeys with bananas? At least his Slytherins had kept relatively well behaved, speaking just loud enough so that they could hear each other over the din from the other tables.

Many of his snakes hadn't seemed inclined to talk at all. Draco, he knew, was suspicious. Smart lad, his godson. So was his new student Thomas Rook. Also a smart lad... unnervingly so. Rook had integrated himself into Slytherin hierarchy in record time, charming and manipulating his classmates and teachers with the ease of an experienced politician, and his ambitions for more were apparent. At least to Snape.

He had seen the boy observing Harry Potter during meal times on several occasions and Draco had mentioned Rook's curiosity regarding the Dark Lord's 'favorite student'. His godson's words had suggested the interest was more carnal than political, but the young Malfoy was young enough to confuse the two... many adults still did. It was possible the interest was both. In any case, Snape felt the boy worth watching.

Someone had to protect Potter, after all, and Lestrage clearly wasn't going to cut it. She wasn't even going to make an attempt to protect the rest of the students. Her removal of the staff's safeguards and the state of complacency she had now lulled the little nitwits into was beyond reckless in his opinion. It was unforgivable.

The situation was strange enough to Snape to warrant a repeat incident, a further teasing. It didn't matter if their Lord hadn't been able to find the basilisk. In fact, that was even more worrisome. Lestrage seemed convinced the culprit who had unleashed the snake had destroyed it afterwards. Voldemort hadn't done anything to dissuade her of this theory, but to Snape it was obvious that whoever had done it wasn't targeting Sweetie or Myrtle. They were either an accident or the beginning of a very disturbing trend.

Voldemort had already left the castle to return to Bristol, leaving Lestrage with the acromantula story and Snape with explicit instructions to remain alert and protect Potter, suspecting that the boy might somehow be a target. Snape was less convinced, but the little Gryffindork had disappeared immediately after Lestrage's announcement with his goddaughter and some friends, and he couldn't help but wonder if they weren't up to something.

Perhaps Potter had simply wanted to warn them. Officially, Snape would have to object to the uncovering of one of the Dark Lord's many lies, but at the same time he was pleased Potter was opting to protect Hermione, and Draco by proxy. He was fond of those three...two, he meant two!

Just as likely, Potter was letting his curiosity get the best of him, thus risking Hermione, and Draco by proxy. Then he'd have to roast the little fool on a spit and feed him to the basilisk... or Rook.

He was going to have to find out soon if he wanted to keep all of them out of trouble.

Mentally, Snape sighed. When and how had he ended up playing father for Hogwart's most troublesome?

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Just a reminder:

DA&D stands for 'Dark Arts & Defense'. It's like DADA, accept it includes actual Dark Arts in the curriculum, not just how to defend against it.

Chapter 31: The Hunt

"They blamed an acromantula last time this happened," Hermione said, handing over 'Hogwarts: A History' to Harry. The four of them were gathered in at the far end of the library, surrounded by a silencing charm. They had selected a couple of books on hexes and dueling, so that if anyone should question their secretive behavior they could say they were studying for matches against other Houses in Dueling Club. No one else had come up from dinner yet, but Madam Pince was eying them suspiciously.

"What do you mean, 'the last time this happened'?" Clyde asked, looking over Harry's shoulder at the article.

"According to 'Hogwarts: A History', another girl died in the exact same manner as Sweetie did, and in the exact same location, almost fifty years ago," Hermione explained.

"Oh! Moaning Myrtle! I've heard about her from Patricia York. She says she's a right menace, what with flooding the bathroom and screeching at anyone who enters," Ginny let out excitedly. "If that's the case, then we can just ask her what happened right?"

"Who the heck is Moaning Myrtle?"

"She's a ghost of a first year who haunts the girl's dungeon lavatory," Harry said.

"Gross! Who could take a leak with a dead girl floating through the stall?"

"Clyde!" Hermione scolded, but then tilted her head in concession, "Well, I suppose that's pretty accurate. No one really goes in there because she's pretty up-in-your-face as soon as you step inside. But she is a gabber. I bet she'd tell us what happened-"

"No."

All three looked at Harry, surprised.

"What? You think she'd tell someone we asked her?" Hermione asked.

"No, I mean it's impossible to ask her. She's been... I dunno what's been done to her, but the investigators brought me back into the lavatory, I found Myrtle in one of the stalls. She looked like she'd been frozen in place. She just sort of ... floated there with this vacant expression on her face. Can you curse a ghost?"

"Wait, why didn't you say this before?" Ginny asked.

"Ginny, I'm sorry to say that just about half of everything I say about what happens to me has been edited for content. Voldemort and Snape keep the scissors."

Ginny shuddered.

"Well...ah... that's a clue at least, right? I mean, who would know how to curse a ghost?"

"Snape," offered Clyde.

"No," Hermione cut off pointedly. "I don't think there are any spells you can caste directly on a ghost. You'd need special equipment or incense or incantations. Really, it would have been a lot easier to exorcise her rather than ... suspend her. But that's a clue. We should start looking up things that could do that to a ghost. Maybe we can figure out how it was done and then figure out who or what could have done it."

"Or perhaps we could just find a cure and ask Myrtle directly," Harry offered.

Everyone looked rather interested in his idea for a moment, but then Hermione sighed.

"No, they've probably exorcised her by now. She would have been proof that an acumantula hadn't killed Sweetie. They would have hidden her at the very least."

Harry pulled out his watch and grinned.

“Thankfully, I’m a master at ending up exactly where I’m not suppose to be.”

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“I’m going to kill Potter!”

Tom looked up from his book, ‘A History of Serpents and Magic’, to observe Draco Malfoy storming into the Slytherin Commons Room. He was followed shortly after by his little band of cronies and the Cypher girl, all with varying degrees of agreement. Tom mentally rolled his eyes. Draco’s frustrated and often ambiguous friendship with Potter was infamous among Slytherins, and resulted in many speculations on his true feelings towards the Gryffindor.

The most common were as followed: Draco was secretly in love with Harry, but would never admit it. Draco was secretly in love with his adopted sister, and hated Harry because he was competition. Draco wanted Harry to marry his sister Hermione, and was frustrated when he did stupid things to muck that up. Draco hated Harry, but kept him as a friend because of his influence with the dark lord. Draco hated Harry, and was pretending to be his friend so he could destroy him later.

Tom was of the personal opinion that Draco both admired and envied Harry, and hated himself because of it. It didn’t really matter to Tom. He didn’t intend on letting Draco remain in Harry’s sphere of influence for much longer, and the boy was still young enough not to pose a real threat. He turned back to his book, fully prepared to ignore the Malfoy heir but his next words drew his attention back.

“Some one died, and Potter’s already meddling and dragging my sister along with him! I swear the next dueling practice I’m knocking his head clean off his shoulders! It’s not like he uses the silly thing!”

“Draco, you’re being paranoid,” Natalie said, sighing, “They went to the library, not the dungeons. I bet your sister dragged them up there to study.”

“With Ginny? She doesn’t have any of the same classes as them!”

Natalie shrugged. “For Dueling Club then. Maybe just to talk about what’s happened. If they have a half a knut worth of sense between them then they don’t believe Lestrangle’s load of dragon dung about spiders anymore than we do.”

Ron paused, mirroring Crabbe and Goyle’s looks of confusions. “It wasn’t really a spider?”

The two blonds rolled their eyes, and continued to stalk up to the second year dormitories. Tom pretended to read his book for another fifteen minutes, then got up to head to the library. If what Draco suspected was right, then Harry was setting himself up for trouble.

An intervention might be in order.

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Harry and his friends spent almost four hours in the library researching ghosts and old newspapers regarding the death of Myrtle Tetherwood. There was a lot of material about the ghosts, less so about Myrtle.

“I can’t seem to find anything about her in the newspapers,” Hermione lamented, “There seems to be some missing around the time of her death, but there’s no way of knowing if they were removed before or after Sweetie’s. But it does suggest that they’re connected some how.”

“Yeah, and I doubt a spider went around stealing newspapers,” Harry said, before turning to his book, *Dealing with the Dreadful Dead*.

“Maybe McGonagal would know,” Ginny suggested, “She would be about the right age to attend Hogwarts then, wouldn’t she?”

Hermione shook her head. "She'd never tell us, if she even knows. She probably thought it really was an acromantula, like everyone else at the time anyway."

The bookish witch turned suddenly thoughtful.

"It's weird though, that both girls were killed in that bathroom. I mean, if it were an animal or a person, what are the chances of them killing someone in the same place?"

"Well," Clyde said, taking the opportunity to close his book on exorcisms, "that depends. If I were an animal or homicidal wizard, where would I be most apt to kill anyone I met?"

Everyone turned him expectantly. He grinned and rolled his eyes.

"It's obvious. It'd be the place where I wouldn't want anyone else but me to be. My secret lair."

"In the girl's bathroom? What kind of lair is that?!" Ginny protested.

"Wait," Harry interrupted, "Clyde might have something there. It might not be the bathroom itself, but perhaps there's a secret passage in there. There's secret passages all over the school, especially in the dungeons. They say no one's ever found them all. Perhaps Cassandra and Myrtle both found it, and accidentally set off a trap of some kind. Maybe a curse or a poison... or a guardian."

There was a tense moment of silence as they digested the possibility..

"If that's the case, and they accidentally released a guardian to some secret passage... then I bet the Dark Lord knows about it," Hermione finally continued, "That's why there's this big cover up. That's why they're blaming it on something as ridiculous as spiders. They want to keep it a secret."

"But what if it really is a spider," Clyde suggested, "What if the acromantula was the 'guardian'?"

"I doubt it," said Harry, "A spider wouldn't have been able to bite Myrtle. Besides, I've talked to Myrtle before. She said she saw a pair of big yellow eyes just before she died. I think spiders have six or eight or something like that."

"Harry! Why didn't you mention that before?!"

"Sorry, Hermione, I kind of forgot about it, really."

"Hold up a sec. When did you go into the girl's bathroom before? Why did you, for that matter," Clyde asked.

Harry turned a bit pink around the ears. "I got sick after potions last year, and ran into the first bathroom I could find. I still don't know where the boy's bathroom is down there. But that's really not important right now!"

Hermione sighed and closed her books.

"I think we should call it a night."

"What? But we've just started making progress!" Ginny protested.

"Hardly," Hermione said tiredly. "We've only got a theory, and one that's going to require us getting a lot more books about things other than exorcisms and ghosts. I think we need to decide whether we want to pursue finding a cure for Myrtle first or start investigating a secret passage theory before we continue. Let's head back for now. I need to talk with Draco and I still have to study for next Friday's History of Magic quiz."

Ginny and Clyde agreed, but Harry lingered.

"I'm just going to see if I can find some old maps of Hogwarts. It might prove useful if we're looking for a secret passage or a hidden ghost. I'll meet up with you all at dinner."

"Alright, Harry, just don't get carried away. And be careful!"

"Yeah, those paper cuts can be deadly," Clyde laughed. Ginny smacked him upside the head. They disappeared somewhere beyond the book shelves and Harry cancelled the silencing charm. Now he could hear the faint sounds of library activity, pages rustling, vague whispers, and the light creak of old wood. Pulling his watch from his pocket he whispered 'Hogwart's maps' and let it lead him to the far end of the library, where he found himself looking at the locked gate to the Restricted Section.

"Well, damn."

"You should be grateful for the locks, Mr. Potter. Your curiosity in that room will kill more than just a cat."

Harry jumped, dropping the books he'd been carrying and spun around to see Snape looking coolly down at him. Mentally, he let out a groan. Just the person he didn't need to see. From the other end of the library he could see Madam Pince glowering over at him, and he avoided her accusing gaze as well as Snape's by gathering up his books.

"Nervousness is a sign that a person is up to no good, you know," the potion's master drawled.

"Or that someone else is up to no good," Harry muttered back, then glowered at the man, making a point to look just above his head as he did so. There wasn't any reason to take chances.

"Ah, perhaps," Snape conceded generously, but snatch up a book from amongst those he was carrying. He read the title and raised a brow at Harry, who was now blushing. "'The Anatomy of the Spiritual Body'. Found religion, have we?"

"It's not about religion, it's about metaphysics," the Gryffindor bit out, taking the book back.

"I don't recall metaphysics being apart of the second year curriculum, Mr. Potter."

“Personal interest, Professor. Detentions have been rather low this semester.”

Judging by Snape’s expression, the older wizard clearly didn’t believe him, but he let it go for the moment. He pulled a letter from an inner pocket.

“This will likely be of personal interest, as well. If you think you might put aside your meanderings on your inevitable demise for a few moments, you might like to know you’ve received a letter.”

Now Harry’s interest was definitely perked. His mail, as far as he knew, was handled completely through owl post with the exception of ...

“Sirius.”

“Yes.”

Harry reached up to take the letter, but Snape grabbed his wrist with his free hand, and pulled him forward so the older wizard could hiss in his ear.

“I would like to take this opportunity to remind you that these letters are a privilege for both you and your mangy godfathers, and so can be taken away if either of you behave poorly. Poor behavior includes, but is not limited to, meddling in affairs that do not concern you and lying to your guardians. I trust we have an understanding?”

The man’s grip was incredibly strong, and Harry knew he could snap his arm without hardly trying. Worse, perhaps, was the fact that he had the power to uphold his threat, severing the last chances Harry had at family. Reluctantly, he looked Snape in the eye.

“I understand, Professor.”

Snape held his gaze for moment, but there was no pressure or the slithering feeling of a foreign presence in Harry’s mind, and finally the potion’s master released him and handed him his letter.

“Good. I trust we will not require a repeat of this conversation.”

Harry’s gaze fell to his shoes.

“No, Professor.”

Snape nodded sharply and turned to leave. He made it all the way to the end of the first row of shelves, before pausing. Harry was afraid he was going to say something else to him, but instead he turned to towards another row of books.

“Good evening, Mr. Rook. Studying hard, are we?”

There was a pause, and a very reluctant response.

“Yes, Professor.”

A wave of humiliation washed over Harry. Had Tom been there through Snape’s entire visit? Had he seen him spook at Snape’s sudden appearance? Had he heard his godfather’s name? Snape’s threat? Had he seen Harry’s pathetic submission? He didn’t know, but whatever Tom saw or thought he did, Harry didn’t want to be around to face the older boy’s questions or pity. He quickly slipped down another aisle, left his books with Madam Pince, and escaped to the hallway.

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Snape kept his eyes on Rook, but listened closely to Harry’s retreat. Rook hadn’t spoken, and the potion’s master suspected he was listening as well. He was glad he had decided to deliver Harry’s letter here. It had originally been his intention to wait till after Monday morning Potions, but the abrupt appearance of Sirius Black’s belated letter provided him the opportunity to sate his curiosity on Harry and Hermione’s activities in the library. He had learned two very important things from the excursion.

One, the Gryffindors either weren’t investigating after all and were pursuing stranger hobbies involving ghosts or they had devised a

theory that had absolutely nothing to do with basilisks. Both circumstances meant he didn't have to worry about them discovering the truth about Sweety (and really, what was the truth?), but still meant he would have to watch to make sure they didn't get involved with different kind of dangers altogether.

Two, Rook really was interested in Harry. Perhaps even stalking the young wizard. That was something he was going to have to list in his next report to Voldemort. It might provide him with sufficient reason to perform a background check on the mysterious boy. Failing that, it would at least reassure the Dark Lord that he was being vigilant in his duty regarding Potter, and perhaps even further validate Snape's importance at Hogwarts.

Every little bit helped.

He smirked at Rook. “Your diligence to your academics is commendable, Mr. Rook. So many students become distracted in their free time. I am glad to see that is not the case with you. After all, with your late admittance to the school, it is important for your future university to see how well you acclimated to student life at an institutional level...”

Every little bit helped.

Rook's expression was cool and neutral, but the lack of his usual confident smile, told Snape his threat had been received and given appropriate significance.

“Yes, Professor.”

“Well, then I will leave you to it. Don’t stay too late.”

With that he strode out of the library, gracing Madam Pince with a wicked smirk. The strict librarian blushed inexplicably and turned away from him to sort through the books Potter had left on her counter.

[illegible]

Tom watched Professor Snape's withdrawal, thoroughly flummoxed. Fifty years ago, he could not recall a single wizard who had been able to see through and out maneuver him with the exception of Albus Dumbledore.

And Severus Snape was no Albus Dumbledore.

Not yet anyway.

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Harry practically ran out of Hogwarts. Or at least the castle. He had hidden his letter in an inner pocket upon entering the school corridors, and then headed straight for the green houses. After his initial embarrassment of Tom witnessing Snape's reprimand, he was filled with excitement and anxiety over his godfathers' letter. He had been waiting for so long, he didn't want anyone to disturb him while he was reading, friend or foe, and went to one of the most private places he knew.

No one but Professor Sprout and Harry used Green House number three, and Harry only went there to visit and care for Inana. The highly venomous cobra lurking amongst the greenery was more than enough of a deterrent to curious students. Inana had an understanding, via Harry, that Sprout was there simply as a humble servant to keep the illustrious Queen Inana's abode suitably green and lush and should thus be ignored completely when ever she came or went. Sprout assumed Harry had simply commanded Inana to leave her alone.

As if he could command a snake to do anything it didn't want to do. Convince, perhaps, but never command.

So he knocked on the green house door, and then slipped inside. Inana was curled up sleepily in one of Sprout's tin tubs, and hardly gave him any mind. He found a large, upside down pot he used as a chair, and made himself comfortable. He took out his letter and began to read.

Dear Prongslet

Firstly, sorry we couldn't write to you sooner. I left a dead fish in Loki's bed, and the twerp threw such a hissy fit, I wasn't allowed to write for a while. He deserved it, I swear!

Harry rolled his eyes, but smiled. Why was he not surprised? Incredibly relieved, but not surprised.

Secondly, don't worry about being a parselmouth. Your father told me once that your great-grandfather was one as well, but never told anyone outside of the family. He was also a Gryffindor, and a very kind and decent man. Don't let anyone hold this talent against you.

A surge of joy fill him. It was a family trait! A gift passed down the Potter line, perhaps the descendants of Slytherin, but obviously the black sheep of that particular family. And Sirius and Remus knew and didn't care! Thank Merlin! Thank God!

Of course, we could have told you this if you had bothered to mention it before you managed to run off and started setting cobras on dark wizards. You do know you made it into Wizarding Weekly again, don't you?

Eep. So that's how Voldemort knew to send Umbridge.

Judging by McNair's short vacation to St. Mungo's, I take it you won that duel. Congratulations. We're so proud of you. Or I am at least. Remus was puttering around like such a girl. 'Oh, poor Harry, he must have been terrified!' 'What if Harry was hurt? What if he's mentally traumatized for life?!' I was more worried about you actually joining a club taught by Snivillus. Are you mad?!

Well, if you are, welcome to the club.

Harry grinned, and continued to read.

[illegible]

Harry's good mood lasted all the way until Wednesday. Sirius' letter had been long and pleasant and such a relief. Despite all the bad things that had happened, he couldn't help but feel things were starting to take a turn for the better. The only down side to receiving it had been Snape's threat. Hermione and Draco had also received a little 'talk' after potion's class on Monday, and though Hermione hadn't told them what was said he had a pretty good idea. The potion master's scrutiny had temporarily halted all research in the library until they could think of a more discreet way to search.

It likely wouldn't have mattered anyway, as everyone seemed much too busy catching up with school work and missed club activities to spare much time. His Quidditch team was in a fierce competition with their rivals for time on the pitch, and Harry found himself dragged off for practices at a moment's notice at the oddest times. During lunch break, just before breakfast, and half an hour before sunset were just a few examples of his quirky practice schedule. Clyde had taken to bringing Harry and his adoptive uncles snacks and meals they missed because of it. The boy chalked it up to 'showing House spirit' by supporting the team, but Harry was touched by the gesture nonetheless.

It was during one of these meal runs that Wednesday evening, that Clyde came upon his friend being given an unusual assignment by Oliver Wood.

"Angelina's late," the captain said. "She probably didn't get the message or something. I want you to go back to the castle to see if you can find her, kay Harry? It's almost sunset and not good light for practicing with the snitch, even with an illumination charm, so after you do this you can skip practice. Kay?"

"Sure," Harry agreed, albeit reluctantly. As much as everyone seemed to value his Seeker's skill, they still tended to treat him like the part-time towel boy he'd been last year as punishment for flying without permission during his first flying lesson. It was rather annoying.

"Come on, Harry!" Clyde urged, "Let's eat at the table for once. You remember the table right? The food actually stays hot there and they serve dessert!"

Harry smiled and followed his friend back to the castle. Taking out his watch he said Angelina's name, and observed as the long hand pointed down an empty corridor.

"That's weird," Clyde said, "There's nothing down there but the Hufflepuff's dormitory."

"Hold on, let me check something."

Harry turned the watch upright and watched as the long hand started to angle upwards.

"She's on a higher floor. I think it's pointing toward the library or near there. Come on."

"What's she doing in the library? It's already dinner time. I thought the only girl crazy enough to choose a book over food was Hermione."

"You can ask her yourself when we find her."

The halls were mostly empty, with only a few students and teachers heading down to the Great Hall, until they reached the fourth floor which seemed entirely deserted. A distant flash of lightening drew their attention and after a moment the distant rumble of thunder could be heard.

"Looks like practice will be cancelled anyway," Harry lamented. "I hope Wood lets them off soon enough to avoid getting rained on."

Clyde remained silent. Glancing over at his friend, Harry saw that he wasn't paying him any attention at all, but looking further down the hall. He followed Clyde's line of sight and jumped in surprise as another round of lightening cast a figure in blinding white and darkest shadow. The light faded almost immediately, revealing Angelina, looking down at what appeared to be a make-up mirror.

“Angelina!” Harry called, but she didn’t look up. He frowned and moved forward, but Clyde grabbed him by his arm.

“Something’s not right.”

Their wands were in their hands instantly, a special flick of the wrist Snape had taught them in Dueling Club that they hadn’t thought they would ever need to use in the halls of Hogwarts. They scanned the surrounding hall, found it empty, and slowly moved forward.

“Angelina?” Harry tried again, but she remained motionless.

“I don’t like this, Harry.”

“Me neither.”

At last they were beside her. There was still no response. Cautiously, Harry reached out to touch the underside of her neck.

“She’s alive, and still warm. She must have been cursed.”

“Do you think she’s been petrified?”

“Maybe, but not the kind we learned in Quirrell’s class. It kind of... She looks kind of like Myrtle did...”

They shared a telling look, and spun around to scan the hall yet again.

“What do we do?” Clyde asked.

“I’ll stay here and guard Angelina. You go to the Great Hall and find some teachers.”

“But what if it comes back?”

“That’s why I can’t leave Angelina alone. She’s can’t defend herself like this.”

“But Harry!”

“Go! The faster you get someone the better.”

The other boy hesitated, clearly torn about leaving his friend alone and finding help for Angelina. Realizing he couldn't convince Harry to come with him, he finally bolted back towards the stairs and out of sight. A distant roll of thunder drowned out the sound of his shoes on the stones.

Alone in the hall, Harry tried to calm himself. Angelina wasn't dead. This was a bad school prank. The Slytherin team trying to sabotage Gryffindor's practices. A finite incantatem later, and she would probably be fine. He would try it himself, but McNair's warning against applying counter-curses without knowing the actual curse hadn't been forgotten. Madam Pomfrey or Flickwit or even Snape would know what this was, and a simple incantation or a bad tasting potion later and everything would be back to normal. He swore he was going to cream Slytherin in their next match.

“Bloody hell, Potter, what did you do?!”

Harry spun around, his wand ready with a curse to defend himself, but he hesitated. Ron Weasley stood at the end of the hallway, his wand in one hand and accusatory glare on his face. Suddenly, Harry realized what this must look like to the other boy.

“Bullocks.”

Chapter 32: The Hunt

“Expelliarmus!”

“Refutia! Knock it off, Weasley. You’re going to hit Angelina!” Harry snapped, after fending off the third disarming spell Ron had thrown at him.

“Ha! Says that bastard who cursed her!” Ron snarled, “What she do, Potter? Turn down an offer for a date? Is that what happened to Sweety? You’re a sick bloody fucker! Rofendio!”

“Refondae! I didn’t do anything, you stupid twat! She was like this when I got here!”

“Sure, just like Sweety was just lying there when you found her too! Sorentia! Peticio salenco! Porinarde desticia!”

Harry could only recognize the first two hexes, and with no time to caste a counter curse and figure out the third, he caste his strongest blocking charm. The spells smashed into it at once, causing his shield to trembled violently until they dissipated or veered off harmlessly into a wall. His arm tingled in the aftermath.

“Oh, bugger off, you flipping muggleborn-hating little Nazi. Clyde went to get-”

The spell that hit him, smashed him sideways into wall. He fell to the ground and was unable to move, too stunned to understand what had happened. Ron had been in front of him, looking for an opening for his next hex that hopefully wouldn’t hit the still frozen Angelina, and what ever had hit him had definitely come from behind but he hadn’t heard a curse.

“What is the meaning of this?” came an angry, feminine voice.

For an instant, Harry though Clyde had managed to find McGonagall, but his heard sank as he managed to roll over weakly and look up at the fuzzy outline of Madam Umbridge scowling down at him. He closed his eyes and let out groan.

"I caught Potter hexing... whoever this is," he heard Ron say, and suspected he'd thrown in accusatory pointing for dramatic affect. Another familiar, and equally unwelcome voice joined in.

"That true, Potter?" McNair snarled.

Oh, wonderful. Two of his worst enemies (and a very annoying toad woman) gathered in one spot, and him having already lost his wand.

"No," Harry said, not bothering to pick himself up. If they intended to curse him again, he wasn't going to give them the excuse of self defense. He would lay there and wait for Clyde to show up with a real teacher and straighten this all out.

"Liar!" snarled Ron, "I was coming from the library, and saw him with his wand pointed at that girl."

"I didn't point it at her," Harry grumbled, still not bothering to get up or look at any of them. "I had my wand drawn in case who ever cursed Angelina was still around. And shouldn't you be trying to fix her? She could tell you exactly what happened."

There was a moment of silence, and Harry had to physically swallow 'nitwits!' before he earned himself another curse. There was some shuffling about, and someone toed him sharply in the leg.

"Do get up, Mr. Potter," Umbridge twittered, "You're a student of Hogwarts, not a drunken vagabond. Please behave accordingly."

He sat up, but didn't try to stand. He felt dizzy and still shaken from the attack. Making himself comfortable against the wall, he searched the corridor for his wand but realized it was useless. He'd have to find his glasses first. A catch twenty-two situation. He couldn't find anything without his glasses, and it was the glasses he needed to find.

"What's wrong with her?" he asked, waiting for his dizziness to pass before starting his blind groping.

"Silence, Potter," McNair hissed.

"I don't know, Professor, I think he asked a very good question."

"What are you doing here McGonagal," growled McNair. "You should be at dinner supervising the rabble."

"I am where ever my students need me most, Professor," came the cool reply. A moment later, the witch's fuzzy silhouette knelt before him. Gently, she set his glasses on his face. His vision cleared... mostly, and he offered her a weak smile. She smiled back and helped him to his feet, before turning her disapproving glare on the other two. "Clyde Hoffman came to me reporting that one of my Gryffindors had been cursed, and that Harry Potter had remained behind to guard her. I see it was good that he did. I can't imagine what might have happened to a paralyzed girl left unprotected with the three of you roaming the halls."

"Now Professor McGonagal, do try to consider this situation from our point of view," Umbridge said, looking not the least bit contrite. "Two students casting curses in the hall and a third already paralyzed! Such extreme behavior can not be tolerated!"

Yet another voice joined the verbal battle, this one as smooth a silk noose.

"But clearly it can be mimicked. What is going on here?"

"Potter cursed someone else!" Ron spouted quickly, determined to take credit for the discovery.

"Weasley, shut up," Snape muttered. "The grownups are speaking. McGonagal?"

She repeated what she had said before, then added, "I found Potter slumped against the wall and his glasses on the floor. I think it's best I take both children to the infirmary."

Snape nodded, dismissively. "Of course. They're from your house after all."

Madam Umbridge, unable to let any opportunity to condescend pass her by, protested.

“Now we must not act hastily. This is not a mere hex! A more thorough investigation must be conducted!”

“I told you what happened!” insisted Ron, earning him another ‘shut up’ from all the teachers. The potion’s master sneered at the toady woman with enough condescension it was a miracle the woman wasn’t drowning in it, then turned away from her to stand before Angelina. He snatched the compact mirror from the frozen girl’s hand and tossed it at Umbridge.

“It should be fairly obvious what happened. A spider did it.”

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Starring across the infirmary at the still statuesque Angelina, Harry somehow doubted her condition was caused by a spider. He had watched Madam Pomfrey pattering about the girl for almost half an hour, neither moving or speaking lest the medi-witch take note of him and close the privacy screen around the paralyzed girl. McGonagall had stayed only long enough to be sure her students were taken care of before escorting Clyde back to the Great Hall, informing them that Harry would have to stay the night in the infirmary while she went to inform the rest of the school of what had occurred.

Harry would have liked to know what had happened as well. Snape had said it was a spider, but what did a spider have to do with Angelina’s makeup? And if it was the same ‘spider’ that had killed Cassandra Sweetie, why was Angelina still alive?

It had to be a clue. An incredibly important clue, but Harry didn’t know what to make of it and frankly he wished he had gotten it without someone else getting hurt. Would Angelina recover or remain like she was forever? Somehow that seemed even worse than death.

His disturbing thoughts were interrupted by Professor Snape’s entry. He spared a warning glare for Harry, before casting a couple of

charms. Harry felt himself suddenly go deaf and the privacy screen around his bed slid closed around him. He didn't dare try to counteract the spells with Snape still present, even though he felt his insides squirm with curiosity over the potion master's and the medi-witch's conversation. Did Pomfrey know what had really happened? If Snape lied to her and she believed it was a spider, would Angelina not receive the proper treatment and never recover?

Only a few minutes had passed, when both spells were suddenly lifted and Harry could see and hear them again. Madam Pomfrey was looking a bit disgruntled, but encouragingly less frantic than she had before. Snape... looked like typical Snape.

"I trust that blow to your head hasn't stolen what little remained of your wits, Mr. Potter," the wizard said, moving towards him.

"He's quite alright. Just a mild concussion," Pomfrey insisted, then flicked her wand at Angelina. "Muscolo distendasi!"

Angelina's previously immovable form suddenly went limp, landing half way on the hospital bed. Displaying years of experienced nursing, Pomfrey quickly and easily maneuvered the girl into a more comfortable position before she spelled the screen closed. Harry guessed she was getting Angelina ready for bed, and pointedly looked elsewhere. His eyes immediately found Snape.

"Will she be alright?"

Snape pulled up a wooden chair, transfigured it into something much more comfortable, and sat down. Harry thought it didn't bode well for him if this very ill-tempered man was settling in for a nice long chat.

"You will be pleased to know Ms. Johnson will make a full recovery..."

The young Gryffindor felt the knot of anxiety in his stomach uncoil.

"... in about five months."

Err... well, at least she'd recover. She'd probably have to take the entire year over again, but that was a small price to pay for being

alive and without any permanent damage. Although what the Quidditch team would do without her he didn't even want to consider.

"Why so long?"

"She will require an antidote that will require very peculiar and very fresh ingredients. Professor Sprout will have to grow much of it herself. Luckily, I believe she has already ordered the mandrakes for some of her second year students."

He wanted to ask more questions about the mandrakes and Angelina's condition and what would happen now that there had been a second attack, but he forced himself to hold his tongue. Snape wasn't here to talk about any of those things, and could he really trust any of the man's answers? So he stayed quiet and waited, staring down at his wand, which he had refused to surrender even after being changed into hospital pajamas. Snape noted the wand and nodded in approval.

"I have to ask, Mr. Potter, if you heard or saw anything suspicious before or after you came upon Ms. Johnson. Voices perhaps or a fleeting shadow?"

Harry gave his professor a queer look.

"Voices, Professor? Can acromantulas speak as well as paralyze and kill people? What talented creatures they are!"

"It was only an example, Potter! Ten points from Gryffindor for being obnoxious. Now answer the question."

"No, I didn't see or hear anything. The hallway was empty."

"And why were you in there in the first place? Didn't you have practice?"

Harry told him about Wood's instructions and the use of his pocket watch to find her. Snape seemed to accept his explanation.

“Sir, what will happen now? Will everyone be stuck in their common rooms again?”

“If you’re lucky.”

Snape settled back in his chair and studied the boy carefully, wondering why the boy reminded him so much of Lily Evans when he looked so much like James Potter. Was it the familiar concern in those bright green eyes or that particular way he fiddled with his wand when nervous?

He didn’t know, but whatever the reason, Snape didn’t like the similarities one bit.

If Harry didn’t remind him so much of his mother, Snape theorized he wouldn’t give a damn about what might happen next. Certainly, he wouldn’t have felt even the tiniest twinge of guilt at the boy’s subtle and unconscious show of trust, for the boy turned to him far more often than he should have when things went amiss.

“Will Voldemort come back?” Harry asked.

Snape’s usual dark expression suddenly went neutral.

“Do you want him to?”

Harry fiddles with his wand, and considered.

“I just don’t want anyone else to get hurt.”

The irony of Harry’s words were not lost on either of them.

“I am not sure what the Dark Lord will do. His business in Bristol is of great importance to Britain’s future. However, Hogwarts is a national treasure in and of itself, and this sort of incident is bad for public morale. It may be better for the school if Voldemort doesn’t return for a while yet. I’ll give you back the ten points if you can tell me why.”

Harry racked his brain for a reasonable answer, but all he could pull together was a feeling of unease at the prospect of Voldemort in a bad mood.

“Because he’ll be cranky?”

Snape cough into his hand, fighting to keep his face neutral and not actually smirk.

“Yes... well, that’s true, but not the answer I’m looking for. Voldemort will be in a hurry to return to Bristol. Haste and ‘crankiness’ will lead to rash and likely drastic actions.”

“Oh.”

“Yes, Mr. Potter, ‘oh’ about sums it up. I would like to enlist your assistance in preventing Our Lord’s untimely return.”

“What could I possibly do?”

“I want you to provide an alternative story about what happened. Something that will point to a culprit unrelated to Ms. Sweetie.”

Harry scowled.

“If my friends and classmate’s lives are in danger, they have the right to know.”

Snape matched his expression.

“I am a teacher, Mr. Potter. As irritating as I may find the entire lot of you, student welfare is one of my responsibilities. Safety measure will be taken regardless of what story is given, and all will be provided with the appropriate level of protection. I require only that you help divert a panic.”

Harry settled back into his pillow and crossed his arms, and waited to be convinced. Snape sneered in disgust.

“Very well, if public peace of mind is not enough for you, perhaps self preservation will be.”

“What are you talking about?”

The potion master smirked, already convinced he'd won the battle of wills.

“No doubt Mr. Weasley is at this very moment down in the Great Hall, telling everyone how you cursed your own house mate. No doubt they’ll bring up the late Ms. Sweetie again, and review the matter will a more ‘informed’ perspective.”

“What?! But it’s a lie! Clyde was with me, he can vouch for me!”

“He’s welcome to try, but whose to say that he didn’t help you? Or perhaps you ‘confunded’ him? No doubt you’re a walking encyclopedia of dark arts. Speaking to snakes, defeating former Death Eaters, and having Voldemort’s favor... It would hardly take much of a leap of logic to assume that you are a Dark Wizard intent on ruling the school,” Snape said, the more absurd his postulations the more cruel his tone became.

What truly horrified Harry was that Snape was right. Ron Weasley wouldn't stop spouting his ridiculous story, and the rest of the students were often eager latch onto a good story regardless of it's validity.

“You can stop the rumors?”

“Of course not. Gossip is a force that cannot be controlled, only manipulated.”

“So what do I do?”

“Blame someone else of course. I would suggest a Slytherin. Mr. Weasley would be the most reasonable choice.”

[illegible]

Snape left the infirmary without having finished his conversation with Potter, and felt more than a little anxiety over the matter. Blast Pomfrey and her weird belief that 'rest' cured everything from the flu to head trauma. Potter had not looked the least bit pleased at his suggestions. Snape understood his concerns, and he would have preferred himself never to have suggested it and let the entire scenario play out into one enormous mess of panic and rumor-mongering.

And he would have if Lestrage had been in the castle to take the blame. Instead, the Headmistress was touring Britain, interviewing professors for new teaching positions that were opening up next year. That mean the Deputy Headmaster, one Severus Snape, had been in charge, and there was no way he was going to take the fall for safety deficits that had been Lestrage's doing.

The situation had to be controlled. Downplaying the situation as nothing more than overzealous House rivalry was the only way to prevent student and parent panic while still giving Snape the excuse he needed to re-enact the safety precautions that Lestrage had prematurely removed.

Potter was his only hope to make that possible.

Merlin, that was a depressing thought!

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Voldemort received news of another attack at Hogwarts while in a meeting discussing taxes with four of the most talented economists in Wizarding Britain. He wasn't sorry for the break, but neither was he pleased with the source of the interruption. Commanding his secretary that no one should disturb him, he returned to his office and considered his next move.

His first instinct was to return to the castle, but if his first attempt at locating the basilisk had failed then he doubted the second would be

anymore successful and he was too busy to go chasing phantoms. That's what minions were for.

After meditating on the matter for almost an hour, he decided to wait. Headmistress Lestrangle was out of the castle, and this was the perfect opportunity to see whether Snape had what it took to run the school. He was curious what the man would do. Would he immediately come begging for assistance, let his pride allow the situation spiral out of control, or demonstrate some of that Slytherin cunning of his and turn it all to his favor?

He was willing to take a little risk to find the answer.

Except when it came to Harry. The young Gryffindor was doing well for himself, especially after his defeat of McNair in Dueling Club and the hype over his parselmouth abilities had died down. Harry was turning into quite the powerful wizard, but Voldemort couldn't help worry about his inexplicable ability to put himself in the middle of trouble. How long before his prince ended up seriously hurt?

Lestrangle was useless. Snape was better at cleaning up after problems than preventing them. That left Tom. Tom was already dedicated to Potter's well being, and his position as a peer rather than a superior held many advantages. However, Tom was... Voldemort. Younger and more idealistic, but still Voldemort and Voldemort knew himself well enough that the boy would be unsatisfied with the current status quo. Snape's letter suggesting Tom's interest in Potter might be political or carnal or both disturbed him far more than it should. He should have merely assumed Snape was tacking on a personal motivation for the Slytherin boy's behavior. Tom spying on Potter was motivated only by Voldemort's orders and twisted sense of filial duty... wasn't it?

Voldemort scowled. If there was one thing in the world he truly hated (and truthfully he hated many things) it was uncertainties. Pressing the intercom on his desk, he addressed his secretary.

"Get me Pettigrew. Immediately."

[illegible]

The next morning, Harry was escorted to the Great Hall for breakfast by Percy Weasley. The older boy didn't ask him any questions, but there was a sort of suspicion in his eyes that made Harry suspect that the youngest Weasley brother hadn't wasted time spreading his 'Evil Harry' story. He wasn't sure what he was going to do about that. The idea that people would believe him capable of such horrible things was nauseating, but Snape's idea to blame someone else to divert attention wasn't any better. Why would Snape even suggest such a thing?

Ok, he had a vague idea why, and none of it had to do with Harry's well being. At the same time, protecting Snape was just another reason to do as the man asked. It hadn't occurred to Harry how much he relied on and trusted Snape until now. All night he had shifted restlessly in his bed, trying to convince himself that because Voldemort hadn't ordered the lie there was no way he was going to spread it. Yet the more he tried to convince himself the guiltier he felt. Snape was not a likeable fellow, and they were far from friendly terms, but...

He was there for Harry. Whenever he got into serious trouble the man was there to guide him out of it or through it. He taught Harry not just potions or dueling, but what it meant to live amongst the most powerful wizards in Britain and how. Could he really deny Snape this one thing? If he did, how much would Snape lose and how much would he himself lose by proxy?

At the same time, when would the lies stop? How long before Harry's life just became one long string of lies?

Harry ponder this as he entered the Great Hall, and noisy gossip turned to whispers. Ironically, despite whispering the volume in the chamber only seemed to get louder. Sighing, Harry found his usual seat amongst his friends.

“Welcome back, Harry,” Hermione greeted, “How do you feel? You look tired.”

“Couldn’t sleep. Too much to think about,” Harry said sleepily, then started to gather some eggs onto his plate. “So have the rumors started yet?”

Hermione shared an uncomfortable look with an angry-looking Clyde and a nervous Ginny.

“Oh, everyone is just being so utterly ridiculous! And Ronald Weasley is such a bloody prat!” she snapped, tossing down her fork angrily.

“Hm. I take it I’m public enemy number one now?”

Hermione glared at everyone around them, sending more than a few students on an intent study of their breakfast, before leaning across the table to whisper at Harry.

“Don’t worry about it, Harry. Once we figure out what really did it, then we can prove-”

“We already proved I was innocent, Hermione. I have a list of alibis, and they’ve all been ignored,” Harry interrupted. “Nobody cares. They just want a story. Isn’t that right, Clyde?”

“Bloody twats kept saying I was confused or covering up for you or something stupid like that,” the boy muttered angrily.

And here was Harry’s opportunity. He could suggest to them right here and now that Ronald Weasley may have set it all up. People were listening in already, unable to avoid spying on the curiosity of the day. He would only have to suggest it once to his friends.

Hermione would be skeptical. She was already convinced, like Harry was, that this event was related to Sweetie. Clyde and Ginny might latch onto the idea immediately though. The surrounding Gryffindors might too, and if he didn’t try to force the explanation onto them the more likely they would believe it. The counter theory would spread like wild fire, a fascinating contrast to Ron’s story that would add an intriguing twist to the tale.

After that, it would be up to the rest of the students to decide. What did they want to believe more? That suspicious Harry was guilty or a Slytherin Weasley? That was as far as Snape had managed to layout what would happen before Madam Pomfrey had expelled the man from the infirmary. There had been no opportunity for questions or alternatives. The many possible consequences were an unforeseeable danger.

He licked his suddenly dry lips and looked up at his friends, Snape's story on the tip of his tongue. They were all looking at him with such worried expressions. He couldn't do it. He couldn't use their friendship as a springboard for some vague political maneuver.

"Don't worry about it," he said instead, "Snape said Angelina would recover sometime in the next five months. Perhaps she'll be able to tell everyone what happened."

"Five months?" Clyde exclaimed, "Don't tell me we have to put up with this for five months!"

Ginny glowered at Clyde. "At least Angelina will live! Clyde, I can't believe how selfish you are!"

He snorted at her. "Easy for you to say. You're not being accused of being a liar or incompetent or an evil cronie."

Harry felt his lip twitch. "An evil cronie?"

"Don't laugh, Harry! It's not like what they're calling you is any better!"

"I for one wouldn't mind being called Harry's evil cronie."

They all turned to see the Weasley twins coming up behind Harry. Clyde and Ginny quickly scooted aside before either of the boys could sit on them. Harry immediately found himself in the center of a 'Weasley cuddle', as both boys latched onto him in their over-enthusiasm.

"Our Dark Underlord of Chaos, did that wicked boy dare to lay a hand on you!?" Fred cried, using his words as an excuse to poke and tickle

Harry until he was laughing uncontrollably. As Harry's eyes started to water, George batted his brother's hand away and leaned in to 'whisper' in his ear.

"Don't worry, Master of Mayhem, we, your loyal devotees figured out what really happened!"

Harry blinked at them, wondering if they were serious or this was the beginning of another joke at his expense.

"That's right! Clyde told us everything that happened last night, and after an excruciating process of reasoning and deduction lasting no less than an entire two minutes, it came to us!"

Deciding it was yet another joke, Harry couldn't help but smile at their antics despite the seriousness of the situation. Yet as they began to speak, he couldn't help but notice that most of the students had stopped talking in order to listen in.

"We realized almost immediately that something was off about Clyde's story when he said Ron was alone on the fourth floor," George continued, "Now we all know that the only thing up there is some class rooms and the library. So why was Ron up there in the first place? He likes to study about as much as he likes a skin rash."

Hermione seemed to sense where this was going and started to say something, but let out a startled yelp instead. She glared at Fred accusingly, but he was already picking up where his twin left off.

"The obvious answer is that he was a plant! He was there specifically to accuse the next person who showed up of cursing Angelina!"

Murmuring broke out at the surrounding tables. Harry felt suddenly light headed. What were Fred and George doing?

"Guys, come on," Harry protested, "Do you really think Ron could have cast a curse like that? It's way too advanced. Why would he bother anyway? He doesn't even know Angelina."

The twins let out identical grins, as if expecting Harry's response.

“Of course Ron didn’t curse her! He was just a co-conspirator,” Fred said, “It was obviously the work of an older student.”

“One who would have gained from taking out Gryffindor’s leading chaser just days before their next match!” George said.

Then together they called out so that the entire Great Hall could hear them.

“Captain Flint!”

The hall burst out into amazed gasps, followed by a loud uproar. Harry and Hermione just stared stupidly at one another, wondering what had just happened. Clyde kept muttering ‘why didn’t I think of that?’ At the Slytherin table, Captain Flint and the rest of the Slytherin team stood up to snarl at them.

“You take that back, you bloody fools!”

George laughed at them.

“Why should we? It’s not like it would be the first time this sort of thing has happened! You guys are sore losers even before the match has started!”

At the teacher’s table, McGonagal who seemed to have been waiting for Snape to do something up until now, stood up.

“All of you sit down at once! This ridiculous mudslinging is entirely unbecoming of boys your age!”

Someone at the Slytherin table took the opportunity to cast a hex at George while he was distracted by the professor. Harry saw it coming first and cast a shield, but someone else mistook it for another hex and then everything just went crazy after that. Suddenly everyone was casting spells. Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw were sandwiched between the Slytherin and Gryffindor, the main combatants, and forced to start casting against everyone just to keep from getting hit in the crossfire. Plates of food exploded all around them, and soon

everyone gave up on spells and started throwing food (which was ironically harder to cast shields against). Harry and Hermione slipped underneath the tables almost as soon as the fighting started, dragging Clyde and Ginny with them.

Clyde was grinning like a lunatic, while Ginny sulked over the glob of oatmeal in her hair. Hermione quickly cast a cleaning charm on all of them and Harry cast one of his stronger shield charms that blocked even noise from their little bubble.

"Merlin, how did this happen?" Hermione cried, peeking out at the chaos that was the Great Hall.

"I blame Ron," Clyde said cheerfully. "And of course, Captain Flint, but mostly Ron."

"Don't be stupid, Clyde. Ron's a prat, but he's not some conspirator!"

"Then why was he there in the first place?"

Now Harry didn't think Ron had cursed Angelina, but that was still a very good question. Hermione suddenly blushed.

"He- he... my brother sent him to the library to call be down to dinner. I told him to leave me alone and he stormed off! I was only a few doors down from where it happened and I didn't hear or see a thing!"

Harry was horrified. Hermione, his very best friend, had come so close to being like Angelina or worse, like Sweetie. If she hadn't argued with Ron, would she too have run into whatever had hurt the Gryffindor chaser?

"This is bad," Harry said, "Very, very bad. Whatever got Sweetie isn't limited to the dungeon lavatory anymore. It's roaming the rest of the school as well. We need to find out what it is and stop it fast!"

Clyde looked confused.

"What do you mean? How could this be the same as with Sweetie? Angelina was paralyzed. She didn't die."

"I don't know, but Snape confirmed it for me when he said a spider did it. It meant that the two are related... Wait! Angelina had make-up!"

His friends looked at him oddly.

"I mean, she had a compact mirror! I remember because Snape took it out of her hands and tossed it to McNair. She was looking at it when I found her. Maybe the mirror somehow limited the effects of the curse or something?"

"Hey, you're right!" Clyde agreed. "I completely forgot about that! So what does it all mean? We got a 'something' that was probably guarding a secret passage in the dungeon lavatory, but is now roaming the halls. No one has seen it except for the people it's cursed, it's curse will kill except in the presence of a mirror where it will only paralyze-"

"Oh, and the paralysis can be cured with a potion that uses mandrakes," Harry added, remembering what Snape had said earlier.

"Righto, mate. Mandrakes. And last but not least, Voldemort and the other teachers seem to know what it is, but haven't or can't stop him/her/it. Argh! This is driving me nuts!"

Harry patted him on the back sympathetically.

"No, this is good," Hermione said, looking very excited, "It's finally starting to come together. I've got a good idea on what we need to look for, but we need to get some books before I can confirm it."

"Good luck," Harry groaned, "After this, Snape's not gonna let any of us out of his sight. If he catches us..."

He caught himself before he mention Sirius and Remus. He hadn't mentioned either of them to Clyde or Ginny, and though his trust in them was growing, he didn't think now was the time or place to bring them up. They had enough on their plates without bringing in Harry's demented family situation. The unsaid threat however seemed to do

its job, leaving everyone uncomfortable at the prospect of Snape's possible punishments.

"Hey, I think the fighting's stopped," Ginny said finally, and Harry cancelled the shield charm so they could climb out of their hiding spots.

Just in time for Snape, who appeared in mid rant, to spot them.

"And you will be joining them in detention!"

"What? What did I do?"

Snape sneered. "They're your minions, you should have better control over them."

Harry turned to the Weasley twins, who tried to look contrite, but only managed to look ridiculous with neon pink freckles and covered in scrambled eggs.

"And when, where, and what is my detention?" he asked them, after everyone had settled down from Snape's tongue lashing, too subdued to even gossip.

"Owlry, Saturday, and I think you can guess what we'll be doing."

Harry let out a groan and tried to figure out what was worse. Cleaning the owlry while some homicidal thing wandered Hogwarts or being accuse of being said homicidal thing in the comfort of his own dorm room.

Decisions, decisions.

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"I think that went very well. That story was perfect. Making the Slytherins the villians was brilliant," Fred congratulated, as they made their way to their first class of the day.

“Yes, I think you’re right,” George agreed, “Too bad about the detention though.”

“It won’t take long with the three of us. Besides, Harry didn’t look too upset. Things should go a lot more smoothly for him now.”

“Except with his Slytherin friends, of course.”

The twins looked at each other, smirked and shrugged it off as unimportant.

“Now we just have to figure out how to protect him from Rook...”

“And the monster.”

“And fangirls.”

“And fanboys.”

“Voldemort.”

“Now you’re getting a bit ambitious, George.”

“Ambition is my middle name!”

“Liar, your middle name is Winthrop!”

George coughed and pretended he hadn’t heard him.

“So what should we do about Ronnie-kins? He’ll only get worse now.”

“Harry can handle Ron. He’s a little spitfire, remember? We’ll let them fight it out.”

“Thus, perpetuating the chaos as is our mission!”

The twins laughed maniacally, the future looking perfectly marvelous to them.

Chapter 33: The Prince and the Red Knight

“Were you able to find anything?”

Hermione shook her head, and sat down at the table for lunch. After class she had gone to the library to look for the book she thought might solve their mystery, while Harry and Clyde had been roped into an emergency meeting with the Gryffindor Quidditch team. Oliver Wood was in a complete panic over the loss of Angelina and more than a little paranoid that Slytherin would start targeting his players routinely. It had taken an intervention by McGonagal and some stern words directed at the team captain before they were finally allowed to head to dinner.

“I haven’t been able to get to the library yet, and it looks like I won’t be able to tonight either. The corridor was cordoned off and a Sentinal was snooping around. Though, I doubt she’ll find anything with all the curses Ron and you tossed about. We should be able to go together on Saturday though. I doubt anyone’s going to be desperate to get their hands on ‘Guardian Beasts’. It actually growls at you when you touch it.”

“Afraid I’m going to have to sit this one out. I have to go clean the owlry with Fred and George tomorrow and then there’s the Quidditch match, remember? Just be careful. Don’t go anywhere alone for awhile, ok Hermione?”

“I will if you will, Mr. Potter,” she said airily, “You’ve got more enemies than me at the moment, in case you haven’t noticed?”

“She’s got you there, mate,” Clyde said, gesturing towards the Slytherin table. “I wouldn’t fancy meeting any of that lot alone in the halls.”

Harry silently agreed. The tension in the school was palpable, particularly between the two rival houses. Harry and several of his classmates had witnessed two seventh years dueling in an abandoned classroom next to transfigurations. It was with a bit of pride that Harry noted several glaring mistakes they made while tossing around petty jinxes and hexes even when most everyone

seemed overly impressed, and attributed it to his time in Dueling Club. Their biggest mistake, however, was starting a fight so close to Professor McGonagall. The three nights of detention would be putting definite damper on their weekend.

And that was only a little of what Harry actually saw. There had been several accounts already of duels, pranks, and mysterious curses elsewhere in the school. Madam Pomfrey was said to be quite busy. Even the Weasley twins, skilled duelist and pranksters themselves, hadn't come out unscathed. Fred had been jinxed to say 'I'm with stupider' and point at George whenever someone spoke to them. George got hexed and his tongue went completely numb so he could barely talk for an hour. It might have been pretty funny except he had been standing next to them when it happened, and still no one knew who the culprit was.

So far he had avoided most of the trouble, except for an angry note at his desk and a few suspicious looks. He wondered how long his good luck would hold out.

"Do you suppose Draco and Natalie are mad at me too?"

"Natalie, probably not," Hermione said, sounding a bit irritated at the mention of the other girl. "Draco... is probably just mad in general. He got in as a reserve Seeker you know, so he's taking the accusations kind of personally. At least he's been keeping Ron under control during our classes together, so that's a good sign."

Harry wasn't so sure. It might have meant nothing more than Draco not wanting Ron starting a fight with Harry and substantiating any of the twin's claims. He would have to find a way to talk to him and Natalie in order to clear things up, but even then it would be some time before they would be able to hangout together as casually as they had last year.

Hermione's startled yelp, drew the boys attention just in time to see her flicking a furry body off the table.

"Merlin's sake, Bilgerat, the table is no place for a rodent!"

It turned out that Collin Creevy's eyes had not been cursed to fall out. They'd falling in to his head, which while probably extremely frightening to experience, was easy enough to fix. He was back in the common room by the end of the school day, grossing out his fellow Gryffindors with pictures he'd had one of the medi-witches take of his seemingly eyeless head. Clyde had puked twice after seeing it. Harry, Hermione, and Ginny wisely avoided looking.

The list of casualties in the Gryffindor/Slytherin conflict had only increased as the day went on, though nothing as bad as Creevy the Eyeless Wonder happened again. Harry had finally gotten hit by a Coughing Curse on his way to Herbology, which sent him coughing uncontrollable until he could barely breath and was struggling not to gag. Luckily, Hermione knew the counter curse, but a group of Slytherins had blocked her from him for almost three minutes before Clyde and some of his friends had physically shoved them out of Hermione's way. He was physically weak from being unable to breath for so long and his throat was raw, but he ignored everyone's advice to go to the Hospital wing and marched right out to the greenhouses with as much dignity as he could muster.

He was glad he did, despite feeling ill through most of the class, when Professor Sprout introduced them to mandrakes. They were fascinating. Hideous, but fascinating. Watching one bite Draco's finger was just plain hilarious. Or perhaps it was just that someone had turned his hair into fuschia spikes.

It was about the only thing Harry found funny about that day. Everyone was so tense and paranoid and angry, that he couldn't drop his guard for even a second to enjoy his renewed friendship with Clyde or some of the sillier curses floating around. Harry had hoped something would be done to end the fighting soon, but when Snape finally made an announcement during dinner to do just that, it wasn't at all what the young Gryffindor had hoped for.

"Once again, your juvenile behavior has required that I take drastic action," the potion's master sneered, glaring out over the four tables. "Since you all can not seem to be trusted to your own devices, all extracurricular activities will be cancelled with the exception of those supervised by a teacher. You will be escorted between classes by prefects and specially assigned students. You will return to your dorms directly after dinner. Anyone caught casting spells on a fellow student without a teacher's permission will have their wand revoked for an entire day. Hogsmeade weekends are cancelled, as well as Quidditch. That is all."

There was much whining and muttering. Oliver Wood practically collapsed into his bowl. Adding insult to injury, the only thing for

dinner that evening was porridge and wheat rolls. Harry didn't join in with the table's complaints, instead mulling over Snape's latest orders. They were pretty much the same restrictions the students had been given after Sweetie's death.

Was it possible that this was what Snape had hoped for?

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Late Saturday afternoon found Harry trudging behind the Weasley twins down to the main floor under Umbridge and McNair's watchful stares. Apparently, Snape hadn't thought cleaning the entire owlry by hand was enough of a punishment. He had sent those two to supervise. McNair had barely said a word, obviously disgruntled at having his spare time wasted on them, but Umbridge couldn't seem to shut up. She kept stopping them at odd moments to tell them they missed a spot or where they should scrub next or to put more effort into it. Harry came very close to hurling his bird crap covered scrubber at her. He didn't doubt the Weasley twins were plotting their revenge.

With Umbridge's insistent nitpicking and micro-managing, it was well after lunch by the time they finished. Tired, sore, and hungry, they stopped by their dorms briefly to clean up and then went in search of the kitchens, only to find that the hallway had been cordoned off with a barrier shield. In front of the shield was a sign that read: No Student Access.

"Blimey, this is getting out of hand. That's the third barrier I've seen since this morning," Fred said, scratching his head. "Do you suppose Snape's inhaled too many potion's fumes and gone nutters?"

"Maybe he thinks the house elves cursed Angelina now," George giggled.

Harry, already in a bad mood, scowled darkly at him. "That's not funny."

George sighed. "No, it isn't... Shit. What now?"

“We’ll just have to wait until dinner,” Harry said, heading towards the library. His stomach twisted uncomfortably, demanding food but he ignored it. It had been some time since he’d been forced to go hungry, but he knew from experience a few hours wouldn’t kill him. “I’m going to look for my friends in the library.”

“We’ll go with. Maybe we can get Clydy-kins to hand over some of his Halloween stash,” Fred suggested. Harry wasn’t about to point out that Clyde probably didn’t have any candy left and wouldn’t be getting anymore until after Christmas. They probably knew it already. He’d told Hermione he wouldn’t walk around alone, and if the Weasley twins were following her line of thinking, he wasn’t going to make it more difficult for them.

They had just turned away from the sign, when Harry spun around sharply, drawing his wand. The twins had their wands in hand a split second later. Beyond the barrier, the hall was still empty. Harry watched it for several long moments before pocketing his wand again.

“Sorry, I thought I heard whispering.”

“Geez, Harry, you almost gave us a heart attack,” Fred said, clutching his chest. “Good reflexes though. Don’t fancy taking you on in a duel any time soon.”

Harry waved off the compliment, and they headed towards the library.

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Without Hogsmeade trips or Quidditch matches, the majority of Hogwarts was at a loss on how to fill up their weekend free time. It seemed a good many of them had opted to spend it catching up on their assignments, and had crowded into the school library. Snape was standing next to a blushing Madam Pince and overseeing the place, holding true to his belief that students could not be left unsupervised at the moment. Harry carefully avoided the man’s attention and went in search of Hermione.

He found her among the shelves, but instead of searching for books she was blatantly staring at a crowd of students gathered around one of the study tables. Harry wasn't sure what she found so fascinating about this group until he spotted Ron Weasley amongst them. Ron's presence was particularly odd, as not only was Draco absent, but so was the rest of his house. A majority of them seemed to be Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws.

"What's going on?"

Hermione jumped, too caught up in her pensive staring to notice his approach. She blushed and floundered for a moment before coming back to herself.

"Oh, um..."

She glanced a bit suspiciously over at her godfather, whose attention was being held by the Weasley twin's arrival, before answering.

"Something's up. I think Professor Snape knows what we've been up to."

Harry tensed. If that was true... would he hold up his threat to withhold Sirius and Remus' letters? Seeing her friend's anxious face, she began to reassure him.

"Calm down, Harry, I don't think it's gotten that bad yet. I could be completely wrong, but... you remember that book I told you about? The one I thought might finally tell us what we need to know?"

Harry nodded.

"It's gone. And I don't mean checked out or misplaced, I mean gone. Madam Pince says she doesn't even have a record of the book ever being in the library, but I know it was here last year. Someone has been spying on us, Harry."

He frowned, not liking that possibility at all.

"Are you sure?"

“No, I can’t be completely sure, but it seems probable. I mean, he’s already watching us, plus as Deputy Headmaster, the magic on the school obeys him at least partially. He has the authority to remove the book and any record of it now that the Headmistress is absent. I think this is his way of saying ‘I know what you’re up to’.”

“So what do we do?”

Hermione shrugged helplessly.

“What can we do? He’s got us under his thumb.”

“Dammit.”

She put a comforting hand on his shoulder.

“Hey, don’t beat yourself up about it. Professor Snape already knows what is going, and doing everything he can to protect everyone. Even if we learned the truth, could we do half as much? When this is all over, if we still haven’t found out what happened, then we can start searching again without someone looking over our shoulders at every turn, alright?”

Harry sighed, feeling as if this was his first failure as a wizard. He had taken on this search knowing the dangers, and abandoning it left a bitter taste in his mouth.

“Yeah, I guess your right,” he conceded, then to distract her from his disappointment he changed the subject. “So what going on over there?”

Hermione let out a loud sigh.

“Remember yesterday when Professor Toure yelled at Bulstrode that she wasn’t a newsie?”

He nodded.

“Well, one of the Hufflepuffs got this brilliant idea that they did want to be a newsie. She managed to convince a bunch of her classmates to start a school newspaper.”

“And Ron’s over there because...?”

“Where better could he spread his ridiculous stories?”

He cringed at the thought. Hermione continued to glare at the table, then caught Snape staring at the two of them. She spoke again without looking at him.

“The professor is watching us again. I think we better split up before he wonders what we’re up to. I’ll go keep an eye on Ron. Why don’t you start your DA&D assignment? You’re way behind as it is.”

“What’s the point? McNair is never going to let me pass. He stamps ‘Troll’ on all my essays without even looking at them.”

“Harry, just do it. You can protest the grade later, but you have to do the work first.”

Knowing there was no point arguing with her whether a scholarly pursuit was ever superfluous, he headed deeper into the shelves. When he finally came out again half an hour later and five large tomes heavier, he saw Hermione was now in the midst of the would-be ‘newsies’. He smiled to a bit to see her bent over a parchment of paper, writing things down furiously as everyone around her started tossing around ideas. Despite their attempts to keep their voices down, they were hardly quiet.

Deciding it would be impossible to study there, he went to the front desk to check out his books. Snape watched him closely, but seeing nothing suspicious in his selections, soon went back to observing the Weasley twins snickering over a mysterious book. Madam Pince caste a Feather-Lite Charm on his stack, warned him to return them in two weeks, and then went back to her Snape gazing... eeewww...

The halls were almost empty, except for the occasional patrolling teacher or prefect, making the castle seem eerily quiet. As he headed

up the second flight of stairs towards Gryffindor Tower, a sudden unease came upon him. He looked around quickly, but the stairs were empty with the exception of the enchanted paintings bustling about. After a long, tense moment he turned to continue up the stairs.

The uneasy feeling did not leave him, and as he passed another black barrier to a little used wing near the portrait of the Fat Lady, he felt himself begin to shake.

“Here?”

Harry dropped his books, and still being charmed they floated soundlessly to the floor. He spun around, searching the hall, but it was still completely deserted

“I heard him... this way? That way? Otherway? Hhhmmmm...”

Harry waited and listened, but nothing else was said and he had the impression that whoever had been there had left.

“Are you alright, dearie?” came a feminine voice.

He jumped in surprise, and looked to see the Fat Lady staring down curiously from her frame. Sighing with relief, he picked up his books. How stupid he was being. He must have overheard one of the portraits talking.

“I’m fine, just a little stressed,” he said, managing to smile at his own foolishness. “Barbarous Bombardment.”

The portrait swung open, and he climbed safely inside.

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It was only half an hour before dinner when Hermione finally showed up, looking infuriated. Harry looked up from a set of cards as she entered the common room, but Clyde remained seemingly oblivious as he puzzled over which hand he should play.

"You look lively," Harry mentioned as she passed him on her way to the girl's dormitories. She looked startled to see him, and then let out a sound of frustration.

"Ergh! He infuriates me!"

Harry couldn't help but smile, knowing exactly who she was referring to. Ron was technically his enemy, yet somehow he caused Hermione a lot more strife.

"Get this, he wants to join the paper. I mean, Ron. He can barely form a coherent sentence on a good day! So then I figure he's got to be up to no good. He probably wants to use the paper to spread his lies about Harry. You know, making it seem more legitimate after investigating and then having it written down. Ergh! It makes me so mad!"

"So you were spying on him this whole time?" Harry offered.

Hermione's frustration suddenly turned to embarrassment.

"Well... yeah, that's what I meant to do anyway. I just sort of ambled up, no one had officially joined anyway, and listened in. After that, I don't know what happened. Everyone was starting to put in name ideas, and one just popped into my head so I suggested it and everyone loved it. Then we were brainstorming what topics the paper should include, and I just kept getting ideas and everyone liked those too. Suddenly, I'm sitting in the middle writing a general outline for the paper. I don't know what happened!"

Harry burst out laughing.

"Harry! What's so funny?!" Hermione said, crossing her arms and actually pouting.

His laughter died down to snickers.

"I know exactly what happened, Hermione. You joined the school newspaper."

“No! No, I absolutely did not! We haven’t even passed around a sign-up sheet yet!”

“We’, Hermione? You’re already thinking like a person whose joined. Plus you had all those great idea that everyone liked, and you had a lot of fun. I think you should sign up.”

“Harry’s got a point, Hermione,” Clyde piped in, having finally set down a card. “You did seem pretty happy when you walked in. Well, infuriated and happy... and how did you manage that?”

“Don’t be ridiculous! I only went over there to make sure Ron didn’t make trouble.”

Harry shook his head, setting down a Joker and sending Clyde into a silent fit of frustration.

“You don’t have to make excuses to us, Hermione. I like Quidditch. You like the school paper. It’ll be good for you to have another hobby aside from studying.”

“No, I couldn’t. I’m already in Dueling Club. I don’t want to fall behind with my studies.”

Harry and Clyde rolled their eyes.

“This from the girl whose always weeks ahead of the class?” Clyde pointed out. She seemed to consider.

“Well... I would be able to keep an eye on Ron... and maybe get this wretched rumor mill under control... it would look good on a college application... Oh fine, I’ll think about it.”

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“Too many. Too many. Must wait... wait... wait...”

Harry paused amidst the group of Gryffindors heading towards the potion's class to look behind him. The only one there was Percy Weasley, who was raised an imperious brow at his study.

"Something bothering you, Potter?"

Harry shook his head. "No, I just thought I heard voices."

Percy considered a moment.

"The Slytherin dorms are down that way somewhere. You must have heard an echo in one of the pipes that runs by their rooms."

The younger Gryffindor nodded in agreement, but wasn't so sure. The voice sounded strangely familiar, both from yesterday on the stairwell and somewhere else he couldn't recall.

"Hurry up, Harry," called Clyde, "Or you'll end up sitting at a table with Goyle."

"Clyde, that's very unsporting of you," Percy reprimanded weakly.

Harry just smiled to himself, and went to catch up with his friends. They entered the potions lab to find the Slytherins had already arrived and taken the best seats (those at the very back) for themselves, leaving the trailing Gryffindors to the full wrath of Professor Snape. Harry made it a point to move to the seat farthest from Ron, even though it put him right in front of Snape's desk. The potion's master was already there, sifting through some papers while some chalk floated over the chalkboard, completely ignoring everyone.

"You know what, Harry, I think I ought to sit with Draco today," Hermione said, just a minute before class started.

"Doesn't he already have a part- oh.."

Looking over at Draco, he soon understood her reasoning. Pansy Parkinson had somehow managed to take the seat Natalie normally occupied beside Draco, and seemed to be doing her best to make the

young Malfoy as uncomfortable as possible just by batting her eye lashes.

“Yeah, you go ahead.,” Harry said, waving her off.

“Thanks.”

She just barely managed to rescue a very grateful Draco before Snape stood up to address the class.

“Today, we start your first extended-brewing potion. Potter, what defines an extended-brewing potion from a long brewing potion?”

“An extended-brewing potion requires a lapse of at least thirty-six but less than seventy-two hours between the addition of an active ingredient or ingredients to the initial stock. A long-brewing potion requires a lapse of greater than seventy two hours but less than a month,” Harry said quickly. Snape almost always called on him at least once during potions, and it had taken him most of last year to figure out what sort things the potion’s master would expect him to know. It made studying so damn stressful.

The wizard shrugged, the closest thing he’d receive to a ‘very good, Mr. Potter’ in this class, and continued.

“We will be preparing the initial stock today, which can used to create three different potions. After class you will all decide which potion you wish to brew and then write a foot long essay due this Wednesday, where you will then complete your selected potion. You may work in pairs or individually, but be aware that those working in pairs will be required to brew twice as much stock as each student will be preparing their own potion individually. I suggest you be very careful with your stock, as it will affect your grade for two classes. You may begin.”

They collected their cauldrons, filled them with water, and set them aside for boiling before going to gather their scales and ingredients from the store room. Those who had partners to set up their cauldrons got to the store room first, leaving Harry and a disgruntled Parkinson to wait outside.

“Get out of the way, Potter,” Ron snarled, knocking into his shoulder as he exited.

Harry forced himself not to react to the twinge of pain, and replied evenly.

“Sorry, I didn’t notice you.”

The pugnacious Weasley’s face darkened at the subtle slight, but the students behind him forced him along before he could start something. Harry ignored the redhead after that, quickly gathered the rest of his supplies, and returned to his work station. The first step was simple enough: Weigh 5g of Norwegian Peat Moss to boil for fifteen minutes, stirring four times counter clockwise every five minutes. Everything went fine for the first ten minutes, then the thin brown broth began to thicken into a dark green goo. He looked to the board to see if he had somehow missed a step, and by the time he looked back down the solution was already bubbling over the sides of the cauldron and sending off sparks whenever it got too close to the flames.

“Professor!”

Snape was there in an instant, tossing in a handful of what appeared to be wheat into the brew. The bubbling mass immediately settled into a brown goo, simmering gently. The potion’s master scowled at the ruined concoction and then at its brewer. Harry blushed in embarrassment.

He was not the best student in potions (that spot was reserved to Draco), but he had never bungled such a simple step before. Truthfully, he didn’t know what he had done wrong. Short of setting it on fire, peat moss was almost completely nonvolatile substance, used for tempering overly bubbly potions.

“Well, that was fun, Potter,” Snape sneered. “Mind telling me how you managed to accomplish it?”

“...I don’t know.”

From behind him, he could hear several snickers. A sour look from Snape shut them up quickly though. The potion master pulled a thin stick, nothing more than a large toothpick really, from the breast pocket of his robe and dipped it into the potion. From the top of the stick a ribbon of paper began grow. After a moment it stopped growing and Snape looked at the paper to see what it said. He frowned.

"Mr. Potter, the acorn is not added until the very end. Can you not read?"

Harry looked confused.

"I didn't add an acorn, Professor. Mine is right there," Harry said, pointing. The man's dark eyes located the innocent little nut, and hardened as if it were somehow the responsible. Although, Harry supposed if Snape's weird little stick was right, then perhaps it was its brother's fault.

The snickers returned, and not only faded but perhaps died a horribly miserable death as the wizard turned to them yet again.

"And what, may I ask is so amusing?"

There was a tense silence.

"Perhaps you all think it's funny to go throwing your ingredients around at random, and seeing what happens. If you're all really lucky maybe you'll turn a simple sleeping draught into a lethal acid. What a hilarious joke that would be! Or better yet, maybe the potion will explode! Bits and pieces of students everywhere! It will be a party!"

No one made a sound, and even Harry was left to stare awkwardly at his shoes. Snape was in a perpetually bad mood, but few things made the man angrier than people fooling around with potions. How much of it was due to respect for the art or just plain fear for what it could do in the hands of the careless, Harry wasn't sure.

"Well, you know what I think is funny? I think it's hilarious to expel students. And so help me, if I ever find out who did this I will be laughing up a storm. Now get back to work. Potter!"

Harry jumped, daring to peek up at the still aggravated man.

"You do not have enough time to complete your potion during this class, so you will re-brew it tonight after dinner. Clean up, and you may work on homework for the rest of the period."

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir."

The rest of the class was spent in a tense silence, with no one daring to utter a word, let alone a snicker, after aggravating Snape already. Harry reviewed his herbology homework, and pretended he didn't care about his quasi-detention he'd gotten even though he was more than a little angry. Cedric Diggory arrived to escort them to their next classes just before the end of the period. As soon as they were out from under Snape's scrutiny, Ronald Weasley was after him.

"Looks like the advantages to being the Dark Lord's pet doesn't include a get-out-detention-free pass, does it Potter?" the redhead hissed into his ear. Harry didn't turn around, not about ready to start a fight while a prefect was so close by.

"It still has more advantages than being Draco's goon," he said coolly, hoping Ron could hear his smirk even if he couldn't see it.

There was a pause, and Harry wondered what Ron's expression was now or if he wasn't planning to punch him in the back of the head. Ahead of him, Diggory wasn't paying much attention, but behind him he knew Hermione and Draco must be watching them like hawks.

"It wouldn't have saved you if I had added two acorns instead of one though. I should have done it and rid this school of-"

Harry stopped abruptly, causing Ron to run into his back, nearly knocking the redhead over. The Gryffindor couldn't imagine what his expression must have looked like when he turned to face him, but the Slytherin took a definite step back. Classmates parted around them

as they moved by, staring back at them curiously and perhaps even a bit nervously.

"I don't know whether you're an idiot or just plain pathetic," Harry said evenly, "Risking expulsion or worse over something as stupid as a prank puts you in either category. Either way, I'm warning you now to leave me and my friends the fuck alone or expulsion will be the least of your worries."

To emphasize his point, he grabbed Ron by his robe and pulled him closer with a single sharp jerk and hiss parseltongue into his ear.

"You are beneath me."

"Harry, come on," Hermione said, grabbing onto his arm and pulling him off the stunned Weasley. "He's not worth it."

Harry spared Ron one last glare, then left him to Malfoy for further scolding. He turned back to Hermione and sighed.

"Why couldn't the guardian have paralyzed him instead of Angelina?"

She didn't laugh. In fact, her expression only seemed to get harder.

"What is it, Hermione?"

"Hermione!"

"Harry, just... shut up for a minute," she snapped. "You can't just... just threaten people and then turn around and play at being... being... well..."

"Myself?" he asked, quirking a brow.

She let out an exasperated sigh and rubbed her temple, clearly frustrated.

"Please don't do that again... You were like that when you dueled McNair, and frankly it scares me."

He felt stunned. He scared Hermione? Him? How did he respond to something like that? He hadn't thought of what he had done as wrong. What was he suppose to do? Let McNair hurt him? Let Ron hurt him? At the same time, what did that mean when he frightened someone he trusted and whom he assumed trusted him?

"I'll try not to..."

"There, there, there. I can hear them both... still too many... too many. No way out here. No way out there. Where, where, where?"

Harry stopped cold. It was that voice again, this time closer than he had ever heard it and then gradually fading into the distance.

"What is it, Harry?"

"Did you hear something just now?"

She gave him a confused look.

"Never mind."

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Author's notes:

For those who have forgotten; DA&D stands for 'Dark Arts & Defense'. It's like DADA, accept it includes actual Dark Arts in the curriculum, not just how to defend against it.

Book II

Chapter 14: The Hunting Grounds

“What are you looking for, Mr. Potter?”

Harry turned back around, and trotted to catch up with the irate potion's master. They had just finished dinner, and as promised headed down to the dungeons to prepare his potion. Though this part of the castle never received any natural sunlight, it still seemed somehow eerier at night than during the day. The halls echoed louder and the shadows seemed deeper.

“Thought I heard something.”

And I'm still hearing it...

‘The voice’ had persisted throughout the day, popping up at odd times. He had heard it during a study period in the dungeons with the other Gryffindors, near the Great Hall on his way to lunch, and now again in the dungeons. It seemed to be looking for something, but other than that he couldn't tell what it was or what it wanted. For a while he had thought it might have been ‘the guardian’, but that didn't explain why he was the only one who could hear it. Unless, of course, it was a snake, but that seemed to make as much sense as the spider story had. How could a snake hurt a ghost? If it were just a random snake, it seemed to know Hogwarts extremely well. He finally concluded he'd been hit with some sort of ‘schizophrenia curse’, and rather than skip class to get examined and babied by Madam Pomfrey, he'd instead opted to see if it would fade on its own. Most illusionary curses didn't last long on wizards or witches, especially when they aren't cast on ones self. If it had been caste by Ron, he wasn't going to give the boy the satisfaction of knowing the spell worked.

So far it hadn't begun to fade yet. Even now he could hear the vaguely masculine voice mumbling to itself about where ‘he’ was and how bored it was and how dark it was and how smelly everything was. Sometimes it wouldn't say anything, and just hum some odd tune that

seemed vaguely familiar. As far as pranks went, it was pretty damn creepy.

“Come, Potter, we do not have all night.”

The murmuring voice disappeared altogether once Harry entered the potion’s lab, and he couldn’t help but wonder about that. Snape set him to work nearest his desk, while he himself started leafing through his papers. They said nothing as Harry set up his cauldron and scales and gathered his supplies, but once the Gryffindor had settled into stirring for the next fifteen minutes, Snape surprised him by initiating conversation.

“Mr. Weasley seems to have taken a rather strong dislike to you, Mr. Potter.”

“You’ve just noticed?”

Snape shot him a look.

“It has never made me concerned for your safety before now.”

Harry shrugged, not seeing the point of this conversation. It wasn’t like it was his fault Ron was a prat.

“You would do well not to provoke him.”

The ladle in his hand stopped for a split second.

“When did I ever provoke him?! I’ve always ignored him and his stupid games.”

“Yes, exactly. You refuse to acknowledge him as someone worth noticing, and now he feels as if he must make you acknowledge him, even if he has to hurt you to do it.”

Harry acknowledged that what Snape said made sense. Perhaps, in a way, he had known it all along. Hadn’t his ignoring the other boy been his way of angering him in the first place?

"Less than a week ago you were suggesting I accuse him of cursing Angelina, and now you want us to be buddies?"

"Circumstances have changed," Snape admitted. "The Weasley twins have already alleviated the need to blame their younger brother, and provided even better circumstances for me to set up safety measures. Yet, I seem to have miscalculated the lengths with which young Ronald would go to achieve his own perceived vindication. He is becoming a threat not only to your reputation but also your physical well-being. For both your sakes, I wish to ease the tension. You should add the dragonfly wings now."

Harry floundered to retrieve said ingredients and crumble them into his brew before it turned completely black, then settled back to let the newest addition dissolve on its own.

"You could just expel him," Harry offered. "He confessed to adding the acorn just after potions class."

Snape sneered.

"Expel one of my snakes over you, Mr. Potter? Don't flatter yourself."

The young wizard could have pointed out that a lot worse had been done to Morgenson and Whitehall than mere expulsion, but didn't want to risk it. He was being cheeky enough already. Briefly, he wondered what happened to his two would-be murderers and whether he should write Sirius and Remus to ask.

"What do you propose then?"

"Duelling Club practices will continue as always. We will be performing our first practical demonstrations this Thursday. I want Mr. Weasley and you to be one of the dueling pairs."

"I won't lose to him intentionally."

"Oh, believe me, Mr. Potter, I'm not worried about that. I suspect he'll defeat you with his own skills. After all, I've been tutoring him."

“What?!”

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“The entire school has gone nuts,” Draco grumbled, moving his trembling black pawn to block Natalie’s vicious white knight. Predictably, the bloodthirsty piece smashed the pawn clean off the board a moment later. The young witch smirked at her knight’s antics before deigning to acknowledge Draco.

“Whatever do you mean, Malfoy?”

“That for one thing. You never call me Malfoy. And then you left me with Parkinson in potions and then again in arithmancy. Are you mad about something?”

“Of course not,” she said dismissively. “But I mustn’t give anyone the impression that I’m one of your minions. It’s degrading.”

Draco scowled.

“I suppose it’s fine then, but I can’t think of why everyone else is acting weird. Ron refuses to listen to me anymore and even seems to go out of his way to annoy me. Ungrateful little bastard. Slytherin would have torn him apart if it weren’t for me. I’ll have to remind him of that fact soon.”

Natalie nodded in approval.

“Yes, one should never let one of their pawns run the board. And who else is acting oddly?”

“Hermione. She’s joined another club. Journalism this time.”

“What’s odd about that?”

“She hates reporters.”

She laughed at that.

“And then of course there’s Potter.”

“Isn’t there always?”

He ignored the tease.

“I think he’s starting to crack. He threatened Weasley in the dungeons today-”

Natalie giggled, recalling the incident perfectly. Harry had been so perfectly wicked.

“And now he keeps looking around as if he expects someone to hex him at any moment. Plus I must have seen him turn around at least three times saying he heard something today. Paranoid, I tell you. He’ll be locked away in St. Mungo’s before the end of term.”

His black rook overthrew the white knight, causing his friend to pout. The knights were her favorite pieces after all.

“He has reason enough to be paranoid. These are dangerous times.”

“Still going to go crackers.”

“Check.”

“Shit.”

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Tom’s roving spirit re-entered his body and he opened his eyes to stare up at the canopy of his bed. He pondered over the conversation he had overheard between Malfoy and Cypher, and tried to determine how much of it was worth investigating and how much was just idle gossip.

“And now he keeps looking around as if he expects someone to hex him at any moment. Plus I must have seen him turn around at least three times saying he heard something, today alone.”

Was Harry being paranoid or was he really hearing something. Something only Harry... and perhaps another parselmouth might hear? If that were the case, then Muchalinda had been given far more liberty than was wise. Snape’s many barriers were doing their job, but how long would that last? There were so many secret passages, and no way to secure them all.

He had not heard the basilisk at all when he was about the school, but was that because the serpent wasn’t there or because it was following his orders to keep at a distance? He had made it very clear to his minion what exactly he expected of them and what liberties would be allowed. His own inculpability and Harry’s safety must be assured before they were allowed to ‘play’, and only as a means to be rid of his targets. The mistake with Angelina was inconvenient, but understandable. At the same time, Harry had gotten much too close to danger.

He had made his displeasure well known to his servant, but had not been able to deliver the message in person. Something he felt was critical to them understanding the gravity of his instructions. He had a sneaking suspicion that they were having a little too much fun.

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Five o’ six am was an ungodly time to be called out of one’s bed, even for as ungodly a man as Severus Snape. Particularly by house elves.

Wretchedly over excited and frightened house elves.

“Master Snape says Nibby must come quick if something nasty is seen in Hogwarts. Oh and what a nasty nasty thing Nibby has seen!” she wailed, her floppy ears sagging like an unhappy puppy.

Snape merely grunted in response, tying back his hair for once so he wouldn't be delayed with combing it. He took a vial from his night stand and downed it in one shot, the potion chasing away his sleepiness as no amount of caffeine ever would and without the irritating side effects. With that, he slipped on his teaching robe and stormed out of his private quarters and towards the kitchens, Nibby running after him.

By the time he reached the kitchen the barrier had already been taken down by Flitwick and McGonagall, both still in their bed clothes. Snape almost cracked a smile at the charm's professor's frog print pajamas. Almost.

The five dead house elves pretty much killed whatever humor he found in the situation after that. There was a horrid stench of burnt flesh.

"I pulled one of them off the stove before it completely caught fire," McGonagall said sadly. "Aside from that, we haven't disturbed anything."

"The rest of the house elves?" Snape asked, tip-toeing around broken eggs and flour until he reached the first body, her large bulbous eyes staring innocently up at nothing. He recognized her as Yoyo, the youngest and giggliest of her fourteen siblings.

"I found them hiding in the pantry. I sent them to the laundry. Working always seems to calm them down."

Snape nodded, moving to the next body and then the next. After confirming they had all died in the same manner, he went on to investigate the rest of the kitchen. It was a mess, food and cooking utensils scattered everywhere, tiny hand and foot prints of flour marking the hurried escape of Hogwart's cheery slave population.

"There's no sign of a secret passage in here. It must have entered from the hall and gone out the same way. There are at least four different hidden passages it might of escaped through," he said.

Flitwick surveyed the damage and shook his head in dismay.

“This is awful.”

“It could have been worse, Filius. A lot worse. Hufflepuff’s dormitories are only another hall away,” Snape pointed out.

“Hem-hem.”

Three heads turned to see Madam Umbridge, looking as if she had been up and ready for hours, and Professor McNair, who looked none to pleased to be awake, standing in the door way. Umbridge cast her wide eyes around the room, her vapid smile firmly in place even as she spotted the dead house elves.

"My goodness," she said pleasantly, "This will take forever to clean up. I hope no one was hurt."

The three looked at her blankly for a moment, then at the five corpses. Snape spoke first.

"No... I suppose, technically speaking, no one was hurt."

Then he went on to ignore her.

“Filius, Minerva, I want you to secure this corridor and take care of the elves. I want the barrier up again by six. Umbridge, inform the rest of the staff. McNair, you and I are going hunting.”

McNair's grumpy scowl curved into a malicious grin. This was likely the first bit of fun he'd had all year.

“Hem hem...”

“You should really have that checked, Madam,” Snape said, already stalking past the toady woman and following the traces of flour that marked the murderer’s passing.

[illegible]

The voice was gone the next day. Harry waited for it to appear all through his morning routine, on his way down to the Great Hall, all through his oddly skimpy breakfast of oatmeal and fruit, and on his way to classes, but it never reappeared. He felt strangely accomplished by that, now knowing his avoidance of the hospital wing had been the right decision and that somewhere someone was wondering what they'd done wrong in their casting.

This cheery feeling didn't last long. The circus of curses had died down over the weekend, even if everyone's disgruntled attitude had not. The general atmosphere of Hogwarts remained tense and uninviting. Even the teachers seemed stressed and disgruntled.

Oliver Wood was insistent that even though Quidditch was cancelled, that the team still keep up practices under Professor Grimm's supervision to keep their competitive edge. Harry would have been quite content with this, but the weather which had been unseasonably mild finally decided to rear its ugly head. A cold snap had blown in from the North, bringing with it a light snow and a reminder that the Christmas season was only a week away.

Suddenly, Harry found himself inundated with a completely new set of worries on top of his old ones. There was his inevitable duel with Ron that Thursday, semester exams and papers he would need to start work on, 'the guardian' which may or may not have gone, Christmas presents he would need to buy or make within a month, Quidditch practices in bad weather, and still the need to be watchful of attacks in the hall (even if hexes had become rarer, he doubted he was completely safe).

It was almost a relief that he and his friends had decided to halt their investigation. In fact, it would have been a relief except that made Harry feel like such a cowardly jerk.

His life went from dangerous and exciting to hectic and mundane practically over night. Hermione tried her best to get him organized, but she was having more than a little trouble with that herself. Much of her spare time was being taken up with getting the newspaper up and running. Clyde's only concern was gathering enough courage to

ask Cathy Wicket to the Winter Dance, and that wasn't going to help anyone.

Deciding he may as well face his most immediate concern- his duel with Ron- first, he found himself burying his nose in spell and strategy books. He wasn't sure what good it would do him in the end. Books would help him, but not nearly as much as instruction from Snape would likely help Ron.

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"Relax, Harry," Clyde said, as he and the rest of their club made their way from dinner to the Dueling Hall, "It's only Ron."

Ginny pinched him. Hard.

"Shut up, Clyde. What do you know about it?" she snapped, not liking the dig at her brother one bit. Ron was full of flaws, but she knew better than most that he was not weak. Stubborn as a mule and oblivious at times, but never weak. She hoped Harry had been paying more attention to his rival than Clyde had and realized this. She wished Hermione hadn't decided to skip this lesson in favor of calibrating the Hogwart's Herald's new printing press. The brainy girl might have had better luck cautioning Harry than she would have. Not that she had been able to caution him much to begin with. Every time she turned to him to say something, she'd notice and cut his serious face was and get distracted.

Ron kept peeking over his shoulder at them, his expression hungry.

They entered the Dueling Hall and found it had been rearranged a bit. The dummies had all been pushed back to press against the far wall, and a matt that was shaped like the dueling platform had been pushed to the center of the freed space.

"You have ten minutes to suit up and line up beside the matt," Snape instructed them, gesturing towards the armor on their practice dummies. They all hurried to obey and were in formation, standing at attention in military fashion within seven minutes. Snape walked

along the line and made sure they were fitted properly before he began their lesson.

“For the last several weeks we have gone over the basics of Dueling, but lectures and practice dummies only provide so much preparation for the real thing. When you finally take the platform, you will not be facing a piece of wood, but a living, breathing, conniving person who wants to destroy you. Hesitation is natural, a result of the unpredictable consequence of your spell and the equally unpredictable response from your opponent. Natural, but unacceptable.”

Snape paused, pulling their attention towards him like fish on a hook. It almost hurt to be drawn in, but it hurt worse to struggle.

“We will begin actual duels today. I do not want you to worry about strategies yet. That will come later. I want you to simply work to overcome your natural hesitancy. Fire the first spell that comes to mind, and do not worry about your opponent’s spells.”

Mentally, Harry scoffed at the hypocrisy of Snape’s instructions, for despite the man’s words he knew that he and Ron would be neither hesitating or spouting out anything randomly. It would be a REAL duel.

“You will not be scored on your success or failure,” the professor continued, “but I do want you all to try your best. Next semester I will be assigning one of you as the captain of the Junior Dueling Club, based on your proficiency in my lessons. Houghton, Malfoy. You two first.”

Clyde seemed a bit startled. He had known Harry and Ron were going to fight, but it hadn’t occurred to him that he might actually have to as well. Draco was looking rather smug in comparison. He had a reason to be, for they had only gotten through the ritual salute when Draco blew him clean off the mat with a simple expelliarmus. Snape did not hesitate to call up the next two duelists; Ginny and a first year Ravenclaw boy. They were more equal, and they managed to cast two spells each before Ginny took the boy’s wand with a simple

summoning charm. And so it went, with each of them being called to the platform. The duels were short, most of them over within the first three spells cast and all of them under a minute.

Harry and Ron were the last summoned. It wasn't unexpected, but it didn't make it any less nerve-racking for Harry. He took a deep, calming breath and moved to the platform. Harry briefly noted that Ron had changed his uniform colors to solid black, but quickly returned his attention to more important things.

They saluted, and locking his eyes to his opponent, he could see a savage hunger for battle and something else which seemed more dangerous for his inability to recognize it.

"Suffoco sentenia!"

"Oculus obliquo!"

The two hexes smashed into each other simultaneously, evaporating into nothingness. The voices had barely stopped echoing through the hall before the duelists were set to attacking again.

"Sterneo!" cried Ron, gesturing violently with his wand. Harry simply moved sideways to avoid, shouting out a Wind Curse. Ron blocked it with a shield charm, but the charm was meant to block elemental curses and not the Stinging Hex that followed. Turning sideways, the redhead caught it in the arm not holding his wand, before casting three curses of his own in quick succession.

"Perturbo ordo!" Harry called, the disruption spell causing two of the three spells to break off and fizzle in the air like firework sparks. The third curse slipped through behind the other two, ghosting into and over Harry. He felt the effects immediately, not in the form of pain as he had expected, but fear.

"Fortis fidens!" This spell, Harry did not cast on Ron, but on himself. A Bravery Charm. It was a risky move, especially since he wasn't entirely certain what spell Ron had used on him, but he hoped it was enough to prevent the rise of magically induced terror.

And it seemed to work... or at least work in his favor.

The fear was still there, making his heart beat frantically and his hands tremble around his wand. It also made the adrenaline rush through him, unleashing strength and a flurry of mad thoughts formed for simple self preservation.

The spells were coming to him faster, coming out more powerfully, more recklessly. Ron was forced to move to the offensive, blocking and dodging, clinging to his position on the matt and waiting for exhaustion to do what his own curses could not.

Harry was on his twelfth hex when his magic suddenly flickered, causing him to stumble, almost from the matt all together. Ron brought down his shield to cast his next curse.

“Spina mordeo!”

Harry instinctively brought up his arm to protect his face, foolishly using his wand arm which caught the worst of the Thorn Curse. He hissed as he felt a hundred little barbs sink into his exposed hand and the bend of his elbow where his armor did not protect him. Stubbornly, he refused to drop his wand, even as the sickening feeling of his own blood on his hands and the sickly scent of it pervaded his senses.

“Not so tough after all,” Ron said, breathless and gleeful, and followed his observation with another spell.

He heard the second curse shouted and quickly rolled out of the way and to his feet, shouting out two successive spells of his own. Ron blocked the first curse easily, but the rock Harry had summoned flew through it as if it weren’t even there. It struck him clean in the forehead and knocked him to the ground.

Harry’s magic wavered yet again, preventing him from casting the final blow before Ron managed to scramble back to his feet, blood seeping from a gash on his forehead.

“Blood. Oh, I smell it! I smell it!” came an unfortunately familiar voice. A feeling of dread that had nothing to do with Ron’s previous curse

settled into Harry's stomach. He had thought 'the voice' gone, certain it was a cursed induced hallucination that had finally faded away. It couldn't have come back. Curses didn't work that way!

"It's here, and it sssmellsss sssooooo goooooood... I musst have it!"

'The voice' distracted Harry enough for Ron to regain his balance, but the impetuous boy wasn't satisfied to fling another fruitless spell. His head throbbed, his anger throbbed in time with it, frustration pounding in his mind in time with the heart pounding in his chest. It wasn't suppose to be like this! He had trained so hard, done everything Snape had told him, studied for hours and hours on end when even Draco had given up. Potter should not have lasted this long. There was no way the stupid Gryffidnor was as powerful or perfect as everyone thought he was. He was just a stupid mudblooded fool with brainy friends and a silly ability to talk to snakes.

There was no way Harry fucking Potter was better than him!

With a roar of pure rage, he rushed for the Gryffindor, tackling him to the matts.

"Harry! Ron! Stop!" someone cried, reminding Harry of the spectators he had forgotten about. He had been so preoccupied with Ron, he hadn't been able to think about those around them. How long had they been dueling, anyway?

"I want it! I want it nowthe disembodied voice demanded, and then fell into the most horrible description of why. Even as he struggled to push the other boy off of him, Harry felt the rise in panic as the voice drew closer and louder and more bloodthirsty.

Hewanted to flee, believing it was his blood the thing wanted, but the fight with Ron wasn't over. The first punch split his lip, but he managed to block the second, only to loose his wand on the third.

Snape managed to reach them before the fourth one landed, pulling Ron off physically.

“Wealsey! What in the name of Merlin are you doing?!” Snape snarled, shaking the boy like a rag doll. The potion master’s attention was soon diverted to Potter who had jumped to his feet before any of his friends could reach him and bolted for the door. “Potter! Get back here!”

But the Gryffindor ignored him or possibly hadn’t even heard him, slamming the door behind him.

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The halls were deserted, still forbidden as result of Snape’s rigorously enforced restrictions. Harry was both glad and terrified of that. He sprinted in a random direction, but the voice followed him, growing impatient in its hunger.

“I can sssmell it, sssso clossse, so clossse. Sssso hungry. Housse elvesss are too musty to sssatissfy.”

He found the stars and rushed down them, barely keeping himself from plummeting down them head first. When he reached the bottom, he paused a moment to gain his bearings. The halls down here were silent. Should he remain where he was then? Where could he go? This thing following him, what was it? Should he flee the castle altogether?

Harry’s mind was flooded with panic, partly from Ron’s curse and partly from a very real fear of the things he knew haunted this school. For a minute he clung to the rail at the bottom of the stairs, trying to think when all his mind wanted was for him to flee and all his body wanted was for him to rest.

“There! I found you!”

Harry let out a startled scream, spinning around and finding no one, but unable to keep himself from running away nonetheless. He didn’t know where he was going. There was no plan. Finding a teacher to protect him or a place to hide was secondary to simply getting away.

He found himself at the front entrance of the school. The heavy wooden doors were closed, latched shut from the inside. He seized the first lock and tried to unlatch it, but it stuck firm. Harry searched his pockets for his wand before remembering that Ron had knocked it out of his hand in the Dueling Hall. Screaming in frustration and fear, he pounded at the door with already bloodied fist.

"Let me out!"

"Sssmellsss like fear. Deliciousss."

"LET ME OUT!"

"Potter!"

He spun around to find Snape rushing down the hall, and his terror leaping between that of the bloodthirsty voice or his enraged professor. The man seemed to hesitate as he came close, eyeing the bloodied hand prints on the door suspiciously before turning his sights to the one who had made them. Harry could only stare mutely at the man, knowing it was almost as dangerous to run from this man as it was to stay in the non-presence of his pursuer.

"Do not move, Potter," Snape warned coolly, moving forward with deliberate slowness to prevent the boy from bolting. "You're under the affects of a Panic Hex."

Harry shook his head.

"I can hear it. It wants to kill me. It can smell my blood. Can't you hear it? Why am I the only one I can hear it?"

Snape hesitate. Harry eyes widened.

"It's a snake, isn't it? Whatever killed Sweetie is a snake, isn't it? And it's here, and it wants to kill me-"

"Don't be conceited, Potter. It's only the curse making you think that," Snape said, taking another step closer. Harry pressed himself

further into the door, as if he might somehow push himself through it altogether.

“No. No, I heard it before. I’ve heard it everywhere. In the dungeons and the hallways. Not in the tower, but once just outside of it... It’s following me... Let me out, let me OUT OF HERE!”

He seized the locks again, tearing at them with all his strength and gradually he felt the first one give-

“Praesens dormio!”

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Sitting in the infirmary, Severus looked down at the boy who gave him so much trouble and wished he could resent him for it. Resentful was his usual state of being, and even in situations where it wasn’t warranted he could easily summon the feeling and remain quite comfortably there.

It was certainly better than pitying. He didn’t like the feeling and he doubted Potter would appreciate it any. Yet whenever he tried to banish the feeling, he would see the bloodied hand prints on the entrance doors and screams to be let out. Not all the screaming he heard in his mind had been from Potter. Some of the voices were old and dead and gone forever except in the odd moments when his memories surfaced and the frail remains of his conscious plagued him.

Harry was not old or dead or gone though, merely sleeping, dark hair hallowing his pale sweaty complexion. He would have to write the Dark Lord about this. It was a calculated risk on his part. Voldemort would not be happy to learn that Harry was possibly being hunted, but he would be even less so if he learned Snape tried to hide that fact.

The death of the house elves and the failure of the resulting search early that morning was hardly going to impress his Master, although his skill in keeping it quiet so far, just might.

There was no telling what the Dark Lord's response would be in the end. He may return to the castle or have Harry removed from it, or leave Snape to handle the boy's protection (and he was hoping for the last option). He could not be completely sure that the voices Harry heard were from the basilisk and not something or someone else, and he hated the idea of turning someone's practical joke into an act of treason.

Regardless of what happened next, Snape had to deal with the problem of keeping Harry safe and also keeping the boy quiet. In his deranged state, the boy had stumbled to a conclusion about Sweetie's killer that hit far too close to the truth. Demands of silence would only go so far. He would have to ensure that Harry was kept conveniently (and safely) out of the way of the rest of the school, particularly Hermione who would easily figure out the rest of the puzzle.

Until Christmas break at least, only two and half weeks away, and then the boy could be sent away from the castle for the holidays and a more permanent solution could be found or the basilisk destroyed with any luck.

Plucking a small vial from his robes, Snape very carefully unscrewed the top. The lid doubled as a thin dropper, and he used it to carefully place two tiny drops on the bottom of Harry's lip. The sleeping child licked his lip reflexively, taking the potion into his body with hardly a grimace.

Snape returned the vial to his robe and sighed. The next few weeks would not be pleasant for Harry, but in the end it would be for the best.

The best for everyone.

He nudged prodded Harry sharply with his wand. The boy bolted up right, his sleep and potion fogged mind less quick to follow his body's lead. Wincing against wakefulness, he batted the wand away and glowered in his assaulter's general direction. His glasses were elsewhere and he couldn't be bothered to care, wanting nothing more than to fall back to sleep.

“What?” he grumbled.

“Sign this,” Snape commanded, placing a quill in one lax hand and some sort of parchment on his lap. Harry looked down at the parchment but without his glasses it was illegible. He let out an enormous yawn and scribbled something he thought vaguely resembled his signature between two other nonsensical squiggles.

With the sedative running fresh and strong in his blood, it did not occur to Harry to question what he was doing, only to find the quickest and easiest means to return to the comfort of sleep. Once Snape had taken back both the quill and parchment, the potions master allowed him to do just that.

When Harry awoke next he would be in no condition to wonder exactly what he had done in his vulnerable state, and it would be several days later before he realized the consequences of that hasty act even if the act itself remained vague in his mind. He did, however, make an important decision rather quickly after.

Snape was officially off his Christmas list until he died.

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I have no idea if this is true or not in Rowling’s universe, but I would think it would be harder to make a long term spell stick to a witch/wizard without having their own natural magic disrupt it. It wouldn’t be the same if say someone caste a disguise spell on themselves, since it would already be compatible with their body’s own magic. Curses and hexes can work better because they work quickly and rarely linger for long (although it certainly feels like a long time to the cursed I’m sure). There are, of course, exceptions, but you’ll notice that they’re usually considered very powerful spells. Potions work for longer periods because they have no magical signature of their own. That’s my theory anyway. Agree or disagree as much as you like. Artistic liscense. :P

Book II:

Chapter 35: Potions and Plagues

Waking up in the infirmary was not an uncommon experience for Harry. Waking up in the infirmary feeling worse than he had before going there was. The discomfort of a fever had woken him, several times in fact, until late the next morning when he finally had the energy to stay awake long enough to wonder at his situation.

He could remember his fight with Ron, the return of 'the voice', and the subsequent escape into the halls. After that, things became a bit vague. Snape had chased after him, he knew, but not how or where he had caught him. The memory wasn't lost, but his head felt stuffed with cotton and thinking anything but the simplest thing was huge effort he didn't have the energy to expend.

"H-hello?" he called, coughing a bit from the dryness in his throat. Madam Pomfrey was beside him in an instant with a glass of water. He drank greedily, taking in the coolness of the liquid gratefully. A moment later, his vision cleared a bit as she placed his glasses on his nose.

"Thank you."

"You are quite welcome, Mr. Potter," she said cheerfully, then quickly got to business, sticking a thermometer (or a wizarding equivalent) in his mouth. "How do you feel? You've had a fever all night."

How did he feel? If could concentrate enough he would have to say he felt awful. Sicker than he'd been in years, and unable to account for it.

"What happened to me?"

She smiled sympathetically, taking his hand and holding it closer to his face. He was stunned to find it covered in tiny blue spots.

"See for yourself. You, young man, seem to have contracted Blue Pox."

“What? How could I have... I was vaccinated and quarantined! How could I have Blue Pox?”

“Calm down, dear, you mustn’t excite yourself. You have a lot of recovering to do after all. As for how, well, you may have had a bad batch of vaccine but more than likely it was probably stress. All this nasty business happening at the school on top of end of semester school work, I imagine the stress harmed your immune system to the point you couldn’t fight off the infection.”

She plucked the thermometer from his mouth and read it.

“101.3°. Hmm... a little better than last night, I suppose. Lay back down dear, and I’ll get you a compress. We can talk a little more after you’ve rested some.”

He wanted to talk more NOW, but she had already scurried away and by the time she had returned, he had already drifted off. The next time he woke it was to someone gently calling his name. He blinked sleepily and turning to his left he saw a worried looking Hermione, Clyde, and Ginny standing a few feet from his bed. Draco was also there, although he looked more amused than worried.

“I can’t believe it. You really did catch the Pox. I thought they were just covering up that you fell down the stairs or something else equally ridiculous,” the Malfoy heir sniggered.

“Draco, be quiet, this isn’t funny!” Hermione snapped, made a move towards Harry but then hesitate and stepped back again. She sighed. “I’m sorry, Harry, but you’re under quarantine. This is as close as we’re allowed to get.”

Harry felt a pang of loneliness, but managed a reassuring smile for her.

“It’s alright. I’ll be fine in a couple of days, I’m sure. But what happened? I remember running away, but I don’t remember why.”

He did remember why, but he needed to hear why they thought he ran away. Surely, Snape would have made some excuse that in no way resembled the truth.

"Panic Hex," Clyde offered, "Who knows what you were thinking while under its affects? Maybe you thought you were bleeding to death or Snape was going to kill you or you needed to study for Herbology in case of a pop quiz. Scared the bejeezus out of the rest of us though."

"Yes," Draco agreed, looking bored, "Ron did quite the number on you. I didn't know he had it in him. Though, you didn't do half bad yourself."

Harry shrugged.

"And what happened to Ron?"

"Suspended from practices till after the holidays for 'unsportsman-like behavior'," Hermione said, sounding disgusted, "He's lucky I wasn't there or I'd have turned him into a toad."

Harry chuckled, but it caught in his throat, making him cough violently. The shutters to the nearest window slammed shut.

"I-I'll get it," Ginny offered, opening the shutters again with a few flicks of her wand.

"This is ridiculous," Harry muttered, taking the now warm compress from his forehead and wiping the sweat from face. "I'm dueling one moment and dying the next... from something completely unrelated."

"You're not dying, Harry. You've probably been carrying the virus around for a while now, so when you expended all that magic during your duel-

"Rather careless of you," Draco pointed out smugly, earning him a pinch from Ginny.

“- it left you vulnerable to the infection. You’ll be up an about in a few weeks. At least that’s what my godfather said. You have the worst luck.”

“A few weeks? I can’t lay around her for a few weeks?! I’ve got class-”

Another round of coughing cut off his protests, closed the shutters again, and tipped over a glass of water. Ginny set everything to right again without a word.

“Don’t worry about class, mate,” Clyde admonished. “You’ll be well by winter break, and you can make it up then.”

“I’ll lend you all of by notes. And I’ll visit every day to keep you up to date.” Hermione offered. Harry nodded, but didn’t feel particularly comforted. He hated staying in the infirmary, where it was always too quiet and too lonely and too boring. Besides, there were things happening in Hogwarts. Some of these things were fun, some of them scary, but all of them important to him.

It was completely unfair that he’d have to miss out on it, even if it was only for a little while.

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Voldemort read the latest report from Snape and felt distinctly unhappy. The return of the basilisk was disturbing enough, even more so since it seemed to be doing a wonderful job of avoiding Tom while at the same time following Harry. At least Snape had found a way to secure the child, even if it did disrupt the boy’s education.

This turn of events was confusing, as well as frustrating. It left him in doubt of Tom’s involvement yet again. His younger counterpart would never place his ‘mother’ in danger, after all. Yet at the same time, how could Tom possibly keep missing the basilisk? True, Snape’s safety measures had limited Tom’s freedom of movement, but if he were earnest there wasn’t anything the young snake couldn’t accomplish.

"Pettigrew," he said, startling the sniveling little man sitting in the chair across from his desk.

"Y-yes, Master?"

"Have you learned anything new?"

The coward rung his hands for a moment, his nose twitching like the creature he so often mimicked.

"Ah... well, no, not really. The, the Slytherin dorms are harder to get into than Gryffindor's. There are a lot of p-pet s-snakes there."

Voldemort watched Pettigrew shudder with some amusement. He knew it was unfair of him to ask the animagus to infiltrate a place swarming with his natural enemy, but he was a sadist and such things were entertaining to him.

"So be it. If you are too incompetent to infiltrate the bedrooms of mere children, I suppose it is too much to ask for you to search the secret passages."

Pettigrew paled. His master was not his friend, and their relationship and his affinity to breathing hinged on his continued uses to the Dark Lord. Should he run out of uses, the secrets he held would not permit him to simply walk away.

"N-no, Master! I can do that for you! I- I could even... maybe... get into the Sl-Slytherin d-dorms. It-it will just t-take time."

Voldemort seemed to consider, although he was merely taking a moment to enjoy watching the little man squirm.

"Very well, I will give you another chance. Return to Hogwarts and find me something useful. If something should happen before I receive a meaningful report from you, I will be most... displeased."

"Y-yes, M-ma-"

“GO!”

The man was a rat (or rather the rat became even more of a rat), and disappeared through a strategically placed hole in the wall. A scuttling sound was heard for a few moments and then blessed silence. He took the opportunity to consider his next move, but there was little he could think of to do. Snape was handling the situation as best he could without knowing the truth about Tom, Tom was the only one who could control the basilisk in his absence yet was less than trustworthy, and Harry wasn't going to be able to help or hinder anyone for a while.

Unable to think of an immediate course of action, he shoved his concerns aside and turned back to his other responsibilities. For now, that involved sorting through correspondence with his various spies and officials. There was over fifty to look through for today. He sorted through them, and found one from Lestrangle. Apparently, she was having better luck serving Hogwarts abroad than she was serving at home, for she had already found a couple of very fine teachers that even Voldemort approved of. The newest missive presented the teacher who would be replacing McNair next year, a former Ravenclaw with impeccable credentials and a reputation that preceded her.

Finally, some good news.

He set it aside, making a mental note to have Lestrangle's candidates undergo a thorough background check, and checked the rest of his letters. One in particular gave him pause, if for no other reason that it was pink. If his mail sorters had missed yet another love letter, he was going to cut off someone's fingers.

But no, it wasn't a love letter. It was an Umbridge letter. Mentally, he sighed. The toady woman really was tiresome. Clever and capable, but tiresome. And perhaps a bit over ambitious if the contents of her letter were anything to go by. She quite thoroughly reported everything that Snape already had, perhaps hoping she would reveal something her supervisor had withheld.

Really, did that woman believe she could ever surpass Severus or even Bella? He tossed the letter aside, seeing no reason to waste time with a response.

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Ronald Weasley stared down at his adversary with a combination of disappointment and irritation. Harry Potter really did have Blue Pox after all, and was not just covering up the fact that one of Ron's spells had done real damage. The bruises, the split lip, and the tiny cuts on Potter's hand and arm had already been healed, leaving only a series of little blue spots to justify his hospitalization.

Currently, Potter was sleeping restlessly, his pale skin shiny with fever-induced sweat. Ron didn't like it. He thought he'd take pleasure in the discomfort of the pompous bastard, but it felt wrong to see him brought low by something as menial as a flu. He never admitted it to anyone, least of all himself, but the Gryffindor had always seemed indestructible. But he had bled under Ron's fists, made mortal by a mortal.

Now, Ron couldn't claim he defeated a god, but he could claim what was rightfully his.

"Potter."

The sickly boy flinched, awakening with a groan and a hand blocking the dim light of the infirmary from his eyes. The medi-witch had left his glasses on, but even then the room looked blurry at first. He finally managed to lock onto the vague shape of someone standing at the foot of his bed, and after a long tense moment Ron's expressionless face came into focus.

Harry tensed. Without looking, he already knew that they were the only two there, and of them only Ron had his wand. There was absolutely nothing comforting about this situation.

Yet Ron did not have his wand in his hand and he made no move for it, merely stared at Harry intently, making a demand the Gryffindor

couldn't understand yet couldn't deny. How long they remained there, silently staring at each other he didn't know. But finally, Ron's blank expression broke into a pleased smirk.

"Hn."

With that, Ron walked away, leaving Harry to wonder what had happened or if it all hadn't merely been a fever dream. Let him wonder, Ron thought, he had gotten what he had come for.

Potter had looked at him.

Potter had seen him.

And if the mudblooded bastard ever dared to disregard him again, he'd leave him a bloody smear on the stones of Hogwarts.

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A week passed, leaving Harry to dismiss Ron's visit as nothing more than one of a series of bad dreams. The Pox left him weak, fevered, and light headed, despite the many potions Madam Pomfrey poured down his throat. Worse than this, however, was the endless boredom. Hermione visited him daily, usually in the company of his other friends and occasionally a teacher as well, but she could never stay long and in her absence the infirmary was a silent and lonely place. Reading and studying were impossible, his mind still too foggy from fever and potions to concentrate, leaving him to random thoughts and during his more energetic periods he could squeeze in a few sketches.

The only even slightly remarkable thing to happen was a visit from a Hogwarts' Herald student reporter, Abigail Bilst, and her young photographer Collin Creevy. Some rather unflattering rumors about what had happened in dueling club had been circulating, and they had both come to confirm or bust the official story. Abbey seemed disappointed that her first story didn't have some hidden twist, but seemed delighted to have an interview with him. Apparently, she had to beat four other students in a round of Exploding Snaps to get it.

Harry wasn't sure if he should be flattered, amused, or vaguely worried.

He settled on amused, because he didn't get near enough amusement in that place.

A second week passed, leaving Harry a little stronger, a little more clear headed, and with fewer spots. And he remembered. He remembered his desperate escape through the halls, 'the voice' chasing him the entire way, Snape confrontation at the doors, his own mad conjecture proven true by the potion master's reaction.

And it was all pointless. Because...

"Harry, don't speak," Hermione begged, her friend bent over himself and coughing violently into his sheets. Around them his erratic wild magic opened and shut shutters, knocked over flower vases, and exploded a nearby pillow. "I'll go get Madam Pomfrey!"

"No-wait! Her-" more violent coughs wracked his body, until the medi-witch appeared and dosed him with one of her potions. His fall into unconsciousness was swift and deep.

When he had woken again it was late, and Snape was standing over him with only a Lumos Charm to see by. His expression was devoid of emotion, of anything resembling regret or guilt.

"What did you do to me?" Harry hissed through clenched teeth.

"I protected you."

"You poisoned me."

"Don't be melodramatic, Potter. You are safe here. There are more wards protecting the occupants of the hospital wing than half of Hogwarts combined. Now you have a reasonable excuse to remain here. You should thank me."

"Fuck you."

Snape arched a brow.

"I will overlook your asinine attempt at insult just this once, as you are ill."

"I'm not ill. I'm poisoned and I'm pissed."

“Mm... well, I didn’t come to argue semantics. Aren’t you going to ask me about the contract?”

Harry was diverted in his search for something to throw at the potion's master by his question.

“What contract?”

“The one that made you almost cough out your lungs when you tried to tell my goddaughter what you had learned. The one that will cramp your fingers if you ever try to write it and scatter your thoughts if someone were to try and legilimens you. The one that will protect the Dark Lord’s secrets. That contract.”

“... I don't remember...”

“You weren’t really coherent when you signed. In fact, I think you signed ‘Hairy Plumber’, but with magical contracts you could have signed ‘Mary Antoinette’ and it wouldn’t have made a difference. You’re bound, Mr. Potter, and there’s no getting around it.”

Harry could only stare at the man, horrified. Snape waited for him to say something, but quickly grew impatient.

“Well, goodnight then, Potter.”

The lumos charm ended, plunging everything into total darkness, and by the time Harry's eyes readjusted the infirmary was empty.

[illegible]

Harry managed to catch up on his school reading fairly quick, with nothing else to do, and though he was not yet in enough control of his magic to practice spells he practiced the hand movements with a pencil. Anything was better than thinking about Snape's betrayal, and more importantly the success of it. A great deal of energy was spent just not thinking about it.

If possible, he was even more bored than the week before. Hermione visited like clockwork, but she brought fewer and fewer visitors. Although, sometimes when he was napping he could have sworn someone else had been there, but could never be sure it wasn't the result of bad dreams. Hermione assured him that no one could enter the infirmary without alerting Madam Pomfrey, who had reported no one but the odd patient and occasional student visitor.

That Sunday brought the first edition of the Hogwarts Herald, delivered by Hermione herself. She was giddy.. He found it pretty amusing until she accidentally smacked him in the head with the rolled up newspaper (she still wasn't allowed close enough to simply hand it to him), her excitement badly affecting her aim.

"I'm sorry!"

He righted his glasses, and offered her a wane smile.

"That's ok. So how's it going?" he asked, unrolling the paper. It was thicker than he'd thought it would be, nearly as thick as the daily Wizing Weekly. The front page read "Meet the Heralds of Hogwarts" and showed a large picture of the paper's staff, including Hermione sitting right up front with the more prominent older students.

"Fantastic! Everyone did a marvelous job! I wasn't sure if we were going to make our deadline, but Professor Toure really knows how to get people organized. We put an article about her under 'The Teacher's Tattler', and it mentions she used to be coordinator at the National Wizing History Museum. And to think before that she-"

Harry listened to her with half an ear, most of his attention focused on the various articles scattered in the paper. It was actually pretty interesting. There were articles about recent events, future events,

student activities, teacher and student announcements, weather reports, a gossip column, a fashion column, sports sections, advice column for school related problems, study tips, health section (which he was amused to find his picture a part of), student interviews, teacher interviews (this week was Toure as Hermione mentioned). The student interview featured none other than Tom, coming off as charming and poised even on paper.

He skimmed Tom's article briefly, but it revealed nothing he hadn't heard about him before. Disappointed, he checked the 'Events in Review' to see if anything new or the least bit suspicious had been written about 'the Guardian'. Aside from a article about the 'hex epidemic' that had since passed, there was nothing unusual mentioned. He wasn't surprised.

Looking over at Hermione happily chattering away about the paper's success and her plans for future articles, he couldn't feel too terribly guilty. Nothing bad had happened and Hermione was happier than he could ever recall seeing her. Perhaps 'the Guardian' had been following Harry, and now that he was seemingly out of reach it had left. It was too much to hope, but it was the season...

Which reminded him.

"I don't suppose I've received another invite to the Malfoy Christmas party?"

Hermione, who had gone off on a tangent about Collin Creevey's questionable photographer's morality was brought up short in her speech. Confused, she merely blinked at him for a moment.

"Oh! I told you last week. We only hold those balls on even years. We're sort of in an agreement with the Hothwell family, who hold the balls on odd years. Otherwise we get into quite the competition over guests. I'm not surprised you don't remember. You were pretty loopy from fever."

Harry couldn't remember much of last week, and it was his greatest wish that no one else would remember him like that either. 'Loopy' wasn't a very flattering state to be in.

“What about you, Harry?” she asked, “Has Professor Snape or Professor McGonagall come to talk to you about where you’ll be spending winter break?”

“What do you mean? I assumed I would be staying here for the holidays, like last year.”

Hermione frowned, somewhat worried.

“I would have thought... oh, never mind. Turn to page four, under ‘Important Announcements.’”

He did as instructed, skimming over the schedule for midterm exams and located just above the Hogwart’s Express Departure procedure was an unexpected bit of news.

Due to an unusually low number of available staff during the holiday season, all students will be sent home or to an otherwise specified domicile for the duration of winter break. Letters to parents and guardians have already been sent, and should all arrive by Tuesday. If you or your family have any questions, please speak with your Head of House. Arrangements will be made for special circumstances.
- Deputy Headmaster S. Snape

“Huh. First I’ve heard of it,” he admitted. Could this somehow be a part of another of Snape’s plans? Perhaps with the rest of the school empty, the potion’s master would attempt to find and capture the serpent yet again? He looked to his friend to ask her opinion on his theory, but a sudden flush of strange magic surged through him, invoking a series of violent coughs.

“Harry?! Are you ok? Should I get the nurse?”

He waved her off, continuing to cough. After a moment, it stopped. He had forgotten about Snape’s contract, but clearly it hadn’t forgotten him. Running his hand through his hair in frustration, he tried to think of what to do next.

“Still sick,” he said distractedly, voice a bit raspy now. “But at least I didn’t tip any glasses or something.”

Hermione nodded sympathetically, and got up to go.

“You should rest if you want to get better before break. I’ll talk to McGonagall and see what their plans are for you. You can keep the paper.”

“Thanks.”

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After Hermione left, no one else visited that evening or the Monday morning that followed. Alone with his thoughts and frustrations, the restlessness that had plagued Harry since his hospitalization came to a peak. He could not stand to lay there in bed any longer.

He peeked down the hall of the fourth floor corridor, and finding it predictably empty, moved quickly until he reached the next turn. At ten in the morning, everyone would be in class, including Madam Pomfrey who taught Intro to Medical Wizardry twice a week at this time. That gave him one hours to search the school and get back to bed before anyone noticed him.

Hardly feasible, but he had a few places in particular that he wanted to check out. The dungeon would have been his first choice, but he couldn’t risk being caught by Snape, so he began with the hall outside the library and made his way to every place he could remember hearing ‘the voice’. Now that he had figured out it was from a snake, he though he might have better luck finding it... possibly even reasoning with it to return to the place it had been guarding.

So far all he had to show for his trouble was a nasty chill.

“Harry?”

The young Gryffindor let out a startled squeak, and spun around. Climbing out of a secret passage behind a suit of armor was Tom,

looking almost as surprised to see Harry as the boy was to see him. Harry bolted.

He was half way back to the hospital wing when Tom finally caught him, catching hold of his wrist and spinning him around. Harry twisted in his grip, struggling weakly. Whether it was his own prolonged sickness or Tom possessed unusual strength, it quickly became obvious that escape was impossible.

"Let go, Tom. I still have the Pox, you know," he grumbled, staring pointedly at Tom's hand gripping his wrist rather than the boy himself.

"Which is why you should still be in the infirmary. What are you doing out here, Harry? Merlin, you're freezing!"

The Slytherin released him, but he didn't have time to run again before he found himself netted in Tom's school robe. The robe was much too big and pooled over his feet. With a few flicks of the older boy's wand and a muttered spell, the black cloth began to warm like an electric blanket.

Harry almost sighed in relief.

Until Tom grabbed him by the arms, his grip wickedly fierce.

"What are you doing out here? And dressed in nothing but hospital pajamas? Are you daft?"

He flushed in embarrassment.

"Nothing. I was just... bored. I've been laying bed for two weeks and I'm sick of it. What are you doing out here? Don't you have class?"

Tom hesitated, his grip loosening.

"I... this is my free period."

"Shouldn't you be in your dorm with your classmates?"

Tom snorted.

“If I have to spend one more minute listening to what so-and-so’s parent is buying them for Christmas, someone’s not going to live long enough to get their gifts,” the Slytherin said, sneering. His expression smoothed when he looked back to a Harry. “Why are you here, Harry? I can think of a dozen better...warmer places an escapee-patient might prefer.”

“Then why aren’t you there?”

Again, that moment of hesitation and Harry was quickly beginning to think Tom was up to something. He wondered if... could Tom be looking for ‘the guardian’ too? Did Tom know or at least suspect the true nature of Sweetie’s killer? If so, how much did he know about Harry’s own investigation? Was the older boy spying on him that day in the library for that reason?

A thousand thoughts bombarded him, all questioning Tom’s possible role in the mystery and whether it was curious investigator or... something else. Something that was too absurd to think about. Tom was his friend, why would he spy on him? But then why wouldn’t he tell Harry if he knew something?

“I refuse to have a conversation in the middle of the hall with someone in pajamas,” Tom said finally. “I’ll take you back to the infirmary and we can talk there.”

Once enclosed in the warmth and privacy of the infirmary, they each settled into a chair. For a long moment, neither said anything. Then Tom looked at his watch and sighed.

“I have to be back in the dungeons in twenty minutes, so we best make this brief and to the point. Why were you wandering in the halls?”

Harry shrugged, unable to answer truthfully even if he wanted to. Tom frowned.

“Were you... looking for it? That thing that hurt your teammate?”

Green eyes widened. Tom's frowned deepened.

"You can't keep doing this, Harry. You're much too important to be risking your life over trivialities. Let Professor Snape take care of it."

"Trivialities? A girl is dead, Tom! There's nothing trivial about it! And Snape's the bloody reason I'm in here!"

The Slytherin's mouth twitched, fighting a smirk as he poked at a prominent blue spot on Harry's forehead.

"Yes, it was rather clever of him too. No one's even suspected, not even your own best friend. And I heard she was smart."

The Gryffindor slapped Tom's hand away from his forehead, glowering. Anger bloomed in his heart, its root feeding on his sense of betrayal. He should of know, he thought. Tom had been too perfect. He had seen his lying smile and still been charmed. But Tom wasn't what he had thought... hoped?... he was. But how far did the lie go? Was the mask simply a charming cover for his more callous and cynical thoughts or did they hide something more sinister?

"Tom... what do you know?"

The Slytherin smirked.

"What anyone with half a brain, a little bit of curiosity, and access to the Restricted Section of the library might know. I imagine you've figured out quite a bit yourself."

"You didn't answer my question."

"You didn't answer mine either."

True.

Tom glanced at his watch again.

"I don't have much time left, and after this I may not be able to visit you again before break. How would you like to spend the holidays with me?"

Now where did THAT come from? Tom's charm was back, his clever little smile directed at Harry, and his eyes were intense...no...welcoming?

"What?"

"I had hoped to keep you out of the matter, but if you're going to be stubborn we might as well work together. I was planning on spending Christmas in Askrigg. Have you ever been there? Tiny little town, but very pretty when it snows."

That sounded nice, and Tom wasn't acting mean or weird now. He was smiling and curious and just what Harry wanted.

"I still have no idea what you're talking about."

"I keep my best books in Askrigg. Spend the holidays with me there, and I promise I'll tell you everything I know and you can help me search for more. How about it, Harry? Will you come?"

Green eyes, different than his own, soften from intense emerald by little flecks of red, held him gently, warm as the charmed robe around his shoulders.

"I... I don't think..." he tried, thoughts of Snape's unknown plans for him slipping into the warm atmosphere like a cold mountain spring. Innocent, but distracting.

"Don't worry about your guardians, Harry. I'm sure I can convince them. I'm very convincing, aren't I?"

Yes, he was definitely that, he thought hazily. But there wasn't much he had to convince Harry of after all, was there? Why spend Christmas alone when he could spend it with a friend he both liked and admired? One who shared his interest in the-

A familiar surge of foreign magic welled up, spilling out into violent coughing, breaking the connection Tom had made to his mind. The connection that had sought out the knowledge Harry's contract would protect, even from legilimency.

"Harry! What's wrong?"

Tom's hands were on his shaking shoulders, and Harry shoved him away harshly, stumbling away from him. The robe fell from shoulders, tangling his feet and dragging him to the floor.

"Don't touch me! Don't come anywhere near me! You-you...bloody..." he snarled up at him, eyes flashing in rage. Tom was stunned.

"Harry?" he tried softly, looking almost pitifully confused. All Harry saw was a lie.

"You... I trusted you! I thought you were my friend! Then you tried to...to... I THOUGHT YOU WERE MY FRIEND!"

The lie fell away, leaving Tom's expression cold and his eyes devilish red. Like a striking serpent, he went from absolute stillness to violent motion within a fraction of a second. He shoved the smaller boy to the floor, pinning his wrists beside his head.

"I am the only friend you will ever need," he hissed, parseltongue turning an already dangerous statement into something obscene. Harry could only lay there, stunned and frightened.

Tom's expression softened, and he released Harry's wrists when he showed no signs of struggling. He let out a long, frustrated sigh and checked his watch.

"Damn it. Out of time."

He pointed his wand at Harry.

"Obliviate!"

Oh, well that actually made sense. It wasn't exactly flattering, but at least it made sense.

“You should be released from the infirmary Wednesday afternoon, which will give you just enough time to collect your assignments and pack. McGonagall has assigned a Prefect to keep an eye on you... incase you suddenly relapse from your illness.”

Harry snorted. Snape smirked.

“The train leaves the next day at exactly 8 o’clock. You must be ready to leave the castle at seven-fifteen with the rest of your House. A WYRA representative will be in London to escort you to the estate. After that, it’s up to the Dark Lord. Happy Holidays.”

“I hope you’re hit by low flying reindeer.”

“If only I were so lucky. The Headmistress is returning on Friday.”

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1. Remember Blue Pox? I mentioned it in the first book. It’s a common illness of young wizard. Sneezing commonly results in the lights flickering on or off, and other odd little things happening.

Book II:

Chapter 17: The Prince and the Fortress

Outside it was snowing, and it had been since Harry and all his classmates had left Hogwarts. The heavy, fluffy white flakes had gradually given way to sleet as they drew further south towards London. Inside the Hogwarts' Express, however, the atmosphere was warm and bright and smelled strongly of chocolate and peppermint. Christmas carols were being sung, picked up and left off by who ever wanted to join in, and laughter filled the silences in between.

The compartment Harry had managed to procure was already crowded with luggage and his friends. For once, Harry was able to sit with Natalie and Draco, made possible by Ron opting to sit with his siblings. Clyde had opted to sit with them, avoiding his 'uncles' as much as possible before being trapped with them at home. Natalie had gleefully offered to hold a spherical basket for Harry, and peeked inside at Inana's dozing form every so often.

"Would you stop that," Draco grouched, glaring suspiciously at the basket, "It's going to wake up eventually and then bite you on the nose."

"But she's so pretty!"

"And can kill you within minutes!"

"Even better!"

Hermione and Draco rolled their eyes. The Malfoy heir turned to Harry.

"You couldn't have left it in the baggage car?"

"It's not heated back there. Besides, when I told the baggage carrier what was inside the basket, they refused to touch it. Don't be a sissy, Draco. I fed her before we left, so she'll sleep for the next couple of days."

“Just because I have a survival instinct that surpasses that of lemming doesn’t make me a sissy.”

Harry just chuckled. He had missed his Slytherin friends and the battle of wits and philosophy that inevitably sparked between. If Draco was at all resentful of the trouble sparked between Gryffindor and Slytherin and the unpleasant restrictions that had resulted, he did an impeccable job at hiding it. They had spent most of the day discussing the last couple of weeks, finding out where their houses differed in perspective of recent events.

“Speaking of survival instinct,” Natalie said, redirecting the conversation, “Are you ready to face the Dark Lord, Harry?”

Harry sighed, and wondered that himself.

“How can I be ready? I mean, it’s the Dark Lord. What’s he do for Christmas anyway?”

“Absolutely nothing,” Draco said, smirking. “He’s a pagan.”

Now that Harry hadn’t been expecting, and felt a sudden nervousness. Witchcraft was technically a pagan craft, and Professor Toure had done much to remind them of that fact in History of Magic. She held a sort of contempt for what she referred to as the ‘pseudo-Christian’ religion most wizards and witches followed today, and he briefly wondered if she weren’t pagan as well. Yet for all the homework and research assignments she had assigned, Harry still wasn’t entirely sure what it all meant.

Hermione rolled her eye.

“Don’t worry about it. He might be a pagan, but he knows the benefit of playing a Christian to the public. Aside from the lack of a Christmas tree or nativity scene, I doubt you’ll see much difference,” she said. Clyde nodded in agreement, pulling a candy cane from his mouth to speak. Harry was amused to note that his tongue was now stripped red and white.

"Yeah, mate, what she said. Christmas is supposedly steeped in pagan symbolism anyway. And you get to skip those boring church masses and Christmas pageants. Consider yourself lucky."

Draco sighed, irritated that they had ended his fun before it had really gotten started.

"Fine, so he won't set you on fire as a sacrifice, but don't let your guard down. I doubt he invited you into his house out of the goodness of his heart."

Harry shrugged. He knew the situation was strange and more than a bit frightening, but what could he do? The chances were this was just a publicity stunt, which meant he would have to smile and look grateful around people and then spend the rest of his time bored out of his mind in his room. It wouldn't be so different from Christmas with the Durs-

Okay, comparing life with his relatives to life in the wizarding world was a definite no-no on his mental list, so he was going to make sure they never resembled each other even if he had to let Voldemort set fire to him to make it so.

"I'll be fine. I doubt he wants anything... bad. I'll just keep to myself as much as possible and be polite whenever we meet. I doubt we'll see each other much. He's busy doing... whatever he's been busy doing the last couple of months."

"I'm sure we'll find out what he's been up to before the end of break," Hermione said, "Lucius has been helping with his latest project. Crowned Negotiator, whatever that means."

"It means," Draco drawled, "that half the Court is going to be traipsing through our estate while we're there and most won't have the common sense to keep their mouths shut. Chances are we'll know more about the Dark Lord's latest plans than half of his inner circle. You should keep your ear to the door as well, Potter. You might learn something interesting."

Clyde snorted.

“Yeah, like what the Dark Lord does to spies.”

“No! Harry, you keep with your plan. Keep your head down and out of trouble.”

Harry chuckled at her overly concerned expression.

“Despite what your brother thinks, I do have some survival instinct. I fully intend to have the most boring and uneventful Christmas I can manage without being comatose.”

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The platform in London was crowded, slick from sleet, and gloomy this late in the afternoon. Harry procrastinated leaving the warmth and companionship within the train, but eventually he had to say his goodbyes to all his friends (and check his pockets thoroughly after Fred and George glomped him by surprise) and make his way to the platform. Claiming his luggage, Elsbeth, and Inana’s basket, he maneuvered them awkwardly to a bench under the station’s awning. Being closer to the ticket booth and opposite the floo stations, he was able to free himself from most of the traffic and dutifully await his chaperon.

From his vantage point he could see families finding each other, parents and children and siblings and friends drawn together and apart like droplets of oil on a smooth surface. He watched as the Weasley bunch gathered into a particularly large crowd, joined now not only by their mother Molly but by two unfamiliar young men who could have only been Charlie and Bill. Not long after they had come together though, did other witches and wizards come along and start to tear them apart. Clyde’s grandparents lingered the longest, chatting amicably with Mrs. Weasley, but they too eventually drew their adopted children and grandson away. Bill and Charlie rested reassuring hands on her shoulder, but even from across the platform Harry could see her eyes had grown large and shiny.

“Mr. Potter?”

Harry started in surprise, his wand in his hand and raised before he could stop himself. A woman stood beside him, her expression vaguely indignant at the sight of his wand. She sort of reminded him of Professor McGonagall, looking most prim, proper, and a bit severe; but where patience and the occasional ironic smile soften the Transfiguration teacher's demeanor, this new woman lacked anything that might make her more approachable.

"Sorry. Habit," he said, reluctantly returning the wand to the holder in his sleeve. She tilted her head in acknowledgment, but there was nothing forgiving about her expression.

"I am Madam Hardwick. On behalf of WYRA, I am here to escort you to Bristol."

"Oh..." Joy. "Nice to meet you. Um... password?"

Snape had been very insistent on remembering to ask for the password. Had even threatened severe punishment if he forgot to ask (how the hell would he know anyway? Unless this woman was his mother. She sort of looked like she could be).

She nodded in approval.

"Curiosity killed the Black Cat of Gryffindor."

Subtle, Snape. Very subtle.

"Come along then. We have a long way to go and traffic is going to be atrocious in this weather," she ordered, snapping her fingers. A chauffeur, dressed in a grey uniform appeared, taking up Harry's trunk and Elsbeth's cage. The young Gryffindor quickly snatched up Inana's basket before he ran off with that as well, and followed after the retreating woman. She led them to an old fashioned car, black and shiny with silver accents, waiting for them just outside the muggle station. Madam Hardwick ignored the curious stares of the surrounding muggles, and encouraged Harry to do the same by forcing him to quicken his pace in order to keep up with her. She

shuffled him into the back seat as quickly as possible, and after a suspicious glance around the station, climbed in as well.

The car was not the same one that had first retrieved him from the Dursley's, and Harry had a strong suspicion it belonged to Voldemort when he found the interior lined with dark green velvet. His trunk in the boot of car, Elsbeth in the front passenger seat, Inana's basket set at his feet, and a rather quiet and unfriendly stranger to his left, Harry tried his best to settle himself for the rest of the ride. It was rather hard to get comfortable with Hardwick's sharp grey eyes pinning him to his seat, daring him to so much as sneeze.

Once they left the station, however, Harry soon found himself suitably distracted. They were not traveling through wizarding London like he had thought they would, but through the muggle city. All around them the curiosities of his magical world gave way to distantly familiar things. Sunglasses, Christmas lights, traffic signs, Big Ben, trench coats, high-rise office buildings, snow shovels, and a postman danced across his line of sight with all the peculiarity of a polar bear lounging on the beach. Such inane little things he hadn't realized were missing, and was startled to find he missed.

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After forty minutes stuck in holiday traffic, their driver pulled off into a tunnel, and came out of it somewhere in the middle of a country highway. Bristol was about a hundred miles directly west of London, and though both were notable cities, there was very little by way of settlements between them. It was also colder in the interior, and the light cast a gloomy pall over the empty farm and pasture land.

Harry tightened his winter cloak around him, the chill seeping into him through the glass of the window even as the rest of car remained toasty. His chaperone cleared her throat, drawing his attention.

"Do you have anything nicer to wear?" she said evenly.

He looked down at himself and wondered what she thought was wrong with what he had. It was a little plain, but clean and in good

repair. WYRA had certainly thought it suitable when they'd given it to him last year.

"This is the only winter cloak I own. Really, the only clothes I have are what WYRA gave me last year," he answered nervously. Which reminded him that he needed to get some new socks and underwear. Perhaps some new shirts too, since the sleeves were starting to get too short. Not that he was going to ask her for any.

"I see," she said, her grey eyes turning inward in thoughtful introspection. She said nothing else for another hour. They passed a sign citing Bristol city limits at 12 kilometers, but pulled off the highway onto a county road and then pulled off again onto a dirt road. They traveled until they reached a short stone wall with a small wooden gate, and the chauffeur had to get out and use his wand to open it. As soon as they crossed the boundary the English countryside fell away to a thick forest, though nothing but more countryside could be seen from the other side.

"Where are we?" he murmured, but in the silence it was easily heard.

"The Dark Lord is a guardian of the people, but he values his privacy. Most of his estates are outside city limits. This one is known as the Sianach Lodge, named after the man-eating deer that are bred here. I encourage you not to wander the woods at dawn or dusk."

Didn't anyone like animals that didn't eat people?

"Thanks for the warning."

The Sianach Lodge was anything but a lodge. It was nothing more or less than a country mansion, encased in extensive gardens and lawns that gave way to wild forest. From the driveway, Harry could see a flock of pheasants grazing near a stone gryphon, and wondered what else wandered onto the grounds.

Harry released Elsbeth to stretch her wings, and within moments her white plumage faded into the misty gloom and she disappeared. Suddenly, Harry found himself surrounded by three servants dressed in green and black uniforms. They quickly gathered up his trunk and

Elsbeth's cage, but when one eager young maid tried to take Inana's basket he dissuaded her by showing exactly what she was trying to take. Her startled shriek was rather satisfying. They were lead into the front entry where they were met by two neat rows of six servants.

An older, but solid-looking butler with a green cord draped over his shoulder marched down the row to introduced himself to Harry and his chaperone.

"I am Mr. Whitby, manager of this estate. On behalf of Lord Voldemort and his staff, we welcome you to the Sianach Lodge, Young Master Potter."

The manager and the servants all bowed or curtsied to them, and Harry flushed, unsure if he should do the same. Madam Hardwick didn't, so he followed her lead. There was a moment of tense silence before Harry realized they were expecting some sort of response from him.

"Oh...er... Th-thank you. I'm... I'm glad I was invited."

Thankfully, none of the servants seemed to pay attention to his awkward response, and no sooner than it was out then they all dispersed to complete their usual tasks. Mr. Whitby spoke to him yet again, gesturing to a pretty young maid who couldn't have been more than twenty.

"This is Miss Victoria. She will be your personal maid during your stay here. If you need anything or would like to go somewhere, she will assist you in any way she can. Miss Victoria, if you wouldn't mind settling our guest in his room?"

The maid curtsied, and Harry blushed when she smiled at him. She was very pretty.

"It would be an honor and a pleasure," she said demurely, "If you would please follow me, Young Master?"

He followed her to a corridor and up a narrow stairwell. Once at the second floor, tall windows allowed a gloomy silver light to fill the hall.

He was surprised to find it appeared to be decorated for Christmas, bows of holly, garlands of real evergreen, and wreaths of pine and winter berries. Then realized these were pagan decorations long before Christians adopted them. The portraits lining the hall were mostly woodland scenes, filled with beasts and hunters moving cautiously through the painted greenery. Indeed, for all that the estate was clearly a mansion, the place had a sort of 'lodge' atmosphere to it, aided by the abundance of unpainted wood furniture and soft natural colors.

Victorial led him to a room at the farthest end of the hall, opening it to reveal a large room with sets of windows of two adjoining walls, looking out over the gardens and forest beyond. The room was done in elegant ambers and dark woods, dominated by a large four poster bed in the center and an ornate rolling desk in a corner under a Western window. He was immediately drawn to the Northern windows to admire the view.

"Pretty, isn't it?" his maid said.

"Y-yes, it is," he said, feeling strangely shy. He had never had anyone obligated to do what he told them, especially not anyone older than him, and he wasn't quite sure what to do with her. She quirked tilted her head, regarding him curiously.

"Are you really only twelve?"

"Yes, I really am only twelve. Why? Do I look older?"

"Not really, it's just... You know you're pretty well known, in certain circles," she said. She peaked out the door to make sure no one was coming, and that made Harry feel inexplicably better. When she did that, she looked much younger and more than a little mischievous. "You're probably the most famous twelve year old in Britain."

"I wouldn't know," Harry said, skeptical of her claim, "WYRA and Hogwarts and few hours in Daigon Alley are about all I've seen of Britain."

She seemed to consider his words, testing them against what she had heard and what she was seeing for herself. She smiled when she reached her conclusion.

“You seem like a nice boy. Is there anything I can get you? A snack or something to drink? I can give you a tour of manor if you wish, or would you prefer to rest?”

“Ummm... well, I do need to get caught up on some homework. Perhaps a trip to the library, and then we can save the full tour for tomorrow.”

“Very good, Young Master. Master has a very impressive library. I am certain we can find you something useful.”

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“I want those background checks done before the office clears for the Holidays or no one is going home. Let the personnel department know they can recruit from the administration office, and make sure McCullen knows not to give them any grief over the matter,” Voldemort ordered, standing before his office mirror as his assistant draped his cloak around his shoulders and fastened it with a brooch in the shape of coiled serpent.

“Yes, My Lord,” Lewis reassured, “I will have it taken care of it. Are you certain you wouldn’t prefer to stay in the city tonight? The weather has gotten nasty since this afternoon.”

Voldemort regarded himself in the mirror, and finding his appearance satisfactory, made his way to the door. His private secretary scurried to open it before he reached it. The receptionist stood and bowed respectfully as he crossed her desk, handing him his messages without a word. He leafed through them as he made his way to the door.

“Thank you, Lewis, but Harry should have arrived by now, and I wish to speak to him before tomorrow.”

"I understand, Sir. Will Mister Potter be joining you tomorrow?"

"Eventually," he said, exiting the inner sanctum of his Bristol office and entering the restricted offices, where six Court Sentinels suddenly appeared around him to escort him. The Sentinels eyed the enchanted paper airplanes floating overhead and the late-working employees peeking out from their cubicles suspiciously. Voldemort spared an acknowledging nod to his hard-working staff as he passed, before continuing his conversation. "He's recovering from a bout of the Pox, so he'll need the mornings and afternoons to catch up on his studies. There are some social gatherings I would like him to attend in the evenings though. I think it's time he's introduced to his future colleagues. Except for Bernstein. Make sure that woman and the little whores she calls her daughters aren't in attendance at any of these gatherings."

"No Bernstein whores. I'll see to it," Lewis acknowledged, vaguely amused at the order. Normally, the Dark Lord made it a point to have them around. They tended to keep the more easily distracted audience suitably entertained.

"And Moyse. That man's a pedophile, I don't care if they found evidence or not."

They left the restricted section of the office and entered the public corridors. A Sentinel at the front desk saluted as they passed and picked up the phone to call the garage.

"Perhaps it would be easier to fit young Mr. Potter with a chastity belt. I'm afraid political officials tend to have aberrant tastes," Lewis joked, then hoped he wouldn't regret it. The Dark Lord's sense of humor was patchy at the best of times.

Voldemort barked a short laugh, and dismissed the matter. Four of the six guardians and their master entered the private elevator, while two of them headed for the stairs. His personal assistant bid the Dark Lord goodnight and headed back to the office to complete the last of his orders.

The elevator released them into the underground garage where a motorcade was already standing by to relieve his current Sentinels. The two that had taken the stairs reappeared to confirm everything was clear so far. Six men already mounted on brooms surrounded his private car, and he walked through them without hesitating. This sort of security had become such a routine it moved like clockwork, even at times when it was designed to do exactly the opposite.

The driver opened the door for him and he slid in, allowing himself the luxury of a deep calming breath. Faintly, he thought he could still smell Harry and the distinct scent of snake in the velvet of his seat. On the floor of the compartment he made out a tiny down feather, no doubt belonging to Elsbeth.

"I trust everything went well, Helena?"

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Voldemort's private library was indeed just as impressive as Victoria had said it was. It hardly compared to Hogwarts, but the two story bookshelves lining the walls had a little bit of everything. And one particular book caught his attention.

He hadn't expected to find it. Hadn't even conceived of the possibility. All he had wanted was a book on magical booby traps for DA&D. Yet there it was, nestled between 'The Security of a Castle in your Home' and 'One Hundred Useful Creatures for Your Home and Garden'.

'Guardian Beasts' by Elmer Furly lay in his hands, growling softly.

"No way."

"Everything alright, Young Master?" Victoria asked from across the room, browsing through transfiguration tomes.

"Uh, yeah. Just... you know, some interesting stuff in here."

He quickly turned away, knowing his face was probably read like an open book. He took a deep breath. This wasn't necessarily the same

book Hermione was looking for. There were lots of books out there, no reason why there shouldn't be copies. Perhaps every library had this particular book. He opened to the cover page and nearly dropped it.

'Property of Hogwarts School of Wizardry and Witchcraft' was stamped in bold red ink across the bottom of the page.

"Young Master Potter?"

"Eep!"

He spun around to see Mr. Whitby standing at the library door.

"I am truly sorry to disturb you, Young Master, but your designer as arrived."

"Huh?"

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Madam Hardwick sat across from the Dark Lord, her severe expression unmoving even in the face of the most powerful man in Britain.

"There were no problems. He behaved himself well enough, though I might recommend some etiquette lessons. The servants unnerved him a bit. Though, I suppose anyone used to house elves rather than real people might behave similarly."

"I'll have Whitby teach him the basics," he said. "Anything more will have to wait until summer holidays perhaps. Anything else?"

"A haircut."

"I'm afraid that's pretty much useless. He has a terminal case of 'Potter hair'. No cure has yet been found."

She sighed, disappointed. They exited the garage and entered a narrow cobblestone street. The Guardians mounted on their broomsticks cleared the way, pointing their wands threateningly at witches and wizards who lingered about the street in order to glimpse the Lord of Wizarding Britain.

“He will need new clothes. All he has are his clothes from last year, and those are hardly suitable for more than formal than school. I’ve sent a designer on ahead to the house. Mr. Whitby was informed and is prepared for his arrival.”

“I trust they are discreet?”

“Mrs. Malfoy recommended him.”

Voldemort nodded in approval.

“It’s good to know that there is someone in WYRA I can entrust these matters to when Professor Snape is indispose.”

“Thank you, My Lord.”

He turned his attention to the man sitting on the other side of the woman. He was a short, solid man, easily overlooked in a crowd and easy to ignore in private as he was prone to neither fidgeting or talking.

“I trust all safety precautions have been adapted to include my young charge, Morgan?”

“Yes.”

“I will hold you personally responsible if it turns out your team is unprepared.”

“Yes.”

That was Morgan in a nutshell. A yes-man. It would have been annoying if he’d ever actually failed to follow through.

They made their way through wizarding Bristol without any delays and finally exited the city by crossing under an archway that exited from under a train tunnel and onto a muggle road. The driver killed the lights, hiding the car and the shadow figures that followed it. They stopped briefly at the entrance gate to the estate, and Morgan exited with the driver. The driver returned a moment later, but Morgan did not. Once they passed through the gate, Morgan and his men disappeared in seven resounding 'pop!'s.

A minute later they pulled up to the front entrance. Whitby was there to meet him when the driver opened the door for him and Hardwick.

"Whitby, has the designer arrived yet?"

"Yes, Master. Mister Spindle and Young Master Potter are in the White Room taking measurements."

"How was he?"

"Studious. He went straight for the library after we settled him upstairs."

Voldemort considered Harry's actions, and decided they were good. He wanted Harry to feel comfortable enough in his home...homes... to venture out from his bedroom. He made his way to the White room, Whitby and Hardwick close behind, unable to depart without his dismissal. He opened a set of double doors to a long room, painfully bright after his nighttime journey.

"A little privacy, please?! At least knock!"

Voldemort found Harry standing on top of a stool, stripped down to his briefs and turning bright red. He smirked in amusement, but sent his followers away with a dismissive gesture. He closed the doors behind him, and told the surprised designer to continue. His young protégé looked none too pleased that he was still there, circling his half naked self like a curious shark.

"You're looking a little thin."

An irritated look crossed Harry's face, but the embarrassed blush didn't recede. Mr. Spindle handed him a crisp white shirt.

"Yeah well, blame Sna- Professor Snape. No Quidditch practices for a month and then two and half weeks in the infirmary will do this to you," he muttered, struggling with the shirt that seemed too big in some places and too small in others. With a little help, he managed to get it on and Mr. Spindle went about setting pins for the refitting.

"I see it hasn't dampened your spirits any. How do you like my house?"

Deciding it was better to save his anger for a time when he was a little less naked, Harry accepted the subject change.

"Man-eating deer aside, it's rather nice. Ouch!"

"S-sorry," the designer stuttered, glancing nervously at the Dark Lord who ignored the slip.

"What do I need a new wardrobe for anyway? My old clothes were fine. Maybe I needed to let out the hem a little in the pants, but otherwise fine."

Voldemort snorted. He found himself a chair and slid into it, regarding Harry thoughtfully.

"You are more than a mere orphan, Harry. You are my protégé," he hissed. "You will dress to a standard I find befitting."

Protégé. Draco had called him that once. Natalie had tossed it around like flower petals. A few students had murmured it in the halls of Hogwarts. But Hermione had never said it. Snape had never said it. He had trusted that they would tell him if it were true.

"Why? I'm nothing but a trouble-maker."

Voldemort smiled, a sort of fondness in his expression he'd never seen before. It looked familiar somehow.

“We are two of a kind, Harry. Parselmouths, orphans, and brother wands make up only a small fraction of what we have in common. Even our differences strengthen us. We can do great things together. We will do great things together.”

Uh-oh, might have frightened the boy that time, if the sudden shift from pink to white was any indicator.

“Even if you are skinny and have silly hair.”

Oh good, the pink was back.

“There’s nothing wrong with my hair! Ouch!”

“S-sorry.”

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A few pin pricks and far too many clothes to fit in his single trunk later found Harry and his keeper at the dinner table. Aside from the serving woman standing behind them, it was a fairly laid back affair. Voldemort, predictably, sat at the head of the table while Harry sat at his right, conversing over pot roast and mashed potatoes.

The Dark Lord had opted to keep things light, talking of nothing more grand or ambitious than taking a shopping trip sometime during the holiday.

“Victoria is nice. Seems kind of young to be working full time though.”

“She’s a squib,” Voldemort informed him. “All of my servants accept Whitby and my security staff are. Most start working by the time they’re fourteen.”

Yet another surprise. He’d known about squibs of course, but hadn’t been interested enough to learn much about them before.

“Why do you take muggleborns from muggles, but keep squibs with wizards.”

Voldemort considered his question, or perhaps was just enjoying the flavor of his wine, before answering.

“Magic is a gift and a birthright. Nature provides the gift. She does not give her gifts to everyone, and her deprivation can be devastating. Yet we, as a culture and a race, provide the birthright. It is a history and a future that we share with all of our children. I find it fundamentally wrong to deny them this part of themselves. Especially when it will more than likely be the birthright and the gift of their children. There have been studies conducted that suggest the re-emergence of magical talent in later generations is more common than previously thought. There’s even a theory that all muggleborns are the descendants of squibs.”

That seemed reasonable, Harry supposed, except that despite what Voldemort had said, squibs seemed to have the short end of the stick. Working what he suspected were mostly menial jobs from fourteen till you died seemed a bit of a rip off. He was just about ready to point that out, when Voldemort took charge of the conversation.

“Whitby tells me you’ve already found the library. How much homework do you have to make up?”

Harry flinched at the mention of the library and reminder of the book he’d found there. For second, he wondered if the Dark Lord hadn’t laid a trap for him, seeing if he could catch him in a lie, then remembered if he suspected anything legilimency would be his first option and trickery his second.

“Um... well, I have most of my reading done. I have a lot of essays to do, but Professors McGonagall, Flitwick, and Sprout are letting me get away with writing half of what they assigned everyone else. I have exams in everything. I’ll be making up potions for months when I get back to school. Then I have some wand work, but I’m usually a pretty quick study with that.”

“I’ve taken the liberty of hiring you a tutor to help you. Hopefully, he’ll be able to speed things along. There are some matters I would like your assistance in.”

Harry felt panic well up inside. What could the Dark Lord possibly hope he could help with?

“Careful, Harry, if you decide to panic now you’ll choke,” Voldemort drawled. “I have several public appearances to make, outlining some projects I have for next year. All I need for you to do is stand around and look pretty for the cameras. I want the press and the public aware of you before you graduate.”

“Do they know about my parents?” he asked, hating the thought of being surrounded by cameras and people asking nosy questions, and then again of said people prying into his past and painting it across the next edition of Wizingard Weekly. He hated all of this but he could only focus on small pieces of it at a time.

Voldemort remained silent for a moment, regarding Harry’s sudden interest in moving his food around his plate rather than eating it. It was a good question, and one that had taken more sensitivity than he was used to dealing with.

“They know... but they won’t release that information. Not for some time yet. Who else knows about your parents?”

“Hermione, sort of. She knows they were both wizards, but I couldn’t tell her their names because of the Taboo. She found my family name in the Wizengamot. Does that mean I still get votes?”

“No, I had your family’s name revoked from the Wizengamot after they fled the country. Lestrage has them now, but I might reinstate them when you’re older. Your friend is discreet?”

“Yeah.”

“Good. We will let the public continue thinking you’re just an orphan muggleborn for now.”

“And later? A lot of people knew my parents. It can’t stay secret forever.”

“Let me worry about that.”

“And my godfathers?”

“That... is another question for later. You have enough to deal with at the moment without worrying about the things like that. That’s my job.”

“And my job is to stand there and look pretty,” Harry groused.

“And eat your potatoes. You’re too thin.”

He did as he was told, but was sulky about the whole thing. Everything had gotten weird and considering life before he had gotten here that was saying something. He was helpless, caught in the push and pull of people older and more powerful than him, thrown back into the same unease that had plagued him during his brief stay at WYRA. Hadn’t he promised himself he wouldn’t allow himself to put into that situation again? How was he going to pull himself out of this tide?

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Voldemort retired for the evening feeling more satisfied than usual. The slow progress on his latest project was briefly overshadowed by his current success with Harry. The boy was warming up to him, despite the recent debacle at Hogwarts. Their conversation over dinner had been littered with trivialities that he normally despised, but were strangely refreshing coming from his young charge. Every little mundane detail he took in, he twisted and morphed into something that could be helpful to Harry’s future purpose.

Harry got along with his squib staff. Perhaps he might go on to quell Squib protestors by negotiating with them.

Harry was shy in front of cameras. He would come off as modest or mysterious and the public would be made even more curious about him.

Harry was skinny and had silly hair... he'd think of something.

Even the boy's apparent reluctance with his new role pleased him. If he had been too eager, Voldemort wasn't so sure he'd be able to trust him. He didn't need or want another Tom. Speaking of which, he wondered if he shouldn't slip in a visit with his younger self after his meeting with Lestrage and Snape.

That, he supposed, would depend on what his two minions had to say.

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Guardian Victoria slipped into Harry's room shortly after midnight, following the schedule set down by her boss. Her real boss. Chief Sentinel Morgan was not a man whose orders you ignored. So despite the inconvenience and the risk, she flitted about the room in her maid's outfit and wand, checking for potential security risks.

Harry was fast asleep, looking very young and angelic despite the giant cobra snoozing on his chest. Victoria paused to regard the snake, but it seemed as oblivious to her as Harry was. It was the first sign of Harry's special gift that she had seen, the one that had drawn the Dark Lord to the child in the first place.

She shook her head and let out a soundless sigh. Poor child, he really did seem like a nice boy. How long would it take for their Master to ruin him?

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I couldn't remember how to convert miles into kilometers. Something to look into when I go back and proofread again.

Book II:

Chapter 17: The Pride of Kings and Princes

Harry bent over his work table, trying to ignore Professor Benjamin Beechlull's curious study of him in favor of his own academic pursuits. He had been reviewing Hermione's copious notes on Herbology and penning down an essay on the magical properties of roses since lunch almost two hours ago. Before lunch he had been reciting Dorian's Three Properties of Metal to Alloy Transfiguration and outlining his midterm paper for Charms.

Professor Beechlull, an elderly gentleman who seemed more curious about everything Harry except his homework, had been overseeing his progress. The man spoke very little, content to offer his name, his assistance if requested, and then relax in one of the library's plush reading chairs in order to watch him. Frankly, it was irritating.

Perhaps the only good thing about the man's presence was that Harry didn't dare shirk his school work and risk it being reported to his latest batch of keepers. Of course, left to his own devices, Harry thought he might have learned something more important from 'Guardian Beasts' than from Hermione's notes on the magical properties of roses. He hadn't been in any state to look through the book the night before, being exhausted and still reeling from his discovery. That morning hadn't been any better, as Victoria had woken him up early and hustled him through his morning routine and then straight to breakfast with no time to dally.

Voldemort had been on his way out just as Harry sat down at the long dining table, and offered him a short greeting, patted him on the shoulder, and then disappeared for the rest of the day. After breakfast, he'd been brought to the library, introduced to his tutor, and hadn't had an unsupervised moment since. Even now, the book sat in a neat pile by his desk amongst yesterday's selection. A constant temptation he couldn't yet indulge.

At a quarter to three there was a knock on the library door, and Mr. Whitby and Victoria entered.

"I'm afraid studies are finished for the day, Professor. Young Master has an appointment," Mr. Whitby said formally. Beechlull raised a curious brow, but said nothing as Victoria shuffled Harry out of the library.

"Come along, Young Master. We need to get you ready," she gushed, looking rather giddy about something.

Harry was a bit more dubious.

"For what?"

"There's a press conference today at four. The Dark Lord has requested you be in attendance."

The young Gryffindor felt a surge of panic.

"What's the conference for? I'm not going to have to talk to the press, am I?"

Victoria giggled, hurrying him up to his bedroom without a moment's pause.

"Who knows? I was just told to make you look appropriately plush and debonair."

"What does that mean?!"

They entered his room and Victoria went straight to his closet. Her reply was partially muffled by his new wardrobe.

"It means a suit, tie, and that lovely new cloak the tailor dropped off this morning."

Moments later, she reappeared with said ensemble, and took his shoes to be polished as he got dressed. Harry had worn suits before, but never in the wizarding world. His vaguely resembled Snape's usual black teaching robes, but were of a silkier material with dark violet vines embroidered along his inner robe, with a brighter violet vest over a starch white dress shirt with black tie. His trousers were

dark grey and his shoes now shiny. He wasn't sure what to make of it. Violet was not one of his usual colors, and he had a sort of fear of developing the inexorably bad fashion sense that plagued the majority of the wizarding world. At the same time, he thought he might indeed look a bit...ah...debonair?

"Ohhh! You look perfect!" Victoria squealed in delight. She didn't attempt to straighten his hair at all.

In his vest pocket, his watch began to grow warm.

"Are we running late?"

His maid let out a flustered squeak, and hurried him back down stairs. There was yet another maid there waiting for him, winter cloak and gloves in hand. The winter cloak was black and heavy, lined with thick fur, and hooded. The gloves were black, thin, and charmed to stay warm.

It seemed that if he somehow embarrassed himself it wasn't going to be over his clothes. Everything they'd dressed him in seemed to be at the height of elegance and style.

Harry on the other hand felt awkward and displaced.

He wasn't given time to linger on the feeling, being rushed out to the familiar black car waiting for him in the drive way. Mr. Whitby opened the door for him while he climbed inside.

"Good luck to you, Young Master."

"Er... thank you, sir."

The door closed and the driver pulled away from the estate. Harry watched it disappear longingly, before settling into his seat. He almost jumped out of his skin when he saw Madam Hardwick sitting across from him, her expression seamlessly dour.

"Oh... Good ... Good afternoon?"

She tilted her head in acknowledgment but didn't return the greeting, instead launching into the reason for her presence.

"Our Lord has requested I provide you with a more thorough explanation of what this press conference will entail and what will be expected of you."

He swallowed, processing what she had said, and then nodded.

"Our Lord has decided to re-organize our Court Enforcement offices, opening up a large number of positions for wizards and witches that do not require the stringent educational requirements of most Court positions that are beyond the average person."

Oh, more jobs for everyone. That sounds nice, Harry thought naively.

"He will be making the announcement today so that he might begin recruitment after the first of the year. This is to be a celebrated occasion, so our Lord thought today would be a good opportunity to present you as his... protégé? Most of the papers will be more interested in his announcement, but there will of course be a few gossip rags represented. You will be stationed with the Dark Lord's advisors and some of his staff, safely behind a line of Sentinels. Stay close to either myself or the Dark Lord, smile and try to act interested in the proceedings, and what ever you do don't pick your nose or scratch yourself."

Not even if it itches really bad? he thought sarcastically.

Having said her part, she said nothing more, which was fine by Harry. He was starting to dislike the haughty old prune. They disregarded each other for the rest of the journey. They entered Bristol on a muggle highway, then spent the next fifteen minutes weaving between muggle and wizarding streets, marked only by sudden change in pedestrian wardrobe and the intermittent silences of the planes landing and leaving Bristol International Airport. Quaint little shops and restaurants gave way to cathedrals, clock towers, and government buildings.

One moment, Harry was sitting back and enjoying the strange metamorphosis and the next he was plunged into a darkness. Startled he turned to his chaperone.

“We’re in Our Lord’s private garage. Security precaution,” she said dismissively. The car came to a stop and they were confronted by several Sentinels, who cast several spells to check them for... just about anything, before being escorted to the elevator. The elevator released them into the lobby, where Voldemort was already waiting.

After being shuffled about for the last two hours by strangers, Harry felt strangely grateful to see the man. Which was silly really, since it was Voldemort’s fault he was in this mess in the first place. The dictator was busy ordering several of his staff around, demanding reports on who was coming, who he wanted excluded, what pages he wanted dedicated to this story, and where was his cloak for Merlin’s sake? When he spotted Harry, he broke of his line of commands to gesture the boy closer.

Reluctantly, Harry obeyed until the Dark Lord was close enough to seize him by his shoulders. A cool elegant hand lifted his chin, forcing him to look out at the bustle of witches and wizards who had paused to watch them curiously.

“This is Harold James Potter. It would be wise of you to remember him,” he stated, offering nothing by way of explanation before seeming to lose interest in the boy altogether. Without a second glance he went back to ordering everyone around.

Harry felt rather miffed... or was it disappointed?

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“... For centuries, thousands of witches and wizards have been deprived the privilege to serve their country simply by the circumstance of their birth. Political positions have been treated as familial assets, passed down from parents to children, and withheld from others who long to serve this proud nation...”

Harry stifled a yawn, and tried to look interested just as he had been instructed. The conference was being held outside to accommodate the large number of reporters and curious onlookers who had gathered in the square to listen to their ruler. Despite the cold, the crowd seemed excited to be there, cheering enthusiastically at words like 'patriots' and 'opportunities'.

He wished he were among them, rather than stuck sitting behind and off to the left of the podium, trying not to sneeze or yawn or scratch his nose in full view of the flashing cameras. It didn't help that he still had no real idea what the Dark Lord was talking about. He understood that there were going to be a lot of jobs opening up at Court, perhaps even a new branch of the Court itself, and that anyone was welcome to apply, but not what the jobs were or what they paid or what people would be doing.

To make matters worse, he found himself sitting two chairs down from Hermione's foster father Lucius Malfoy. The man was poised perfection, not so much as a hair out of place and his gaze fiercely intent on his lord and the crowd that adored him. He knew Malfoy Sr. had a coveted position in the Court working closely with the Dark Lord, but Harry hadn't realized how close until now. He was sitting one chair closer than Headmistress Lestrangle was.

The woman had shown up just as they were being given instructions on where to sit by one of Voldemort's million-and-one lackeys, and seemed utterly horrified when she spotted Harry. Luckily, a completely unfamiliar man was stationed between them or else Harry thought he might not have gotten off with just a nasty glare.

Snape was no where in sight, but perhaps that was to be expected. Hermione had said that while her godfather coveted power, he didn't give a wit about popularity. Still, Harry wished the man were there. They could have been uncomfortable and bored together.

"- one more step towards a nation where privilege and success are earned, not inherited!"

There was more cheering from the crowd and Harry clapped with his fellows, desperately trying to keep himself from scratching the

thousand different spots that had started to tingle from lack of distraction and ignore the bitter cold seeping into his toes.

“- and a Happy New Year to you all.”

One last thunderous applause and a wave of cheering, and the Dark Lord exited, as regal and majestic as a lion and grinning with the subtlety of a snake. Harry and the rest of Voldemort’s entourage stood and followed as he passed.

“Harold, come here,” the Dark Lord instructed, not looking back at him. Harry was quickly becoming irritated with this strange not-disinterest, but he dared not disobey with Lestrage practically kicking him in the heels as they walked. Even if he wanted to kick the man for calling him ‘Harold’. Who the bloody hell was Harold?

Voldemort took him by the shoulder as soon as he was in range, having him walk beside him as they made their way back inside. The flash and click of cameras was conspicuous, and did not cease once they had entered the building. A flock of reporters and photographers were waiting for them, eagerly throwing out questions.

“My Lord, who will be in charge of this new department?”

“When will the name be finalized?!”

“Has anyone expressed reluctance opening Court positions to the average witch and wizard?”

“Who is your young friend?”

Harry blushed and ducked his head at the last question, unconsciously stepping a little closer and behind the Dark Lord. The hand on his shoulder tightened a bit, either to comfort him or ensure he didn’t retreat any further Harry wasn’t sure.

“I will, of course, remain the ultimate authority as Commander and Chief of the Court. But as I have stated before, these new positions, including that of the Department Head, will not be finalized until after

the first of the year and will go to whom ever proves most qualified, regardless of political or familial ties.”

Voldemort seemed to conveniently forget the third question and went straight for the fourth.

“And this young man is Harold James Potter. He is my ward, for the holidays at least.”

A curious murmur ran through the ensemble. Some of the reporters seemed to recognize the name.

“The Harold Potter. The only known parselmouth aside from the Dark Lord?”

Harry’s ears turned pink and he ducked his head even more. Voldemort’s thumb sudden stabbed him sharply.

“Eep.. I...ah.. That is... yes, yes I am.”

“Is it true you’re the youngest Seeker at Hogwarts in a century?”

Harry glanced cautiously at the Dark Lord, before answering.

“Yes... or I was last year, any way.” A genuine sigh. “Haven’t been playing much of anything at Hogwarts these days.”

Thumb stab. And did that man ever trim his nails?

“I mean... I’ve been sick the last couple of weeks!”

“Which is why I should take him home to rest,” the Dark Lord picked up, throwing off any further questioning of his charge. “It has been an eventful day.”

The reporters sensed nothing more was going to be gained from questioning this latest curiosity, and went back to getting comments on the Dark Lord’s announcement from the rest of the entourage. At last they moved into the restricted section of the building, leaving the reporters behind.

“That went well,” Voldemort remarked, entering a private corridor and releasing Harry.

“Yes, My Lord,” Lucius agreed, “They seemed very receptive to the idea.”

Lestrangle rolled her eyes.

“Why shouldn’t they? It’s the answer to their prayers. Jobs for everyone and all you need is a wand. You don’t even need to be very good with it.”

“Bella, now now,” Voldemort chided gently, “They all have their place. What they’ll lack in power and skill they’ll make up for in sheer numbers and obedience. Speaking of power and skill, I’ve been reviewing your latest selection of new professors for next year. They seem quite capable.”

Lestrangle preened under her Lord’s small praise, the first she gotten in several months. Harry who had started sulking, perked up at the news.

“New teachers?”

“Hush, Potter, this doesn’t concern you,” Lestrangle hissed, irritated by the boy’s very presence. She wanted nothing more than to cast several of her more creative curses at him and she thought she had conveyed that well enough with just her eyes, but the little brat actually had the audacity to glare at her.

“It will if we’re stuck with another McNair,” he said pointedly, then slapped his hand over his mouth. Bad mouth! Bad! What I have I told you about running away with yourself?

He got away with a dark look and a slap upside the head from Voldemort, a nasty look from Lestrangle (it was less intimidating while she was blushing from embarrassment), and a chuckle from the man he didn’t know.

"We're going to have to do something about that mouth of yours," the Dark Lord drawled, "It's far too compulsively honest. You handled yourself with the press fairly well though."

"I sounded like a twat."

Voldemort smirked. "Perhaps, but you came off as honest. That's why I didn't give you any prepared statements."

No, only a couple bruises, Harry mentally groused and rubbed his shoulder. After that, Harry frankly didn't want to talk any more and the Dark Lord seemed more than happy to let him continue sulking while he chatted with his minions about work and holiday plans. The sulking deepened as Harry overheard several dinner dates, press conferences, and charity banquets he was probably going to have to attend with the leader of wizarding Britain. Somehow he doubted it was going to be anymore exciting than it had been today.

There was a brief, more formal conference in the Dark Lord's office, which Harry was thankfully excluded from. He was placed in an empty cubicle and given some tea by a harried secretary, whose twitchy smile made Harry suspect she was only a few short hours from a psychotic break.

Harry used the sudden privacy to try and figure out what was going on. Voldemort had been strangely reserved with him today, even a bit cold, despite the casual conversation and good humor they'd shared the day before. Had Harry done something wrong, he wondered, or was the man just too busy to pay him any mind? If he had done something wrong, would he be told? Would he be punished?

He glared down into his tea. He already had been punished. He'd been poisoned and tricked into signing that contract. It might have been Snape's idea, but it was done to fulfill the Dark Lord's orders of absolute secrecy. Never mind that the bloody thing was trying to kill him.

Good God, what was he doing here?

How had he gone from orphaned nobody to the protégé of a bloody King? Dressed in the finest clothes a wizard could ask for, having a tutor, going to press conferences, mingling with the most important families in Britain... and being forced to keep secret a murder, attempted murders, and a murderer. How?

And more importantly, why?

The answer lay in Voldemort, but he could not truly trust the answer. The man would only tell him something sweet and sugar coated, like he had the crowd outside that afternoon. Something to induce compliance, even enthusiasm for something you didn't even truly understand. The truth... the truth was of a different flavor. Was it sour like Lestrage's superior, conceited view? Was it bitter like Snape's poisonous practicality? Or was it rich and dark with a sharp bite like Voldemort himself?

"Harry?"

The soft call jolted him, spilling lukewarm tea on his hand and the desk. He cursed himself, and quickly cleaned the mess with his wand before going out to meet the source of his confused thoughts.

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The ride back to the estate was a quiet one. Aside from the driver, Harry and Voldemort were alone in the car. Madam Hardwick had apparently found alternative means to get to her house, or her crypt, or whatever sheltered the stuffy old biddy. The Dark Lord was studying him intently, completely opposite of the earlier disregard. Also completely opposite of earlier, Harry had no desire for the man's attention. He avoided intent red eyes by looking out the window, searching the trees for life as they entered the Sianach Estate.

"Are you angry, Harry?" the man finally asked, sounding genuinely curious.

"So it's 'Harry' now, is it?" It was the first thing that came to mind, yet it wasn't what was truly bothering him. Of course, he didn't really want

to talk about what was really bothering him. This man's assistance could only make things worse.

The Dark Lord chuckled.

"Don't take it personally. It's necessary to put some professional distance between us while in the company of others. You are aware of how jealous Slytherins tend to be, aren't you?"

Oh, yes, Harry had been made well aware of that.

"Keeping you as nothing more than a PR prop prevents... or at least delays such feelings. No one envies a prop."

"And am I? A prop, I mean," he asked, watching the man in the reflection on the glass.

Voldemort looked surprised by the question, but quickly recovered, his expression curious.

"Do you think you are?"

Harry looked beyond the reflection to the passing buildings, eyes floating upward briefly, following the bell towers of a gothic style cathedral.

"I hope I am."

Now Voldemort's curiosity was anything but feigned. He had been unprepared for such a response. Why would anyone want to be a prop?

"Why?"

"Because... after I get thrown away, I'll do my own things. Stuff I want to do, with people I want to do them with."

Well, that was an idea that Voldemort could appreciate, yet still utterly not appreciate from Harry. Being shy or uncertain of his capabilities

as his protégé was one thing, but not wanting the job was a different matter altogether.

“... You ungrateful little bastard.”

Startled, Harry spun around. Voldemort moved with the speed and accuracy of his totem, a hand at his prey's neck before he could so much as lift his wand in defense. The boy's startled yelp was smothered with a sharp increase in strength of his captor's grip. Crimson eyes glowed like hot coals, burning with a rage that sent aimless waves of malevolent magic pounding against Harry's senses.

“I would make you my prince and you would chose to be a pawn?!” he snarled.

Dark magic pressed against Harry, crushing his mind and spirit, invading the cracks and crevasses like salt in an open wound. He buckled under the initial onslaught of pain, stunned by its intensity.

But then the will to live, to fight, to lash out at the source of his torment rose up with fangs bared, sinking its teeth into the dragon.

“FUCK!”

Voldemort snatched back his hand, stunned by the miraculous pain the likes of which he hadn't known for almost a decade. He now bore a crescent shaped wound on the delicate skin between his thumb and forefinger. He turned his wide eyes to Harry, the child's teeth bared and stained with blood. His blood.

“Prince or pauper, your pawn either way,” Harry hissed.

Already unbalanced by the retaliation, and again by Harry's savage look and words, he was unable to rouse himself to action quick enough for what happened next. The car wasn't moving fast, but it was still moving, which logically meant one should not attempt to exit the vehicle.

Gryffindor's were not known for their logic.

One moment Harry was pressed defensively against seat and the door, and then the next the seat was empty and the door slamming shut.

“Stop the car!”

The driver, seemingly oblivious to what could possibly have been construed as a murder-in-progress not moments before, hit the brakes on command. The car skidded to a halt, but by the time Voldemort managed to pull himself out of the car, Harry had disappeared into the shadows and trees.

“FUCK!” he snarled, pounding his hand into hood of the car. A spike of pain made him hiss, and unfurl his fist. The bite mark shown bloody with the beginning of a bruise forming around the edges. He glared angrily at it and it seemed to glare right back, righteous in the midst of his folly.

Yes, his mind taunted, you deserve this.

It was ridiculous. He had killed men for less than this. A lot less than this. Yet to be defied, no, attacked by a little boy? A god damned ungrateful little bastard...

Oh... oops.

Harry wasn't a bastard, ungrateful or otherwise. He was a descendant of Slytherin. Of the same blood, of the same clan, as he. A clan with a sense of pride too easily bruised. Voldemort had, carelessly, made the first blow. Harry had, rightfully, returned it. Then things had escalated, again a result of his carelessness.

Well, bother. Things had been going so well, too.

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Harry ran as far as he could and as fast as he could, which wasn't nearly far enough. The cold of the approaching night burned his lungs, forcing him to stop and cough violently. Paranoid, he scanned his

surroundings and then hid behind a large tree while he tried to think up a plan.

Voldemort had just tried to kill him... well, fuck. He couldn't go back the mansion or really anywhere in the wizarding world. Would the man send the Court after him? Would he come and finish the deed himself? What was wrong with that man?!

Oh, he had known about the violent temper. He had been at the end of it more than once, but he'd seemed to warm to Harry since then. How stupid of him to think it had been honest interest or affection? The Dark Lord was probably laughing at his gullibility, or had been at least. Right now he was probably thinking of creative ways to dismember him. Or maybe he'd just let the man-eating deer do it.

Ok, rest period over. It was time to get out of these woods, out of Bristol, out of the country when it came down to it. But how? Getting out of the woods was easy enough, he just had to keep walking. Perhaps if he was quick enough he could get past the barrier before they sent someone to guard it. If someone wasn't guarding it already. If it even required a guardian to keep people out or in. Had the driver just opened the gates or had he used a spell or password?

Alright, stop thinking about that. Think of something more important... like man-eating deer.

Feeling newly motivated, he tightened his cloak around him, covering his mouth and sprinted in the general direction of the exit. It was dark and gloomy in the forest this time of year, full of empty shadows and strange noises. Several times Harry had to pause, thinking he'd heard something or seen something move out of the corner of his eye.

This continued until after sunset, after almost an hour of wandering had convinced him that there was no way to get back to the road or the gate. He was trapped in a land steeped in magic. Perhaps the only way to leave the place was by the road, and now that he'd wandered off the path he would never be able to find it again. The wizarding world was full of such places.

Just as despair fell over him, stealing the warmth that his cloak and gloves provided, he heard something. He turned to see torches flickering in and out of view as they passed through the trees. Faintly, he could hear people calling 'Young Master' and 'Harold' and even the occasional 'Harry'. He turned to flee, but all that stood before him was darkness and dangers unseen.

"H-Harry?"

Victoria stood behind him, caught up during his long moments of indecision. She was wrapped in a dark green cloak, but her legs held no protection but a sheer pair of pantyhose and her shoes were even less suited to the cold. Her nose and cheeks were bright red, her teeth chattered a bit.

"Good grief, what are you doing out here dressed like that?!" Harry admonished, casting a warming charm on her. She sighed in happy relief, but then came back to herself to glare intently at him.

"What am I doing out here? Looking for you, you silly sod. What were you thinking running away like that?" she scolded. He gave her a glare of his own.

"Oh, I dunno. Maybe I was thinking, 'I don't want to die'?"

"So you ran into a strange forest filled with Merlin only knows what?!"

"No. I ran away from a psycho trying to kill me!"

That seemed to take away a bit of her self-righteousness. She fidgeted uncomfortably, scrambling for a retort.

"Well... The Dark Lord sent us out to find you. He's worried about you."

He snorted.

"Oh, come on, Harry! What are you going to do? Stay out here all night? I don't know what happened between you two earlier, but he's not angry anymore. I really do think he's worried."

Harry said nothing for a moment, trying to think. Really, what else could he do? He couldn't really run away, and he had known about Voldemort's strangely fickle temper. This wasn't the first time the man had grabbed him by the neck or threatened him, but he had never... never what? Never hurt him? Completely untrue. Never frightened him? And Snape's favorite color was hot pink. Never what then?

Never made you feel disposable.

Ah, that was it. The crux of the matter. He had felt like he was going to be thrown away, and so easily too. It wasn't a fear he had been consciously aware of. Perhaps it hadn't even appeared until that morning, when the man had so casually dismissed his presence and it had come to head in the car where he thought for a moment the man was going to strangle him to death. And he had provoked him to do just that. Alright, not strangle him, but throw him away. Was it to reassure himself that he would be fine with that or to make the Dark Lord reassure him that it would never happen?

But had Voldemort really tried to kill him? It seemed kind of silly now, really thinking about it. He had been angry, and an angry Dark Lord was always scary, but had he been deadly? No more than he had ever been, he supposed.

"Ok, fine," he surrendered. "But he better not be expecting an apology."

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Voldemort waited in the study for his servants to return with Harry. One of the servants had lit a fire, and it roared in his thoughtful silence, casting heat and light and shadows over the contents of the room. A few book shelves, filled with more instruments than actual books, the wooden floors, the writing desk that was little more than slanted table, and the ancient tapestries he'd chosen in place of paintings, gave the room an ancient feel he found homey and comforting.

He wasn't particularly worried about Harry's disappearance, the boy being more than capable of handling the local wildlife and incapable of leaving estate grounds without his consent, so he need only be patient. What did concern him was what he should say to the boy.

"Sorry, I tried to strangle you."

That just didn't seem to cut it. And frankly it was never his practice to apologize to anyone... for anything.

"I won't do it again."

That... probably wasn't true.

There was a light knock on the door. He had no more time and no idea what to say. Hopefully his improvisation skills would be up for the following conversation.

"Come in."

Whitby entered the study, followed by Harry, and then his maid still holding his cloak and gloves. Voldemort's gaze found Harry's. The boy's eyes were intense, guarded and distrustful, ready for yet another attack.

"Leave us."

Whitby and Victoria shared concerned looks, but neither of their masters were paying them any mind. They bowed as they left, closing the door behind them. With their absence, Harry's eyes shifted to the rest of the room, taking it in curiously. It was odd, but the room reminded him strangely of Hogwarts. Or rather of time in which Hogwarts would have been built. In the light of the fire, Harry was reminded of another time exactly one year ago when he had seen Voldemort stand before another fire place at the Malfoy mansion, and thought him a devil.

And he still thought him a devil, but a devil made more comfortable in his own fiery pit. He was bare foot and stripped down to his trousers and dress shirt, one hand holding a silver chalice and the other

resting on the mantle of the fire place. The glow of his red eyes seemed muted in the fire light, as did the rest of his expression. Was that restrained rage or quiet introspection Harry was seeing now? He couldn't tell, and until he could he was staying close to the door.

"Are you alright?"

Harry started. The voice was gentle, regretful perhaps?

"Yeah," he replied, reluctantly.

There was a tense silence.

"... You bit me."

"You deserved it."

Voldemort felt an unexpected twitch in the corner of his mouth.

"True enough... but I'm not going to apologize."

"I'm not going to either."

This time, he did smile, almost laughed even.

"Good... if we have nothing to apologize for, than we have nothing to be angry over either."

Harry glared, clearly not agreeing. He released the first button on his shirt and pulled at the collar, revealing the bruises encircling his throat.

"These say otherwise."

Voldemort mentally admonished himself at his own foolishness. Those bruises were going to be difficult to hide from the public. On a more immediate note, they were serving as a reminder to Harry of his own wounded pride. He was going to have to make amends, a gesture where words would not suffice. He set his glass on the

mantle and walked over to Harry. The boy took a step back at his approach, but didn't run.

Brave child.

"I have one to beat yours," he said, holding up his wounded hand to his protégé. The bite had turned dark, the exact shade hard to see in that light, but ugly all the same. Harry flinched. The Dark Lord mentally grinned. Perhaps he would luck out and obtain a little regret from Harry as well. "I tell you what. I won't apologize, but... I won't heal this wound with magic either. A reminder of my mistakes."

Harry was taken back by the offer. The man was throwing him for loop. He hadn't expected an apology, but even more so he hadn't expected an admittance to being wrong on any level. Penitence hadn't even occurred to him.

"W-won't people wonder?"

The Dark Lord chuckled.

"I doubt they'll suspect that you're abusing me, Harry."

The boy flinched at the mention of abuse, hand instinctively reaching for his bruises.

"We'll have to get rid of those before tomorrow afternoon. We're going to a charity banquet," Voldemort informed him.

"I... shouldn't I... keep them as well?"

"People will wonder. And in your case they will suspect I am abusing you."

Because you are, Harry thought, then dismissed the idea. The Dursley's had abused him, and though they had done far less physically, he still suffered from the wounds they had inflicted. Voldemort's behavior... was something more complicated.

"But... it won't... it's not..."

Frustrated with his own inability to express that yes, he wanted to accept his attacker's penitence without actually accepting it as the apology Voldemort wouldn't give, he resorted to a gesture of his own. He undid the button of his sleeve and pulled it up.

“Harry, what are you...”

And bit himself... hard. He let out a grunt of pain and released himself, swallowing the taste of blood. It hurt and lingered in a way that magically induced pain didn't. More real some how.

“There... a reminder of my mistakes that no one else will see.”

Voldemort bulked. He hadn't been expecting it at all. Improvisation had been serving him well for a majority of their interaction, but he hadn't counted on Harry's need for reconciliation. He'd thought all that could be obtained that night was vindication, in which he suffered for his mistake and Harry's pride would be soothed.

He wasn't prepared for it, and his wits had suddenly deserted him. He didn't know what to do now, didn't know how to accept Harry's unspoken offer.

“... You should go have Victoria clean that. Bites get infected easily,” he found himself saying, and felt extraordinarily stupid for being so inane. Harry didn’t notice, or perhaps he was as eager as he to escape the awkwardness that was quickly descending over the room.

“You’re right,” the boy said, re-buttoning his sleeve and turning to leave. “Goodnight.”

“Goodnight.”

The door opened and closed, leaving Voldemort alone with his confusion.

[illegible]

Victoria, as far as servants went, was more liberal than most, yet even she knew better then to question the bruises on his neck or the bite wound on his arm. He could see her suspicion, her indignation, and her worry but ultimately did nothing to reassure her aside from offering her a smile. She rubbed a salve into his neck and wrapped it in gauze, and per his instructions merely disinfected his bite and stuck on a large band-aid patch.

Afterwards, he asked to be alone to study and to have dinner brought up to his room. Now, Victoria was not really a servant, but she had come to understand the need for servant gossip rather quickly. When the cook asked if everything was alright with 'Young Master', she indulged the woman by saying Harry was simply tired and had thrown a tantrum and run off, but was now quite contrite and resting in his room.

She made no mention of what Harry had said earlier or of his injuries, though she feared for the boy. What could any of them really do to protect him? Morgan, the bastard, would probably be more concerned that Harry had bitten Voldemort, than the other way around. Ruddy bastards the whole lot of them.

Harry, for his part, didn't seem unsettled in the least. He had found himself an interesting book to read when she had dropped off his dinner, and when she had checked on him later he had fallen asleep over it. She roused him just long enough to change and brush his teeth, then set him gently to bed.

"G'night, Vicki," he murmured as she tucked him in.

She smiled and shook her head. Such a strangely charming child.

As she tidied his desk, she took a peek at what had been reading so diligently.

The basilisk is the second largest of all the known guardian beasts, but also the rarest. With the ability to kill by merely looking its prey in the eye, few wizards or witches are capable of handling let alone controlling it. Originally from the Mediterranean...

Charming, but with strange tastes in literature.

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“...I know it’s not shown on the map, but we placed one way seals on both entrances to the Chamber. If anything wanders in, it won’t be leaving,” Lestrage said, pointing to the general area of girl’s bathroom on one map and a part of the Forbidden Forest on another. Voldemort nodded thoughtfully, looking for flaws or weaknesses in the castle’s many new defenses and traps that had been laid since the school had been cleared of students and a majority of the staff. Lestrage and Snape had been thorough, and he couldn’t see anymore necessary additions to suggest.

“All of the alarms can be monitored from my office, and there is always someone present to watch them. When I’m not around it’s either Snape, McGonagall, Toure, or Umbridge. Only Snape and I are aware of all the security measures of course, but the others have proven their loyalty and I felt them trustworthy enough to remain in the castle.”

“McGonagall?” Voldemort asked, more amused than contradictory. Minerva McGonagall was indeed a capable woman and an asset to the school, but if she indeed had loyalty it wasn’t to him.

“Is loyal to the school. She is as territorial and fierce as any lioness. She would do just about anything to keep her cubs safe,” Lestrage said, strangely affectionate. The Headmistress held no love for the other witch, but Lestrage would be the first to admit she held a sort of reluctant respect for her old teacher. McGonagall was stubborn, powerful, and against all odds had managed to come out of the war relatively unscathed and undiminished.

Voldemort conceded the point. He too was strangely fond of the woman.

“Then it would seem that you have everything in order. I entrust Hogwarts to you and your staff, Bella. I know you will not disappoint me,” he said easily, turning towards the exit. Lestrage fought back a

grin, maintaining her poised neutrality at the compliment. It seemed she was gradually falling back into the Dark Lord's favor again. All she needed to do now was catch and destroy the basilisk and its handler and she would be firmly in his good graces.

"Oh, and do tell, Severus hello for me, won't you?" Voldemort said, glancing back at her. "I was hoping to speak with him today, but I suppose it can wait. The Christmas party perhaps?"

Lestrangle's triumph waned. Curse Snape. The man hadn't faltered in her time away, and it seemed that he had moved up in the Dark Lord's regard, even if he had failed to catch the culprits. She blamed Potter. Most of potion master's new importance revolved around his ability to protect, manipulate, and spy upon the boy.

"Perhaps, my Lord," she said, "But you know Severus. He despises parties and usually finds something 'more pressing' to attend to. I will let him know of your interest, however."

Maybe.

"Thank you, Bella, I would appreciate it."

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From Hogsmeade, Voldemort apparated to Askrigg without his usual entourage of Sentinels. The little coastal town held no wizarding community and Voldemort felt confident he could wander there without impunity. He appeared in an alley way between a pub and a café, transfigured his cloak into a trench coat and walked out into the muggle town. Despite his perfectly normal appearance, many people stopped and stared as he passed them, suspicion or curiosity clear on their faces. He had to fight the impulse not to pull out his wand and...

His private town house was suddenly before him. It was one of several, used more as a safe house for various officials than for himself, but he visited this one occasionally. It was small, but tidy and rich in historical details with a beautiful little garden in front. He

opened the wrought iron gate, stepped inside, the muggle world now safely separated by a tall brick wall, and breathed a little easier.

He knocked once on the door to announce his arrival, then let himself in. It was, after all, technically his house. Tom did not come to greet him. Rude, but not unexpected. A brief search of the lower level of the house revealed the ornery boy in the kitchen, eating lunch and glowering over a newspaper.

"You couldn't resist, could you?" Tom said, glowering at his elder counterpart as he entered.

"Whatever do you mean?" Voldemort asked, playing at innocence.

Tom threw down the newspaper at the Dark Lord's feet. The headline read 'You-Know-Who Promises Hundreds of New Jobs in New Year', and featured several moving photographs of Voldemort himself and one Harry Potter hovering beside him. The Dark Lord smirked.

"Surely you didn't think I'd let you keep him. I told you before, he's not for you. He's for all of Britain. The sooner Britain is made aware of this the better."

Tom's face twisted into angry snarl.

"Even if it makes him a target of your enemies and 'allies' alike? Are you so arrogant as to think you can protect him from all sides and at all times?"

Voldemort lifted up his hands as if to say 'probably not, but oh well'.

"Damn you!"

"We're both damned regardless, as you well know."

Tom snorted, and then turned his attention to his lunch. If Voldemort had come merely to mock him, and that was likely the case, he wasn't going to oblige him any further.

“What do you want?”

“Ah, nothing much. I just thought I’d see if you’d discovered anything more about the basilisk and its handler.”

Tom took a large bite of his sandwich, chewed it longer than was necessary, swallowed, drank from his glass of juice, and waited for a flicker of impatience to cross the Dark Lord’s expression before answering.

“I sent you my report already. The basilisk isn’t in the castle anymore, and since I am limited in my range of movement my investigation has run cold. If you’d release my restrictions, I would perhaps have made more progress. As it is, I don’t even know if the handler is a teacher, a student, or even located in the school. The more I think about it the more I suspect an outsider.”

“You know I can’t set you loose on civilians. I remember when you and I were the same person.”

“Then I suppose you’ll have to rely on your minions, and I’ll have to sit here and twiddle my thumbs.”

Voldemort did not appear surprised or annoyed with this declaration. He’d more than likely knew it all along.

“So be it. I’m just going to take some books from the library and be on my way.”

Tom said nothing, pointedly taking another bite of his sandwich. Voldemort went to the library as he said. After selecting a few books at random, he went the desk sitting in the middle of the room, unlocked one of the drawers, set something inside, and relocked it.

If Tom thought he was spending the holidays alone and unsupervised, well... let him keep thinking that. It made things so much easier.

Book II:

Chapter 18: Ancient Rites

PLEASE READ: The following scene contains depictions of Celtic paganism and some ideas anathema to Christianity. If you're a Christian who finds some of these ideas offensive or a pagan who is offended by inaccuracies, please don't take them personally. I'm only using the ideas presented as a fictional prop and not as a reflection of my personal belief or understanding of religious custom or ideology. So please, PLEASE don't leave Bible quotes or links to pagan sites or angry missives in the review box. It's just a story.

Otherwise, I hope you all enjoy the chapter!

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"Alright, Draco, how do I look?"

Hermione spun around, her pale blue and white lace dress spreading out beneath her. Her hair had been curled into tight little ringlets and piled on top of her head and held there with a beautiful diamond tiara. Narcissa had put it on her, along with just a hint of blush, gushing shamelessly about how her beautiful little princess was growing into a majestic young queen. With her foster mother's approval obtained, she went in search of a more masculine opinion.

Draco watched her little twirl with some amusement in the reflection of his bedroom mirror. He was dressed almost entirely in black, the large silver buttons and other odd ornamentation standing out in striking contrast. The effect, he thought, hinted at a malevolence with good fashion sense.

"You always look lovely, sister. I have a hard time telling when you look more so," he said teasingly.

She rolled her eyes, but her blush made the flattery worth it.

"Draco..."

"Now, now, Hermione. I know you want to look your best for your boyfriend-

"He is not my boyfriend."

"Oh... then can I have him?"

"Draco!"

"Just kidding! As I was saying, I know you want to look your best for Harry, but don't you think you're coming off as a bit desperate?"

She smacked him with a pillow.

"Ah! Not the hair!"

She smacked him again.

"You're gorgeous! Breath-taking! Helen of Troy was a hag in comparison!"

She tossed the pillow back onto the bed.

"Why thank you, brother."

He glowered at her, and tried to reset his hair in the mirror. He'd just managed to get it back into its immobile perfection when Narcissa appeared to hurry them downstairs. Malfoy Sr. was part of the Dark Lord's entourage that night, and would meet them there later. They took the bespelled door in the music room that usually lead to nothing but the wall behind it, but opened up into the entry way of the Hothwell Family mansion that night. They were lead to the ballroom, their presence announced, and as their mother made pleasantries with the Lady of the Estate, they quickly ducked out in search of friends.

They found Natalie flirting with a boy a good three years her senior under a statue of Aphrodite near the balcony doors. She abandoned

him quickly enough when she saw them, finding more challenging prey.

“Draco, Hermione, thank Merlin you’re here. This party is utterly droll. Not at all like yours. I swear, can’t the orchestra play anything other than Schubert?”

Draco grinned, accepting her backhanded compliment with a gentlemanly kiss to her white gloved hand.

“Natalie, have you even been here for more than fifteen minutes?” Hermione asked, just as eager for disagreement as the other girl probably was.

“I don’t know,” the blond girl sighed, “It feels like it’s been fifteen hours.”

“I take it Harry hasn’t shown up then,” Draco said, baiting them both.

“Alas, no. And I’m so looking forward to seeing him in his new threads. Analeisse said she got to see him at that press conference a few days ago and that the newspaper photo doesn’t do him justice.”

Draco shrugged.

“That’s Spindle for you. Fabulous fashion sense, even if he’s a bit dodgy with the needle.”

Hermione sighed.

“I hope Harry’s alright. He has no luck, and that’s sort of a necessity living with the Dark Lord.”

“Nonsense, it’s Harry,” laughed Natalie, “What can’t he do?”

“Brush his hair? Mind his own business? Get along with the Weasel?” offered Draco.

“Speaking of the Weasel, where is he? He’s usually following you at the end of his leash.”

Draco's expression turned disgruntled. The one thing he did not want to talk about was Weasley. If Ron had been insufferable before he dueled Potter, he was positively ... positively a bleed'n twat now. Not only was he openly disagreeing with Draco about things, he was arguing with him at the most inopportune times and places. The last he had spoken with the freckled menace was right before they'd left for the train, when Draco told him he wasn't inviting him to the Christmas ball this year and Ron said he frankly didn't give a damn. And by God, it appeared as if Ron meant it.

"Chugging eggnog with the rest of plebs most likely," he muttered. Hermione frowned at the use of the word 'plebs', but tactfully refrained from commenting.

The music suddenly stopped, and they turned their attention to the entry doors, where the Dark Lord was being announced, followed by several other prestigious names, and one Harold James Potter.

The Dark Lord himself was dressed in blacks and silvers (which pleased Draco immensely), the simple sharp cut of his robes drawing attention to the complex pattern of Celtic symbols embroidered into his sleeves and chest and back. Beside him, Harry was garbed in a similar style, only rather than silver, a network of bright amber topaz sprinkled over him. If one paid close enough attention, they could see the stones slowly rearrange themselves, giving the illusion of molten fire flowing over blackened stones. Standing beside one another, Voldemort and Harry made quite the pair.

Indeed, it wouldn't take much for one to wonder if they weren't in fact father and illegitimate son.

Hermione, as subtly as she could, made her way towards her friend as soon as the music started again and everyone went back to their dancing and chatter. At some point, Voldemort had seen fit to release his charge, and Harry immediately went in search of Hermione. They met each other half way, and she led him out of the ballroom. Lucius Malfoy marked their disappearance with some displeasure, before following the Dark Lord to the parlor for their usual private party.

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Severus Snape stalked into the parlor wearing black dress robes, plain and severe, and more suited to a funeral than a celebration. They rather suited him. Scattered about the room was the usual contingent of Death Eaters, their spouses, and the occasional offspring that was old and discreet enough to attend. The Malfoys sat side by side, their silent closeness a mockery to the trophy wives and their considerably older husbands who clung together in pseudo affection and the stony civility of those in arranged marriages. Lestrangle, widowed now for four years, held the love seat with the only available seat in the room.

“I apologize for my tardiness,” he said stiffly, striding towards Lestrangle with only a moment’s hesitation. The Headmistress gave him a cruel smile by of greeting, crossing her legs and drawing his eyes immediately to the wicked points of her stiletto heels.

“That is alright Severus,” Lord Voldemort acquiesced. “I was led to believe you would no be attending at all tonight.”

“Madam Umbridge owes me a favor. She agreed to monitor the alarms for me... ah, excuse me, for us...” he corrected, glancing towards Lestrangle. “Over the next couple hours. Without McNair to hound, I dare say she has plenty of free time on her hands, but I am afraid I can’t stay long.”

“I’m glad you’re here just the same, Severus. Every year it seems more of my faithful Death Eaters are gone from me. Damon, Gaius, Althea, and of course poor Rudolphus...” the Dark Lord said, lifting his glass to the aforementioned’s widow. Lestrangle smiled back demurely in acknowledgment, but then frowned when she noticed the bandage around his hand.

“M-my Lord, are you alright? Your hand-”

Voldemort glanced at his wounded hand, and chuckled a bit.

“Oh yes, that. Harry bit me.”

Someone dropped their glass of champagne, but that was the only sound for almost half a minute. Snape felt decidedly less surprised than everyone else, and wished he had just stayed home.

“Dare I ask ‘why’?” Snape said, deciding he’d rather move the conversation along so he could sort out a suitable punishment for when the boy returned to school.

“It was my fault really. I shouldn’t have put my hand so close to his mouth. Lucius, you’re a father. Have you ever had that happen before?”

Malfoy Sr. blinked, quickly recovering from his surprised stupor to nod.

“Yes, once, but that was when Draco was four, and rather adamant to convince me he was a real dragon.”

There were a few amused chuckles, including Voldemort’s, and the conversations picked up again and moved to other matters. Lestrage, however, did not join in, hearing what Voldemort had said and what he hadn’t said, and stewing with a renewed jealousy. Snape, never a true conversationalist, watched her carefully from the corner of his eye while pretending to listen to the Dark Lord thank Narcissa for her recommendation of her designer.

They lingered in the parlor for about an hour, performing their typical routine of subtle insults, subtler alliances, less than subtle boasting, and invitations into various political dalliances mixed in with menial small talk. Eventually, even the dour Bellatrix was drawn in. Severus remained apart from, and yet aware of, it all, and kept his keenest observations for Voldemort.

The Dark Lord was more relaxed than he usually was this time of year. Being the leader of a nation, he was always rushed but the end of the year was always the most stressful, and with his latest project running behind schedule it was even more so. Yet the tension, the quick temper, the natural disdain for the Christian holiday in general was absent.

Was it Potter's doing?

"Severus, walk with me."

The potion's master was pulled from his musings by Voldemort's command, and quickly moved to obey. A few watched their departure enviously. To catch the Dark Lord in a good mood was rare and often rewarding event. No doubt they imagined Severus was receiving some sort of gift or offer. If only.

"How is the search going?" Voldemort asked as they entered the empty corridor.

"No progress, I'm afraid. It's abandoned Hogwarts for the moment, but I doubt it will stay away. The castle is the only place it is likely to find both food and shelter during these winter months. January, early February at the latest, it will have to return or die in the cold. Whoever is controlling it must realize this. Traps have been set all over the castle, but most will have to be removed once the students return. I believe that is when the final and most aggressive attack will occur, and the purpose of these attacks will be made clear."

Voldemort digested the information, and finding the reasoning sound, nodded.

"That must not be allowed to happen, Severus. You have taken precautions?"

"Both entrances to the Chamber have been bespelled to seal themselves once someone has entered. I have also thickened the ice around the moat and closed the boat entrance, so nothing will leave or enter there. All windows and entry ways less than two stories above the ground have been likewise sealed. This leaves only the front entrance. There are more traps there, but they will all have to be removed when the students return."

"You have been very thorough," Voldemort remarked, pleased so far.

"I can not take full credit."

"But you can take a great deal. No students have been hurt since you've taken responsibility over the school and even now these preparations..."

"Have yet to yield results. I will not considered the matter resolved until the culprit is caught and the basilisk is dead."

"I trust you, Severus."

An incredible chill ran down the potion's master's spine, thrilling and terrifying all at once. It was a rare privilege to have the Dark Lord's trust. It was an easy and unforgivable crime to betray it. A crime punishable by more than just death.

"Thank you, my Lord."

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"Harry, I'm so glad you came!" she said, hugging him tightly. He hugged her back, feeling relieved to finally see a familiar face after the last couple of days. "I've been so worried about you, but all the letters I tried to send kept getting returned. I think there's some sort of protection on where ever you live."

"Yeah, I know. I tried to send Elsbeth out, but she can't fly beyond the grounds," he said. "So how are you?"

"I'm fine," she said, "but what about you? How are things going... where ever it is that you are? I've seen your picture twice in the paper already. What's going on?"

Harry shrugged.

"PR campaign. Sort of. I'm Harry Potter, symbol of the Dark Lord's care and concern for muggleborns and halfbreeds everywhere. Never mind I'm not really either and that I can speak parseltongue and am a witness in a homicide and an attempted homicide investigation. We make a pretty photo, don't we?" he said, his tone ironic.

“Oh, Harry...”

“It’s fine, Hermione. Boring beyond belief most of the time, but fine.”

Except for the fact I know what killed Sweetie, paralyzed Angelina, and may have tried to kill me, and that I can’t tell you anything about it because Snape is a clever son of a bitch.

“Oh, did you know we’ll be getting new teachers next year?”

“Really?” she said curiously, accepting his words and his subject change at face value for the time being. For the next hour he told her about many of the things that had happened to him, and despite what he’d said about being bored there was in fact a lot going on. He told her about the forest estate, his new wardrobe, his useless tutor, the trips to the Bristol office, the various events Voldemort dragged him to, and his maid Victoria, but nothing about the Dark Lord himself. She seemed to sense his reluctance in mentioning the man, but when she found an opening to question him he distracted her yet again with a Christmas gift.

“It’s for you,” he said, handing her slender black velvet box like one would find a necklace in. “You should open now, since I won’t see you again until the end of the holiday.”

“Harry, you didn’t have to.”

“But I wanted to.”

She gave him a smile, pulled the silver ribbon off, and opened it. Inside was quill, a raven feather with a obsidian pen head. Tilting it a bit made it gleam in rainbow colors.

“Oh, Harry, it’s beautiful.”

“It’s a quik-quotes-quill,” Harry said, “And not one of those shoddy tabloid ones either. It’s Legal Court standard. I figured you could use one for the news paper.”

"It's perfect," she said, a feeling thrilled jolt when she learned it was more than just pretty. "How did you get it?"

"I convinced one of Voldemort's accountants to trade a half an hour therapy session with his American Corn Snake for it. Apparently, some snakes don't actually like rats."

She giggled at that.

"I got you something too," she said, pulling out a little bell from somewhere in the folds of her dress. "It's an 'Unsilencing Bell'. It's really clever. You can hear it ring even if someone puts up a silencing charm, and if you press it to your ear you can hear even if you're under a deafening hex. I thought you could use it more than me."

The bell jingled as she handed it to him, long and sweet like a crystal glass.

"Thank you, Hermione."

"Good grief, don't tell me you've been in here the entire time."

They turned to see Draco stalking in with a bemused Natalie. Natalie moved in like hawk, snatching up Harry in her painted talons and remarking how dashing he looked in his new robes, and how she'd seen him in the papers, and where was her Christmas present?. Draco rolled his eyes and led them back outside to somewhere less 'tacky' than the cloak room. You never knew who was going to get drunk and stumble inside with some other random drunk and get frisky.

They ended up back in the ballroom, talking and laughing and Natalie managed to drag Harry off for dance when the band finally played something other than Schubert. He wasn't very good, but the dance floor was crowded with taller and drunker men and women, so chances were no one but a very amused Natalie noticed. And as full darkness came, everyone was invited outside for a fireworks display, the likes of which Harry had never seen. These were not the random flashes and streams of light he was used to, but a full on drama of characters played in fire across the sky. Savage warriors and

beautiful maidens and Druids and Romans and castles and forests and strange beasts moving across the sky in a story he didn't recognize, but felt stir his blood.

"It's the story of Hogwarts, sort of a New Year's story for wizarding kind in Britain," Natalie whispered, her head resting on his shoulder as they stared up at the sky together. "It was the first castle ever built by magic, and it was the last refuge for those who were 'gifted' when Rome decided one God was plenty, and destroyed theirs and everyone else's. There's a saying, I don't know if you've heard it before. 'Fire, steel, and God are as rain to the stones of Hogwarts.'"

And my forefather helped build it, Harry thought, a feeling of pride and sorrow coming over him as he watched the scenes of tragedy and glory unfold. The firework druids fled from the Roman soldiers, more lost in the flight than those that reached the castle keep. Monsters rose out of the lake destroying ships and wolves the size of train cars rampaged through the forests (so much closer to the castle than they were now) and tearing apart all they found there.

Gradually, the foes departed or gave up or could no longer find the castle, and the lights faded out of the sky to leave only the stars. Harry found his hand clutching Natalie's tightly, pressed against his heart, and immediately released her.

"Oh, sorry. I didn't realize..."

She shook her head, her cheeks a bit flush.

"Don't be."

"Harry?"

He turned to see a rather miffed looking Draco and Hermione watching them.

"If you turtledoves are quite done," Draco droned, "I think your Daddy is ready to go."

Harry looked to Natalie, but she shook her head.

“Don’t look at me. I have two mothers.”

“Then who is he...oh! Not funny Draco!”

The Malfoy heir’s smirk seemed to indicate that he disagreed.

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The next morning, Harry woke late. Victoria was not there to wake him for once, ordered from the house with the rest of the servants for reasons not specified. He entertained the idea of finishing some homework briefly, and then discarded it. The house was empty. He wanted to explore. He threw on his most comfortable clothes, a pair of slacks and a red jumper (compliments of Clyde and his ‘uncles’) and a thick pair of socks, and set about on his exploration.

He was met with an almost immediate delay when he tried to open the door and bumped something. He found a parcel addressed to him with a note from Victoria on top.

Harry,

This arrived for you yesterday. We don’t celebrate Christmas here, so you may as well open it now. See you soon.

Vicki

There was no return address, but a familiar symbol of a crescent moon over crossbones was stamped on the corner. It was his godfathers’ Christmas present. Grinning, brought it inside and opened it. There was a cloak inside, and Harry groaned. Oh Merlin, please not more clothes. Then nearly smacked himself for being so ungrateful. His godfathers loved him, but they didn’t have the finances or the availability to go shopping like the average wizard. The cloak was probably handmade and the best they could do.

He ran his hand over the cloak and felt it was completely made of fur, black, and incredibly soft. Removing it from the box he found it to be overlarge, and a letter fell out of the folds. He set the cloak on the bed to pick it up, and when he stood up the cloak was gone.

Letting out a startled gasp he searched the bed and floor, and gasped again when he found the cloak right under his hands, now a the exact shade of the comforter it was resting on. For the next five minutes, he tested the new material by placing it on different colored surfaces. By far the most intriguing result was the checkered black and white pattern he got when he laid it on the bathroom floor.

Perhaps this is more toy than clothing after all, Harry thought delightedly.

He wrapped himself in the cloak, felt its warmth and softness ensnare him, and then retrieved his letter.

Hey, Harry

Merry Christmas, or perhaps it's 'I hope you have a Merry Christmas', since more than likely you've opened this early. Good for you.

Harry chuckled.

Remus and I hope this letter finds you well. We have been hearing some disturbing rumors, which we thought you would have mentioned in your previous letter. Please write to us again soon, Remus is a hopeless worrier and I'm not very good with it myself.

If this was meant to guilt trip him, they did a wonderful job.

Well, enough parental nagging, and on to the fun stuff. We hope you like your present. Before you go 'oh no, not clothes!', let me assure you it's way better than an ordinary cloak. Your father had an invisibility cloak once upon a time, but that's still locked away somewhere. So until you find that one, this one should make a suitable stand in. It won't make you invisible, but the fur belongs to a Baluvian bear, which change colors to match their environment, and if

you remain still you'll pretty much disappear. I imagine you'll have a great deal of fun with this.

The letter went on to describe holidays in the werewolf didn't celebrate Christmas per se, but there was some festivities surrounding the New Year. There were bon fires, Song Nights, Great Hunts (during which Sirius had killed the Baluvian bear), Athena and Greyback had their third son together (and he looked more like his mother than Rhiannon), and end of the year maintenance they somehow managed to turn into a competition and game (trying to thatch a roof while avoiding tar being thrown at you was apparently a sporting event). Harry found himself laughing at Sirius' descriptions and longing to be there with them to see it all. It all sounded very coarse and even a bit brutal, but there was a warmth and comradery

in the undertones.

Feeling the beginning of melancholy set in, he quickly roused himself to do what he had been intending to do in the first place. He explored the kitchens, the ballroom, the parlor, the music room, the guest rooms, and the attic (for about thirty seconds before deciding it was too creepy). When he'd run out of unlocked rooms to explore inside, he transfigured a pair of his old shoes into boots, wrapped his new cloak around himself, and went out into the gardens.

There was a light snow on the ground from the night before, and the now cloudless sky made everything painfully bright. The air was still, frigid, and clean, forming steamy puffs of moisture with every breath. He pulled up the hood to his cloak to protect his eyes from the light and his ears from the bitter cold, and took in the beauty of this lonely world.

At first, everything seemed still and quiet, but the longer he stood the more he realized how false that first impression was. Small winter birds flocked amongst the garden statues, which poured out seeds like a fountain poured out water, chirping and arguing with intruding squirrels and rabbits and ravens. Deer, the sort that didn't eat people, were gathered near the edge of the lawn, pawing at the ground to dig up flower bulbs from the half-frozen earth, and lifting their heads every so often to 'chuff', tasting and smelling the air for danger.

Somewhere on the other side of the grounds he heard the trumpets of peacocks.

The crunch of snow beneath his feet as he headed towards the garden labyrinth seemed the loudest of all, though if any of the creatures about heard him their curious eyes couldn't seem to find him. He entered the maze without a second thought. He was not worried about getting lost. His path was marked clearly by his own foot prints, and after a minute or so he found someone else's as well.

Curious, he followed them, weaving through several turns he would have missed otherwise, and surprised more than once by statues of unfamiliar beings. The statues were all different. Most appeared human, although there were some misshapen creatures or animals, but not all were young or beautiful as he was used to seeing. Some were ugly or old or shown with three faces or no face at all. Though carved of stone, most were adorned with jewelry made from precious metals or animal bones or sea shells and draped in silk or leather or costumes of elaborate design. About a one of every four showed signs of recent worship. Offerings of candles, seeds, nuts, silver and gold coins, open bowls of wine or mead or blood or ink, and the remains of sacrificed birds and animals in their winter coats were placed on the plinths of these statues, turning them to alters.

It should have been frightening to Harry, who had spent much of his life in a world where pagan was the equivalent of satanic, but there was a beauty to it all. Everything was done with such loving care and attention to detail, with all the reverence he had witnessed bestowed upon the alters for saints of Christendom. If it had been dark, perhaps the fear would have come, but the deed done in the bright openness of the garden stole any ominous nature that muggle culture had instilled in the custom. This was no satanic ritual done at night in the middle of the woods, or the ruins of a church, or a dank basement.

This was Voldemort saying hello to his gods. Wishing them a Happy New year and hoping they would return the favor. Harry took his time exploring, careful not to disturb the alters' contents, pondering what all the offerings meant and why some received different items and others received nothing at all.

And then he suddenly took a turn and found himself in the middle of the labyrinth and not as alone as he had thought.

Voldemort knelt in the center of a circle and pentagram, stripped down to only a pair of thin pants and showing no signs of discomfort. In one hand he held a bowl and in another he held a dagger. His eyes were closed, face lifted to the heavens, and his lips whispering too softly for Harry to hear. The lines of the pentagram were clearly marked by red blood on white snow. Runes were painted into the spaces between, some of them even recognizable to the young student. Fire, water, strength, harmony, heart, blood, Mother, and so many more he couldn't identify.

His breath caught in his throat. He wasn't suppose to be here. This was a sacred thing, and he was not a believer, not even a scholar with a base understanding of it all. As quietly as he could, he turned to leave.

"It would be rude of you to leave without offering something."

Harry still.

"This is a temple after all..," Voldemort continued. "...not a gallery. One does not come here simply to observe."

Harry turned, reluctantly facing the Dark Lord. The man did not look particularly angry, but he did look expectant.

"I'm sorry. I didn't realize... no one said anything about... How did you even know I was here?"

The Dark Lord smirked.

"In this place, I have all the power and omnipotence of my gods. And their authority. Come here. I will show you what I mean while you make your offering."

"... I am not a pagan..."

He didn't dare say he was a Christian. It seemed blasphemous somehow to speak that word here. Voldemort shook his head.

"Your soul may belong to Heaven, Harry, but your magic belongs to the Earth. She deserves your love just as He does."

The young wizard didn't truly understand, but he moved forward regardless until he reached the edge of the pentagram. He turned to Voldemort, unsure of what to do.

"Sit there," the man instructed, pointing to the left 'arm' of the star in which the rune for 'water' was drawn. "Don't worry about disturbing the rune. I have preservation spells in place."

Hesitantly, Harry did as instructed, but he had hardly set foot inside when he was suddenly overwhelmed with power and awareness. It was as if the world had suddenly poured into his body or his mind had suddenly poured out into the world. His senses moved beyond the physical, taking in the life and the death of existence. He could feel the heartbeat of the animals he'd seen outside the maze, he could hear the soft sigh of soil as it drank the melting snow, and see the dreams of the sleeping forest around them. And ghosts, or rather spirits, fairies?, ephemeral wisps of things not living moving and breathing and laughing and screaming in all places. All these things and so much more, until there was so much awareness that he became numb to it, as if he'd been shocked by an electric jolt.

"Incredible, isn't it?"

Voldemort regarded him, smiling serenely. The man drew his 'awareness', and suddenly Harry's numbness broke into knowledge. Without even looking at him, Harry knew him in ways that simple vision would not allow. He felt every piece that composed his body from sinew to synapse, his mind unfolding like a dark plane larger than the whole of Britain, and his soul was not what Harry had ever thought a soul could be. It was singularly itself, and yet other... things came and went in and out of it, with definite flavors and energies and 'awareness'. It was as if all that defined the unseen of existence were reaching out to touch him, as if Voldemort's gods were paying homage to him and not the other way around.

“What are you?” Harry whispered, too awed to stop himself, to question himself, to question the entire experience. Weakly, he sank to his knees inside the pentagram and power unfurled from the earth to hold him, gently, caressing, singing sweetly in tones of an ocean miles away.

“I am... all that They would deem to make of me. Priest. Warrior. King. God. I am the anger of this scorned land, and I am its sorrow. I am one of the few of the Children of the Earth who have turned back to our Mother and said ‘thank you for your gifts, how might they serve you?’ Do you see it, Harry? Do you see our magic flowing into us from our Mother?”

And Harry could. He could see the magic he had always thought of as his own, flowing up from the ground and around them in the wind, seeping into each of them, different colors and textures and vibrations wrapping around that part that was singularly themselves, their souls, in a cocoon of power.

And Harry could see that Voldemort’s soul was different from his.

He could see it was broken and torn, and that it should have flown apart and disappeared into nothingness long ago, but tendrils of magic, of Mother, held it together, power reinforcing the places where it would crumble and sewing together those parts that had torn. Voldemort’s soul had become so saturated with magic that it was hard to tell which part was which.

“She loves you.”

Unable to stand in the presence of that love, pure for the impure, between greater-than-human and less-than-human, terrible and beautiful, without it touching a piece of his own soul, tears welled to the surface. Even as they flowed down his cheeks and to the ground, Harry was aware that they were more than water and salt, but part of his own soul, tiny pieces of his love and his sorrow and his awe.

“She loves you too, Harry.”

That was true too, and suddenly he found himself sobbing.

“That’s it, child. Tears are as fine an offering as blood.”

Even without watching, bent over and shaking as he cried his offering into the snow, he could sense Voldemort’s intent. The dagger was for more than just show after all. When he could look up again at last, Harry could see the thin stream of blood flowing into the little bowl.

Saw the anger, hate, sorrow, joy, and hope flowing into the little bowl.

Magic flared up around them, swallowing their offerings, taking it into the Earth to become apart of it. The bowl of blood caught fire, the flames blue and barely visible, and Harry’s tears hissing and evaporating little dots into the snow. The magic spread, setting alight the pentagram itself until the blood was devoured and the snow melted into a perfect circle. Once the diagram disappeared the power, the ‘awareness’, left them.

They both collapse, shaking in the after affects of the ritual. There was grass beneath them, green and lush and impossible this deep into winter. Harry buried his face into the soft carpet, inhaling the delicious sent of Earth and Magic and love before it faded from him altogether.

When finally the overwhelming presence of Mother and themselves had dissipated from their minds, the two wizards turned to one another, still laying where they’d fallen. It was a strange sort of understanding that passed between them, intimate on a level few would ever know with another human being. They had, for a few brief minutes, not only seen the other’s soul but becomes connected to it, sunk their spiritual hands into the common material of their existence, both physical and metaphysical.

They both reached for the other, their cool hands coming to meet, warmth and love and perhaps a ghost of ‘awareness’ passing between them as it had with their Mother only a few minutes before.

“She loves you...” Harry repeated, then sighed softly, “... more than anyone else. You are... more Her than anyone else.”

There was no jealousy in the statement, just a sort of longing. Voldemort smiled very gently, as Harry had never seen him do before.

“I have given myself totally to her. When this body and this magic fade, my soul will not return to the Father you Christians have promised yourselves to. There is not enough of my soul left to reside in Heaven or Hell. Rather, it will be drawn into the Earth with the rest of me, to be absorbed or reborn or reshaped as She sees fit. Over and over and over again for as long She exists. I chose Eden over absolution, and I regret nothing.”

Harry’s hand tightened around his. Was it to comfort him? Or was it to ask for comfort? All he knew was in that moment, after what they had shared, he didn’t want to be separated from him. Couldn’t conceive of such a connection breaking. Not ever.

“Why did you show me this?”

Voldemort’s expression turned from serene to amused.

“I’m afraid I can’t take credit for this. I only intended for you to give a few drops of blood and be on your way. I hadn’t expected your magic to align with ‘water’. I thought your element would have been ‘wind’ or even ‘fire’, but not ‘water’. It must have been Her will. She wanted you to be apart of this.”

“And what is ‘this’?”

“Magic at its purest and most powerful. If we had wanted to, we would have had the power to sink the entirety of Britain while in that circle.”

A shiver ran through Harry at the very idea of it.

“So why haven’t you ever done it?”

Voldemort smirked, his previous gentility dissipating with the revival of their sense of self. He got up, pulling up Harry by their conjoined hands. The boy stumbled a bit, but Voldemort held him steady, not yet releasing him.

"I have no desire to sink Britain, Harry."

"Then what do you want? Why conquer it in the first place?"

There was no accusation in his voice, Harry was feeling too connected with the other at the moment for anything other than affection and curiosity.

"I suppose, because more than anything else, I want the wizarding kind to love me... and to love Her, but mankind has always had free will. I cannot make them love or accept Us anymore than God can make them love or accept Him. So, I must first make a world in which She can be loved, where Christendom has no sword with which to strike Her followers and any who wish to follow Her customs, may. If I am careful, I will need to do nothing more than this. Wizarding kind will inevitably rediscover the source that separated them from muggles in the first place and return to Her. It is a natural progression."

Voldemort slowly led Harry back to the mansion, his hand still clutching firmly to Harry's. It would be a lie to say he hadn't been entranced by what he had seen in Harry during the ritual. This was not the first time he had performed the ceremony, not even the first time he had performed it with other people, but it was the first time he'd felt such strength. Not just of magic, but of being. Harry's soul was... it was...

Intense.

The resulting magic was likewise intense, a necessity in order for the Earth to even hope to bind it to Her, but ultimately futile if he didn't accept Her completely. Today, Voldemort had created a bond with Harry, one they would share with the Earth and each other until they died. Would it be enough after they died?

No yet, but perhaps someday...

They entered the mansion and went immediately to Voldemort's study. They each moved to a chair close to the fireplace, setting them

so they faced each other before settling in. All this was done in complete silence, the hum of their respective magic in tune with each other and their environment. Their will was so apparent to each other that they had no need to instruct or question, nor to verbally command the magic that willed the fire to life or opened the drapes without touch.

It would not last. After tonight, once the winter solstice and come and gone, the extra boost in magic would fade. In the meantime, however, Voldemort saw no harm in basking in their 'awareness' of each other and their magic.

"My Lord," Harry said, breaking the silence after almost an hour, "There is a basilisk running around Hogwarts. Why can't anyone know?"

Voldemort blinked. He hadn't thought Harry had figured out that much already. Snape had said the boy knew it was a snake, but not that it was a basilisk. Of course, he'd never bothered to find out exactly how much Harry knew, guessed, or assumed. He had been more concerned with the child staying quiet and out of the way.

"What do you know?"

"I know it's a basilisk. I know it was guarding some secret place connected to the girl's lavatory, and that it got out. I figured it's escaped into the school's secret corridors and pipes, and no one can seem to find it. I know it killed Moaning Myrtle- whose paralyzed spirit is still being kept somewhere in the school- over fifty years ago, and then Cassandra Sweetie, and it would have killed Angelina Johnson too except that she saw it through her make-up mirror instead of directly in the eye. I know you're covering up all of this, probably to keep secret the place it was guarding. Oh, and it's looking for somebody or maybe more than one. I think it means to kill them... I think it means to kill me too."

Voldemort felt rather impressed. So far Harry had been mostly right. He even seemed to know a little something he didn't. Who was the basilisk trying to kill... aside from Harry?

“Very good. You’ve discovered the when, what, and how. Now all that’s missing is the who, why, and where of it. I’d like to know that myself.”

“Sir?”

“Harry, I am not keeping this all a secret just to keep a secret. The fact of the matter is that there is a lot of answers I just don’t have. The basilisk was released from its Chamber by someone, and it wasn’t Sweetie. Who ever released it is using it for some unknown purpose, terrorism or assassination of someone in the school, and they are doing a fine job of hiding it. Hogwarts has always been known as the safest place in Britain, and I can not afford to have that reputation sullied. Britain can’t afford it.”

“But the students are in danger!”

“Children are always in danger, Mr. Potter. Do you think they would be any safer elsewhere? I assure you there are monsters in every school, every settlement, every forest, every place where victims are in ready supply. The one responsible for these actions, the true monster behind these deaths, will be found and destroyed. The irrational fear of students and their parents will not speed things along. Quite the opposite.”

Harry said nothing for a while, turning over the man’s words in his head and prodding the weaknesses he found.

“What was the contract I signed?”

Voldemort hesitated for a moment, considered lying or editing his words, but knew Harry was too aware of him for either option to work.

“It’s old. Almost as old as you are. I wrote it the night before I brought my Death Eaters into the Chamber of Secrets, the private study and laboratory of our ancestor Salazar Slytherin. There was no other way to enter the school without setting off the castle’s defenses, but I did not wish that magnificent place to be disturbed by unworthy fools in search of knowledge and power not rightfully theirs. So I wrote that contract, and had every Death Eater I took there sign it, magically

binding them so that they could never speak, write, find again, or otherwise communicate what they had seen with anyone other than myself or those who signed the contract. Not even Severus knows the specifics of it, as he never signed it and I wrote it in parseltongue.”

“So if I found something out, I couldn’t even tell Snape about it?”

“I suppose not, but I doubt it will be a problem. Severus has done a marvelous job with security. I suspect the matter will be resolved sooner rather than later.”

Harry didn’t look reassured, and frankly he was looking down right pissed. Voldmort stood, moving closer, touching Harry’s cheek.

“Whatever happens, I will protect you, my little prince.”

“It’s not me I’m worried about.”

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1. Celtic Goddess of the Moon and Inspiration. One of them anyway. There’s no strict hierarchy of Gods and Goddesses in Celtic religion, and most are regional and subject to name and authority changes.

Author’s Note: Now, don’t any of you get the strange idea that Voldemort is some sort of ‘Green Living’ messiah who wants to save the Earth. He’s more of an angry idealist, and everyone should know the dangers of people like that. Plus, despite the warm fuzzies Harry got during the ritual offering, ‘Mother’ isn’t exactly all bunnies and unicorns. In fact, She EATS bunnies and unicorns regularly. Just a little food for thought.

Book II

Chapter 19: Forward to Battle

“You seem different, Harry,” Natalie said, boldly eyeing the boy sitting across the cramped compartment from head to toe.

The subject of her inspection was dressed in his usual attire (although someone had lengthened the hem of his pants and his white dress shirt was still stiff in its newness), his skin back to its normal tone before his sickness, and hair still defiantly mused. By all accounts he appeared exactly as he had before his hospitalization, and yet there was something more about his presence that she just couldn't put her finger on.

“Bollocks,” Clyde said, oblivious as usual. “The country air just did him some good.”

Hermione, for once, was in agreement with Natalie.

“It's true. You seem... I don't know. More confident? No, that's not right...”

Draco snorted, knowing or least believing he knew, what was about the other boy.

“You look like you know something we don't know, and you're laughing at us.”

Harry shook his head, though Draco was partially right. He knew something they didn't know, and while he wasn't really laughing at them, he felt a thrill at being party to something they would never understand. It was not the same as his usual secrets, which weighed him down and tighten his insides, but uplifting and liberating. Empowering.

He knew where magic came from. He knew, not just was told and expected to accept. The 'awareness' had dwindled after the ritual, slowly siphoning off back into the Earth, and then just disappearing altogether with the arrival of the New Year. Yet still the knowledge

remained. The days that followed were restless, his mind now completely free to ponder exactly what had happened and what it might mean. His interactions with the Dark Lord were now forever overshadowed by that single intimate moment in the labyrinth. Now every thing said or done by the man seemed to hold an extra dimension, a religious perspective that Harry didn't completely understand. He'd danced around Voldemort for the rest of the holiday, wanting to be closer to study him and yet distanced so as not to be overwhelmed by him simultaneously.

Voldemort had his own ideas. He dragged Harry off to more press conferences and charity banquets and private dinners, always making those present aware of his protégé and yet not allowing them too close. Harry was forced to remain near the man, finding himself drawn into every word and innuendo, wondering at the calculations and the underlining meanings and never certain he had guessed right.

Then in private, the few times opportunity allowed, Voldemort would tell him a story. Never the same story and never about the same thing, though each had a lesson in them.

Even if he didn't always know what they were.

"Do you see that building across the street, Harry? That used to be a muggle courthouse, once upon a time. They burned 'witches' and 'heretics' there five hundred years ago. Now it's a church for wizarding kind. Isn't that strange? They pay homage to the God of muggles, the very ones who preach their inescapable damnation."

Or once at a business meeting with a Director of Foreign Affairs over a recently failed attempt to negotiate some trade agreement with Italy.

"It used to be we could not keep the Romans at bay and now they avoid us as if plagued. A pity, as they have some very lovely libraries and museums. Perhaps it's just as well though. Despite their linguistic contribution to wand magic, they've little talent for the Earth-based magics. Not surprising when their worship has always been directed at the Heavens rather than the Earth, even when they were considered pagans."

There was pride in his words, wounded and inflated pride each in their own measure, but always there nonetheless. It left Harry's head swimming with images of ancient glories and atrocities, making the world larger with possibilities and yet more personal, as if each act and consequence was now being directed at him or someone very close to him.

So if he seemed different to them, he wasn't surprised. He felt different. Bigger and smaller, depending on the new view points he'd found during his brief jaunt through 'Voldemort Land'.

He smiled at his friends.

"It's been an interesting holiday. It will be good to return to Hogwarts though. Anymore time stuck running between the middle of nowhere and the middle of everything was starting to suck me dry. How do you all stand it?"

Draco chuckled, leaning back in his seat with all the poise of a model. This was apparently a topic of which he was confident in his own expertise

"It's a gift, dear boy. Don't feel bad. Some people have it and some people don't."

Hermione chucked a chocolate frog she'd been eating at him. The headless frog stuck to his forehead for a second and then leapt into his hair, which sent the boy into an unhappy fit to get it out. The rest of the company burst into laughter. Draco finally caught the bit of charmed chocolate and tossed it at Harry, but the boy wasn't youngest Hogwarts Seeker in a century for nothing and caught it. And promptly threw it at Natalie who squealed when it got lost in her robes. With everyone distracted by Natalie dancing about to shake it loose, Clyde took the opportunity to open two more chocolate frog packages and stuff one down Harry's shirt and other to Hermione's back.

The Chocolate Frog War lasted for nearly ten minutes, until everyone was exhausted from battle and laughing so hard that they could only collapse in their seats. Finally, between fits of giggles, they cleaned up their candy casualties and chocolate smeared selves with a few

quick cleaning and banishment charms. And not a moment too soon, for someone opened their compartment to peak inside.

“Are you all alright? I can’t tell if your laughing or being tortured, or laughing as you tortured someone,” a seventh year Ravenclaw boy, looking perfectly serious despite his playful words.

“Oh, McGunny,” Hermione said, recognizing him immediately, “Guys, this is the chief editor for the Hogwarts’ Herald. Horace McGunny, these are my friends and brother. Natalie Cypher, Clyde Houghton, Harry Potter, and Draco Malfoy.”

“Good to meet you,” Horace replied disinterestedly, although his gaze might have lingered on Harry for a moment, “I’m afraid I need to borrow you for a bit, Granger. We’re gathering interviews on what students did on their holiday break. Do you think you could get some from the first years?”

Hermione perked. This would be her first assignment as a reporter rather than a glorified office assistant. She looked towards her friends.

“Go on then,” Draco drawled. “It’s harder to steal your Christmas candy when you’re hovering.”

“I’ll take good care of Harry while you’re gone,” Natalie teased, cuddling up to said boy. Harry, now pink around the ears, nodded his approval. At Hermione, not Natalie.

“Put my Christmas gift to good use, yeah?”

She beamed at them, gathering a notepad and her new quick-quotes quill from her carry-on bag and hurrying off. Clyde chuckled after she was gone.

“Hasn’t even got out of school yet and she’s already on the fast track to becoming a professional story finder. Watch out Harry, she might give even you a run for your money.”

Natalie and Draco rolled their eyes.

“Nonsense. Harry’s not a story finder,” Draco pointed out. Natalie nodded in agreement.

“Harry’s a story maker. They’ll be natural enemies before long.”

Harry frowned, shaking his head.

“We’re best mates. I’d do anything for her.”

The two Slytherins shared shrewd expressions.

“Anything is a big word. I wouldn’t ever use it in a promise, if I were you,” Natalie said evenly. Harry met her skepticism with a confident smirk. He said what he meant and he meant what he said. Hermione and he would always be friends, no matter what forces tried to tear them apart.

It was an oath to himself, as much as it was her.

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While Harry and his friends enjoyed their time together, Tom smiled and laughed and plotted the painful demise of the sycophants who had latched onto him since he’d boarded the train. He had nothing against blind adoration directed at his person, but his current batch of followers had developed a rather unflattering sense of entitlement. More specifically, they felt entitled to touch him (a friendly pat on the shoulder, a little poke to get his attention, and ugh hugging), and knowing about his past and future plans.

“Delphia, I assure you, I didn’t do anything interesting this holiday. My parents were away on business. I spent Christmas with the house elves,” he said smoothly, shrugging off her hand from his shoulder.

Across from him, a sixth year boy leered stupidly at them.

“Oh, come on, Thomas, you’re saying you didn’t have a holiday fling? If your parents were gone like you say, surely you took the opportunity to have a little fun.”

“Don’t be crude, Jorgenson,” Tom dismissed gently. In truth, he had entertained a few witches and one very charming vampire over the holiday, but he wasn’t about to share the specifics with these imbeciles.

Brian Jorgenson was parasite through and through, siphoning off his older brother’s popularity as Head Boy and his own fiancée, Evelyn Hughes, who was the second most popular sixth year girl in Slytherin. Evelyn was pretty, but a ninny in comparison to most of her House, and too easily manipulated by the boy. Even now she simpered stupidly with Jorgenson’s arm around her shoulders as he ogled her ‘best friend’, Delphia Bellfeldt practically shoving her breasts into Tom’s arm. Belladonna and Aminitas Greystone, fraternal twins, were absorbed in painting each other’s toenails black and basking in their own narcissism.

They all had their uses, but at the moment Tom was having difficulty remembering what they were. His thoughts kept drifting to Hogwarts, his plans, and the one person in all the world he truly wished to see. Soon, everything was going to come together.

He’d made certain of that.

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From the baggage cart of the Hogwarts’ Express, the sound of faintly shifting luggage was drowned out by the monotonous clamor of the great engine. A ragged looking rodent squeezed itself out from the trunk of one ‘Thomas M. Rook’ through a small hole it had chewed in the corner, sniffed curiously at the air, and turned into a man.

“I’m too old for this,” Pettigrew muttered, straightening out the clothes he hadn’t felt for nearly two weeks. He felt his face to make sure he hadn’t forgotten his whiskers or teeth in the transformation. After re-familiarizing himself with his human body, he closed his eyes to concentrate.

Bristol. The secret entryway.

And with a loud 'pop', he was gone.

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It was just before sunset when the students filed into Hogwarts in well-ordered chaos. The weather had been cloudless and sunny, but colder than they were used to with a sharp, incessant wind. Everyone was glad to reach shelter and file into the Great Hall for hot chocolate and ciders and seasonal teas. The castle had already been stripped of its yuletide decorations, and everyone felt a bit melancholy at the official end of the holidays.

Everyone, it seemed, except for Hermione who was still blissfully ambushing random first years. Now, however, she was being accompanied by one Collin Creevey, flashing his camera every so often when a student exhibited a particularly interesting gift or an emotional reunion with their circle of friends. The break had done much to restore Hogwarts' comradery, and many who hadn't even been on speaking terms during the 'Curse Epidemic' were now chatting excitedly with each other and comparing stories and presents and New Year's resolutions.

Harry found himself the center of attention of a group of girls who had seen his picture in the newspaper a couple times over the break and were eagerly questioning him. A school reporter was amongst them, and he found himself being bullied into an interview. It wasn't as bad as he thought it would be, mostly because she tended to have a story already in mind when asking her questions so he didn't have to make one up on the spot. The fact that her story was a little too sugar coated and inaccurate was not really of concern to him. It certainly beat trying to convince Hermione of what happened.

At some point, the Weasley twins abducted his interviewer and began regaling her with tales she hadn't asked for of their negotiations with Santa to return the coal they'd received for a new goat (they were very specific about the type of goat they wanted right down to its curly third horn) and their experiments with eggnog and their foster mother.

Ron made a brief appearance during a conversation between Harry and Ginny, but aside from a obnoxious little smirk, hadn't bothered him. The Gryffindor Seeker was still busy pondering the change in behavior, when Headmistress Lestrange burst into the hall and went immediately to her podium.

"Attention students," she began, her voice cutting through conversation like a machete. "There has been a small accident with one of the first years. He isn't hurt badly, but I will require you to return to your dormitories for the evening. Prefects if you would please take charge of your classmates and escort them back to the commons?"

She immediately left the podium and disappeared through a side door, leaving the students confused and without answers to a great many questions. Yet within moments the Prefects and several teachers who had appeared out of nowhere managed to herd everyone into their own House assigned groups.

Harry had just shuffled into the Gryffindor Common Room when he realized that Hermione and Collin weren't with them.

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"I'm sorry, Harry, but there isn't anything I can do," Percy said sternly. "McGonagall has already sealed the entry way. I can tell her that Hermione and Collin are missing when she gets back, but I don't know when that will be."

The Common Room was crowded and noisy, everyone equally ignorant of what was happening and some how believing discussion would work in the place of actual facts. Many of them were watching the exchange of Gryffindor's Black Cat with one of the prefects in increasing interest.

"That's not good enough! They only mentioned a boy, who is probably Collin, but they didn't say anything about a girl. What if they don't even know Hermione is out there? What if something happened to her?!" Harry shouted, frustrated that Percy didn't seem to

understand the severity of the situation. But then, perhaps he didn't. Who other than Harry and the professors knew about the monster roaming the halls?

"Harry, calm down and be reasonable. Hermione's a clever girl, and the professors are perfectly competent. I'm sure they've found her by now if she was ever missing. Did you ever stop to think she was the one who reported Collin's accident?"

The condescension in the prefect's voice threw the already frustrated Harry over the edge.

"YOU'RE A BLOODY STUPID TWAT, PERCY!"

He stalked away, parting the crowds like Moses at the Red Sea and leaving the Weasley prefect stuttering in his indignation. No doubt he'd just earned a detention, but that was the least of Harry's worries. He rushed to the second year dorms and went straight to his trunk, hoping to find something that would help him.

Text books, personal books, his sketching journal, the secret box he still hadn't been able to open, the large sketch pad Natalie had given him, art supplies, school supplies, Hermione's magic bell, his Baluvian cloak, Sirius' necklace wrapped in unmagicked leather, a deck of magic cards, candy, his school clothes, Quidditch and Dueling magazines, a couple bottles of healing salve he'd made in Potions, and absolutely nothing that was going to help him get out of the dorm. The only exit he knew of was through the Portrait of the Fat Lady, and unless he could transfigure something into a flying broom and jump out a window, he didn't see any means of escape.

"Harry!"

The frustrated Gryffindor looked up to see Clyde and the twins rushing in, a rather devilish look sending the few other Gryffindors there scurrying for the exit. Fred (George?) cast a Silencing Charm on the door.

"What?" he snapped, suspecting an abysmal attempt to cheer him up when what he really needed was to find Hermione.

“Happy New Year to you too, mate,” Clyde grouched, but was ignored as the twins sat themselves on either side of their idol.

“Got something for you, Lord Chaos. We think you’ll find it useful,” George (Fred?) said, handing him a piece of parchment. Harry accepted it curiously, opened it, but found it was completely blank. He scowled.

“Now isn’t the time to be playing jokes. Hermione could be in serious danger, you know?!” he snapped, getting up to stalk off again, but they both grabbed him by his arms and dragged him back down.

“So impatient today! We know this is serious!” Clyde said, then pointed his wand at the parchment over Harry’s shoulder. “I solemnly swear that I am up to no good!”

Before Harry could question the odd phrase, the parchment before him suddenly wasn’t so blank anymore. Lines began to form walls, which in turn formed hallways, towers, staircases, rooms, and... secret passages. And right there, was tiny little trap door leading out of Gryffindor tower.

“Is that?”

“Yep,” Fred said smugly. “I haven’t been through that one personally. It’s in the First Year Girl’s dormitory. We’ll set off the alarms, but at this point I don’t think that’s going to matter much.”

“We?”

“You don’t expect us to let you wander the halls alone with a big scary monster scuttling about, do you?”

“You could get suspended for this.”

The twins shared an amused look, one their foster nephew didn’t appreciate.

"She's my friend too, Harry," Clyde said, seeming to steel himself for something painful. Harry gave him an assessing stare, but remembered time was not on their side. He pulled the magic bell and the Baluvian cloak from his trunk, and then headed towards the stairs.

"What are all these dots?"

"People, their labeled, see? Collin's in the hospital wing, but we couldn't find Hermione. She's either outside the castle, in a room or corridor that hasn't been mapped, or... well"

A nauseous quiver ran through him, but he forced his mind on what needed to be done and what he could do to achieve that.

"Clyde, I want you to stay here," Harry said, "Seal the trap door after we leave. We'll knock twice, wait a moment and then knock three times when we want you to let us back in. That's the password."

"No way, Harry, I'm coming too!"

Harry shook his head. "I need you to stay here in case a teacher or Hermione comes back. Percy and the other prefects are clueless. You're one of the few with half a clue about what's going on in Hogwarts."

"What about Fred or George?!"

"No one will take what they say seriously."

"Hey!" the twins objected in unison, then shared a 'well, he has a point' look.

"Listen, we don't have time for this. Just trust me, ok?"

Whether Clyde agreed or not wasn't an issue as all four marched straight into the First Year girl's dormitory. Instantly, an atrocious wailing sounded, followed shortly by the startled shrieks of several girls.

“What the bloody hell are you doing?!” screamed one girl over the siren. Ginny was there too, stunned as the rest of them, but quickest to recover.

“What’s going on, Harry?” she shouted, whispering impossible over the wailing.

“I’m going to find Hermione!” he yelled back, tearing away a large rug from the floor to reveal nothing but blank floor. The twins shouted out a Revealing Charm, and grooves appeared in the floor, along with a hole just big enough to reach a few fingers into. Clyde pulled it open, and Harry and twins disappeared inside before anyone could stop them.

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The trapdoor released them into a large storage closet, and after a few awkward moments of shoving around cleaning supplies with only the light of their glowing wands, they exited into a corridor. The twins took a moment to murmur a simultaneous ‘wicked!’ when Harry’s cloak turned from pitch black to the dim gray of the surrounding stones, before quickly following the running Gryffindor towards the Great Hall.

“Where are we going?” Fred (George?) asked.

“The map says Snape is a few corridors over. I just have to tell him about Hermione. He’ll know where to look.”

The same place Harry knew to look, but wouldn’t risk going alone nor could he take Fred or George. The Contract was still in effect, and if he tried to take them down to the secret chamber, who knew what would happen? Would he become perpetually lost? Fall into a coma? He didn’t know and didn’t want to find out.

“Just don’t show him the map, ok? We’d kind of like to keep it out of the hands of authority, ya know?”

“That’s fine. It wouldn’t help him find Hermione, anyway... Here, you guys take it. There’s no point for all of us to get into trouble for sneaking around. Hide somewhere and keep watch. If you spot... something strange on the map, come and find us again. But whatever you do, don’t go playing hero. I know what it is... and it’s not something you’d ever want to find you.”

The twins shared a significant look, but merely nodded and gave him a quick salute and went off to hide. Harry took a deep breath and went to find Snape. It didn’t take long to find him. They practically ran into each other turning a corner, a quick duck was the only thing that saved Harry from a very nasty hex.

“POTTER! WHAT THE BLOODY HELL ARE YOU DOING OUT HERE?!”

Snape snatched up the boy his arm, giving him a harsh shake. Harry cringed, terrified to find that the potion’s master in a rage was worse than even his silent malice.

“Ouch! Stop, I-”

“I swear to God Potter if you’ve dragged my goddaughter or any of your little friends into the halls with you... Is anyone else out here?!”

The young Gryffindor flinched at another harsh shake.

“No! But I have to-”

“No, Mr. Potter, you don’t have to anything but shut up and come with me. You’re going to get such a beating after this is over-”

“HERMIONE’S MISSING!”

The Snape drew back, dropping Harry’s arm in alarm.

“What?”

“She didn’t get back to the dormitory with the rest of us. By the time we realized she wasn’t there, McGonagall had already sealed the entryway and left. She was with Collin Creevey before his ‘accident’!”

Pallid already, Snape’s minimal color drained to an almost luminescent white. He grabbed Harry’s arm again.

“We’re going to the Headmistress’ office.”

The quick stride Snape adopted gradually increased until they were both actually running, Harry was barely able to keep up with the man, until they reached the gargoyle guarding their destination.

“Salamander,” Snape barked, and the rotating staircase opened to greet them. The potion’s master turned to Harry. “Stay here. You will be safe as long as you remain in this corridor. If you so much as twitch from this spot, I will make you intimately acquainted with the many and varied torture devices that qualify the bowels of this castle as a dungeon and not just an oversized basement.”

Snape disappeared up the staircase, which closed after him. The stairs hadn’t even stopped rotating close before Harry was sprinting up them. He pulled the Unsilencing from his robes and pressed the mouth of it to the sealed entryway and his ear to the other end. He could hear voices easily and clearly, as if he were right in the room.

It certainly didn’t hurt that Snape and the Headmistress appeared to be yelling at each other already.

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“NO! Absolutely not,” Lestrangle hissed, pacing in front of a series of maps depicting Hogwarts and the wards that had been set. The girl’s lavatory in the dungeon was glowing red, signaling the activation of the sealing ward at the entrance to the Chamber of Secrets, and on another map a section of the Forbidden Forest was similarly alight.

“We know it’s already trapped, and I’m not going to risk letting it out because you have a grudge to settle. It’s stupid. We will wait for the

Dark Lord like we agreed before the little tart went and got herself killed.”

Snape grit his teeth.

“We do not know she is dead yet. Besides, the wards are meaningless now. They’ve obviously been tampered with. There was no way for the basilisk to have gotten Creevey in that particular hallway without setting off the traps. Not to mention the wards indicated that the basilisk entered the Chamber through the girl’s lavatory, not left it and then re-entered it. Someone let it in through either the front entryway or one of the windows, both of which should have been sealed through the holidays and thus been impossible. If we do not kill it now it is going to escape again!”

“Don’t be a fool, Severus. Obviously, it just hid itself somewhere in the school that we overlooked and came out. This is about Granger. Your goddaughter is dead. You failed her. Deal with it.”

He snarled out something savage and perhaps even obscene by the Headmistress’ sudden flush, and then stormed out of the office. Lestranger smirked as he disappeared from view, positively smug with how things were turning out. Admittedly, their Lord wouldn’t be pleased with the loss of another student, but she was only a mudblood and the capture of the basilisk was ultimately more important. Frazzling Snape was just icing on the cake. No doubt the Dark Lord would be disgusted with Snape’s current frame of mind and his reckless idea to re-open the Chamber. Perhaps she’d even get to see him ‘crucio-ed’.

Her smirk dropped quickly, when Snape suddenly reappeared.

“Harry’s gone.”

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Harry ran as fast as he could through the halls, the hood of his cloak pulled over his head, his only gesture towards stealth. It may have already been too late. Hermione was probably gone, dead and eaten

by that monster, but he didn't know. He had to know, and if his fears were true then he would make it pay. Fear and anger swam in his veins like shark, all power and teeth and base predatory instinct.

He knew he didn't have long before Snape or Lestrangle managed to catch up with him, but descending into the bowels of the castle he passed the girl's lavatory for an important side trip to the potion's lab. The door wasn't locked, and Harry went straight for the supply cabinet, which was ... but only long enough for Harry's desperation blasted the entire door from its hinges. He was in and out within five seconds, a bezoar clutched firmly in his hand. He didn't know if it would do any good against a basilisk bite, but if Hermione was still alive it may save her life. It might even save his.

He sprinted for the door.

And ran straight into the person he was least expecting. Tom caught him by his shoulders just before Harry smashed into him, saving and capturing him in a single move. The Slytherin's green eyes narrowed in anger.

"What are you doing here, Harry?" he hissed. "You're suppose to be in your Commons Room."

A strange sense of deja vu passed over Harry, but he shoved it away just as he shoved Tom away.

"I'm sorry, but I don't have time for this! I have to go!"

Tom caught Harry by the wrist as he tried flee again, and dragged him further down the hall.

"Absolutely not! It's dangerous out here. I'm taking you to the Slytherin's Commons Room."

"NO! Let go!"

Harry tried to bolt towards the lavatory but Tom's grip tightened painfully, causing him cry out in pain. The older boy jerked him

forward, furthering the distance between him and his destination. When Harry tried to get passed him yet again, Tom drew his wand.

“Stupefy!”

Harry flinched, expecting the affects of the spell to overpower him instantly. Instead, he felt Tom’s grip on his wrist loosen and the Slytherin fell to the floor. Stunned, or rather not stunned, Harry blinked down at him stupidly.

“Harry!”

He looked up to see the twins racing towards him, winded and nearly out of breath.

“How did you find-”

Fred (George?) held up the map and grinned, between wheezes.

“Something cooky seemed to be going on, so we followed you! Hurry up, Snape will be here any second!”

Harry didn’t need to be told twice.

“Stay here and protect Tom!” he shouted when they started to follow. They looked ready to object, but when Harry flipped up his hood again, following him was no longer an option.

He had disappeared.

They turned to each other, sighed, and then turned to the boy they had stunned.

“What do you suppose he’s doing out here?” Fred asked, crossing his arms.

“Nothing good, I’ll wager,” George agreed, mimicking the gesture.

“Come on, we’ll ‘protect’ him in the potion’s lab. Don’t fancy Snape popping up while we’re standing here.”

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Lestrangle and Snape entered the lavatory, both dismayed to find the secret entrance was wide open. The headmistress let out a hiss of frustration, cursing the stupid Gryffindor and his suicidal notion's of bravery. Snape saved his already limited breath and went straight for the entrance.

"What are you doing, Severus?"

"Isn't obvious? I'm going to get Potter and kill that bloody overgrown lizard while I still can. Unless you want to wait till the Dark Lord arrives and kills us both for your incompetence. Now go back to your office and deactivate the wards. If Potter or I am injured, we will need to leave quickly."

"I don't-"

But Snape had already disappeared, leaving the Headmistress with no options but to do as he had instructed or face the Dark Lord's wrath alone.

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The tunnels leading to the chamber were cool, eerie, and the great abundance of water originating from the lake was icy cold. Every drop of water, every gentle tap of a falling footstep, and ones own breathing echoed into the darkness for what seemed like miles, so that what may have been falling rock from behind sounded as if it could of come from anywhere, even right behind you. Even as a renown Dark Wizard with a reputation for stoicism in the worst of conditions, Snape would freely admit that he did not like this place.

Luckily, he caught up to Harry fairly quickly. He had the benefit of exploring the Chamber once before while searching for the Basilisk with the Dark Lord, as opposed to Harry who was wandering seemingly blind. Or at least, Snape had assumed blind. However,

when the light from his wand finally fell upon Harry's shadowy form, the reflection off the boy's glasses were a strange orange color.

The boy had cast a Thermal Imaging Charm on his glasses, allowing him to see in terms of heat rather than light, just as a snake would. More importantly, that sort of sight would render the basilisk's deadly gaze utterly useless.

Oh, that was clever.

He'd applaud the boy, but he was going to kill him first, so that seemed a rather superfluous gesture.

He was about to snarl out something, but the boy put his finger to his mouth and then pointed towards his ear. Snape's words caught in his throat. The boy was a parselmouth and would be hearing things the potion's master had no privy to, things inaudible to any human ear save two... possibly three?

Harry tilted his head, turned it partially, like a rodent of some kind trying listen for a predator. Then he spun full around towards the direction they'd been going, and then back again, sprinting towards Snape.

"It knows we're here," Harry whispered, but it echoed loudly in the tunnels.

"Frigorio!" Snape hissed, flourishing his wand, and then followed after Harry's retreating form. "We can't go back the way we came. I don't know if the wards have been completely removed or only partially, but we can't risk being trapped. The tunnels around here all circle back to the main chamber. Just follow the flow of-"

WHOOMPH!

The fire trap Snape had set activated, setting off an explosion that rocked the ground above and beneath them, sending fragments of rocks raining down dangerously. He heard Harry cast a shield charm and prepared to do the same, but the tunnel ahead of him collapsed altogether, knocking him in to ankle deep water.

“Harry!”

A wall of rubble now laid before him, blocking his movement forward just as the explosion no doubt blocked his movement backwards. He could easily blast it away, but that could cause even more tunnel collapse, perhaps burying himself just as he may have inadvertently buried Harry.

“Harry?”

There was a tense moment of silence, and then a weak, but welcome cough.

“I’m still here. Are you ok?” came a muffled reply. The boy was on the other side of the wall, apparently unharmed enough to be concerned for his reviled potion’s master’s well-being.

“I’ll live. Stay where you are, do you hear me Potter?”

“Um...” there was a rather telling hesitation. “Yes, but...”

“Potter, don’t you dare even think about-”

“Gotta find Hermione. Be right back!”

“Potter! Potter?! GET BACK HERE YOU LITTLE... heart attack waiting to happen...” he trailed off as the footsteps faded.

Snape sighed in frustration, unable to do anything. He tried something he hadn’t tried in long time. He thought positively.

Well, really, what was the harm now? Chances are that explosion had blown the basilisk to tiny little bits, or even better the handler. And Harry was a parselmouth, certainly he could handle a snake. A giant man-eating snake with venom so deadly it could eat through your skin like hydrochloric acid, but a snake nonetheless.

It was Potter. He’d figure something out.

Hopefully...

Optimism was for idiots, he decided.

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Harry ran as quickly as he could, which was considerably less quickly than he'd been going earlier when he's started running around like a lunatic. His body was sweaty and chilled at the same time, his fur cloak only making things worse. Snape's arrival had been expected, and once he was inside the tunnels, rather welcome as well. The possible death of the basilisk was well worth the trouble he had just landed himself in... he hoped anyway.

A sudden gust of wind from up ahead gave him pause. He pulled out his pocket watch, which until he had entered the secret passage had been utterly useless in locating his friend.

"Hermione," he whispered, casting a Lumos and pulling down his glasses to read the blurry outline of the watches' hand pointing ahead of him. The watch wouldn't have worked if Hermione were dead. A thrill of hope ran through him, and with renewed energy he sprang forward. The tunnel opened up into a larger tunnel, which in turn ran straight into enormous chamber.

Harry's eyes widened as he let his glasses slip to the tip of his nose, taking in the strangely beautiful juxtapose of natural cavern and master masonry. A wide walkway was banked by pools of inky water and enormous statues of serpents. Ahead of him was the carved face of a bearded man in Assyrian style or was that really what Salazar Slytherin had looked like in his later years?

He slipped back on his glasses, and his gaze was immediately drawn to the blob of bright yellow and pink. Scanning his surroundings briefly, he hurried over to the base of the stone face and found Hermione laying in a shallow pool of water.

"Hermione!"

His hands felt the gentle throb at her throat and the faint puff of warmth from her mouth, feeling the presence of her life even though her blue tinted skin implied the chill of death. A half laugh of relief, and he pulled her lax body to a dryer spot, cast a warming spell, and wrapped his cloak around her. He prodded her gently, trying to waken her but she remained utterly unresponsive but for the faint shivers running through her. A spell or the onset of hypothermia? Either way, he needed to get her to the infirmary fast.

And then there was a sound. A familiar, irritating sound, that in this dark place filled him a horrifying dread.

“Hem, hem.”

Book II:

Chapter 40: Toad Venom

Harry stood and turned slowly. Through his bespelled glasses he could see the yellow and orange form of a stout woman. He may not be able to distinguish her facial features, but that phlegmy cough was unmistakably Dolores Umbridge. The enormous green and yellow body of the basilisk's cooler body slithered into the chamber soundlessly and came to a stop behind her. It was huge, larger than he had ever considered a serpent to be without being labeled a dragon.

That's what lives under the school? What was Voldemort thinking?!

"Oh my, this is certainly unexpected," the toady woman twittered, "Shouldn't you be in your dorm, Mr. Potter?"

He scowled, more pieces falling into place. The basilisk hadn't appeared until after Umbridge had been brought to the school, and then it was to guard McNair, a former Death Eater who probably had some knowledge of the Chamber. But how had she managed to glean it from him with the contract in effect? Had McNair been a willing participant or a victim himself?

"Shouldn't you be dead, Madam?" he replied coolly, indicating the lethal beast behind her.

"Now, young man it's rude to answer a question with a question, although not nearly as rude as stopping by unannounced. I'm afraid you'll have to be punished. But first, where is Granger?"

Harry barely caught himself turning right to his friend, now concealed by his cloak and the statue. Apparently, both had arrived just after he'd concealed her.

"I woke her up, and sent her back down the tunnel. She'll reach Snape and tell him everything. If you hurry, maybe you can escape before Voldemort arrives," he bluffed.

Umbridge gave a twittery laugh.

“Oh you silly goose, this is why plotting is left to adults. Children are just so short-sighted. The mudblood and the giant grease spot are trapped here, just like you. My pet here will dispatch everyone shortly, and we will sneak out the back way. When the Dark Lord arrives, he'll find nothing but corpses.”

The basilisk made a pained hiss and shuddered, twitching uncomfortably and nearly bumping into the woman, who inched away with a belied nervousness.

“It hurts!” the masculine hiss cried, “Theysss burned me! I can't sssee! I can't sssee! Heal me!”

Umbridge cast a cautious look at her servant, and indeed it appeared the trap spell Snape had laid had done great damage. The head of the serpent was charred black and bits of flesh torn away. Worst of all, however, was the absence of the monster's greatest weapons. The eyes had either burst from the heat of the explosion or the eyelids melted shut.

No matter. It's venom and sheer size was lethal enough for one last slaughter before she killed the thing herself. It had been useful, but ultimately she had known she would have to destroy it. Oh, well.

From her fuzzy pink purse she pulled out a device, that to Harry looked like nothing more than a child's kazoo made of silver. It's purpose became clear, when Umbridge put it to her mouth and started to speak... in Parseltongue.

“There, there, darling. Soon, I will fix you,” she cajoled, before speaking to Harry again in English. “Really, your arrival is most convenient. I was going to leave you out of this, but when You-Know-Who finds your mutilated corpse he won't just fire Lestrage, he'll kill her. Oh, yes, this is most convenient. And then, in a few days, I'll cleverly uncover the true culprit and kill the basilisk all on my own. He'll be so pleased he'll promote me for sure! Headmistress of Hogwarts or even a Court Judge. So many marvelous possibilities, and I have so many plans. Such marvelous, marvelous plans!”

Disgust and anger welled up in Harry, the culmination of months of grief and stress and fear found to be rooted in nothing more than the ambitions of this thing.

“You..,” he growled, “You murdered Sweetey so you could get a better FUCKING JOB?!”

Umbridge rolled her eyes (not that Harry could actually see that).

“Children, honestly! I’m so glad I never had-”

“Petrificus totalis!”

Quick as lightening, Umbridge brought up a shield charm to block the curse and readied one of her own, but Harry had ducked into the open mouth of the statue and into a small antechamber.

“Kill him! He’s the one who hurt you!” he heard Umbridge hiss, and quickly ran deeper inside. The antechamber, unlike the rest of the Chamber, was not cold, but hot and humid, the floor layered with plant debris, old snake skins, and animal bones. The ceiling was lower, making the area seem almost cramped despite being two stories high on its own. The most striking thing Harry noticed was eggs. Two rows of twelve eggs the size of footballs (English version) lined the walls in individual nests, a yellow fairy light hovering just above each. On closer inspection, Harry could see four eggs were missing. So this place held a back-up supply of basilisks? Ugh.

Harry moved to the back of the lair, selecting the narrowest of three tunnels he found there, and ran inside.

“Contraho!” he shouted, flinging out his wand, forcing his magic as strongly as he could. The stone walls groaned and crumbled in protest as they began to contract around the entrance, narrowing it even further. The basilisk head speared through the opening suddenly, its fangs bared as it made to strike its prey. Harry jumped back, but tripped on a stone.

Death, fanged and monstrosly snapped... missed, barely, leaving Harry to crawl and stumble away as the basilisk struggled to free itself in the now too narrow tunnel. Now distanced and relatively safe, he tried to reason with it.

“Stop! Stop! I’m not your enemy! I didn’t do this to you! That woman is a liar!”

Yet the snake did not seem to hear or perhaps didn’t care. Thrashing about madly, Muchalinda tried to move forward and then finally backwards where he had more success. He retreated into the antechamber and then through another tunnel, retreating to hunt down its prey through another route.

Harry, meanwhile, cursed. The basilisk had been right there! He could think of half a dozen spells he could have used to destroy it right there, but no he had to reason with it. Arg! Stupid, stupid, stupid!

But he didn’t have time to berate himself. He had left Hermione in the main chamber with Umbridge, and if that giant toad found her Harry didn’t want to think what would happen. He had to get Hermione and get back to Snape somehow. All of them together would be able to fend off Umbridge and her overgrown pet, at least until help arrived. Perhaps if he could even stun Umbridge, what ever spell she had cast on the basilisk would fade and he could convince it to leave them alone?

Casting a Silencing Charm on the nest room and placing the UnSilencing Bell to his ear with his free hand, he cautiously moved back inside and towards the exit. He was only half way to the exit when the basilisk re-emerged from another tunnel, and froze. The snake luckily, had paused as well. It flickered its tongue, tasting the air curiously.

“What hassss it done?” the snake questioned itself, “I can’t sssee or hear itsss now. But ohhh... I can tsssste itsss!”

Harry rushed to one side of the nest, crouching behind an egg, hoping it would move on again. If he cast a spell in here and it wasn’t strong enough to instantly kill the basilisk, the inevitable biting and

thrashing might kill him instead. The giant monster flickered its tongue repeatedly, gradually turning towards where Harry hid and moving hesitantly forward. Harry moved backwards steadily as he headed towards the narrow chamber again.

The basilisk seemed to sense his plan though, for it suddenly moved swiftly, not towards Harry, but towards the tunnels, blocking each one with its massive body.

Shit. It's smart.

His only option now was to go the direction he'd been heading in the first place, but if the basilisk rushed him then he'd have no where to go but straight and the hunter was much faster than he was. Nor could he stay where he was with the monster gradually tasting out his location. He'd have to distract it, and then make a run for the nearest available exit.

But how?

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Fred let out a pained moan, lifting his hand to his aching head and found it wet.

"George?" he called shakily, sitting up. He was still in the potion's lab, hidden between two lab stations. The floor was cold, uncomfortable, and smeared with red on grey. He eyed the bloody pool where his head had been and the matching hand print beside it oddly, disconcerted when he couldn't find anything funny about it. "George?"

"Here," came an equally weak reply. After a moment, George managed to pull himself up from behind another lab station, a slash across his nose and forehead still leaking. "You okay, Gred?"

Fred blinked, managed a shaky grin and climbed the rest of the way to his feet.

"Fine, Forge. What's another head injury?"

“Just another personality improvement waiting to happen,” George replied, then tilted dangerously, nearly falling over again. He caught himself and set himself on a stool.

“We can be improved? I don’t believe it.”

Fred moved to sit beside his brother, took a deep breath, and assessed the damage. The class room was almost completely intact, a few over turned stools and their own blood the only signs of a struggle. They themselves seemed to have suffered nothing more than a few nasty blows to the head... as if that wasn’t enough. Their prisoner was long gone.

“Where do you think Rook went?” Fred asked.

“Either to get a teacher to snitch on us or after Harry probably...”

“Do you think Harry’s alright? Do you suppose he found Hermione?”

“... it’s Harry.”

Which was basically another way of saying the young Gryffindor was causing things no one, even his two greatest devotees, could even conceived of happening. George grimaced and climbed back to his feet.

“Come on. We have to get out of here before someone finds us.”

Fred nodded, helping his brother remain steady on his feet while the other took out the Marauder’s Map to search for the best available exit.

“Uh oh...”

“What?”

“Hurry, Fred. We have less than a minute before we find ourselves surrounded by every teacher in Hogwarts.”

Fred let out a curse and dragged his twin to the door.

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“Sustineo! Sustineo! Sustineo!”

After almost twenty Support Spells, Snape was feeling both drained and anxious. The tunnel was no longer in danger of collapsing, but the spells had cost both time and energy. Potter had been gone for over fifteen minutes, and he had heard voices and shouting distantly. Had one of them been a scream?

Sweaty and breathing heavily, he turned his attention to the wall of debris, opting to conserve energy with lighter spells in quick succession. He could not panic and waste precious magical energy before the true battle began, even if every second that passed might mean the death of his goddaughter and god- Gryffindork Meal Ticket.

Stupid Meal Ticket.

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Umbridge’s pudgy face twisted into something even pudgier, her impatience finally getting to her. She was perfectly assured of her escape, but the basilisk was proving to be a rather poor Guardian. There were three intruders in the Chamber of Secrets, and not one of them was dead yet. She had some time yet before the Headmistress could, if she had even decided to, take down the wards, which Umbridge had re-done to the best of her ability since that night Snape had left her in charge to attend some party. It would have taken at least an hour, forty minutes now, to undue the things. Just the same, she couldn’t have anyone questioning her absence, nor could she leave with Potter alive. Snape knew nothing and the mudblood had been unconscious the entire time, and though she loathed to let them live, killing Potter would be enough to get her what she wanted.

Tom wouldn’t be happy. Potter’s safety had been one of his few stipulations when they’d agreed to this enterprise. Tom had led her to

the Chamber, provided her the Parselflute that would allow her to speak and understand Parseltongue, and ordered the basilisk to obey her. In exchange, she would kill Granger and create havoc at the school. When she became Headmistress, he would be given a suitable (if unofficial) position of power, a teaching position of his choosing after he completed college, and be made Deputy Headmaster shortly after.

Too bad for Tom she had no intention of remaining his lackey. He was clever as far as children went, but she was a full grown witch with no intentions of taking orders from one who was barely even old enough to apparate. The evidence of his plots she had left in McNair's rooms would ensure that neither wizard lived to cause her any more trouble after tomorrow.

First, however, she had to make sure Potter wasn't around to contradict her story.

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On reflection, throwing animal bones at a snake almost twice as large as a dragon, wasn't one of his brightest ideas. Levitating a score of deer (horse? pig? house elf?) skulls towards the tail end had worked for all of two seconds. After that, it's tail had lashed out in a swooping arch, covering half the room a few scant inches above the fragile eggs. Harry, unfortunately, hadn't been on the half of the room the tail didn't reach. His body knocked heavily into a filthy floor, bones snapping (luckily none of his) without a sound upon impact. He lost his grip on both his wand and the UnSilencing Bell, and they disappeared into the debris.

The wind knocked out of him, he frantically searched the surrounding litter for his wand, but it was already too late. The basilisk, having felt it's blow connect, struck.

Everything seemed to slow. In the absolute silence of his spell, Harry was able to focus on sight so much more clearly. The snake's horribly mutilated head, abnormally numerous fangs in a pointed muzzle of a

mouth, wove through air and earth as if under water, reminding Harry strongly of a salt water eel.

Monstrous.

I don't want to die. More importantly, he thought, I don't want Hermione or Snape or anyone else to die.

The basilisk's reared up, arching like a swan's neck, before rushing down to bite him in half. Harry's hand closed on something hard and slender, and in the rush of adrenaline he didn't stop to question as he pulled it free of the muck and spun it around to the basilisk.

"Expelliarmus!"

Only to realize it wasn't his wand at all, but a... sword?

Beneath the caked on dirt and rotted vegetation, it still managed to gleam, unruined from what may have been centuries of neglect, and though it wasn't a wand it accepted the up welling of Harry's magic and sent it out.

The Silencing Charm suddenly broke, an ear-shattering shriek filling the den as the basilisk reared back, blood splashing everything as it waved its head back and forth in pain. The splash of liquid to his face woke Harry from his momentary surprise, and sent him scurrying to find his wand. The sword in his hand began to glow as more dirt was shaken free and in moments Harry found what he was looking for. He dashed for narrow tunnel, barely avoiding being creamed twice by the basilisk's furiously lashing tail.

Sword and wand in either hand, he followed the tunnel, turning down smaller tunnels whenever he thought they might lead back towards the main chamber. He was lost within minutes. Most of the tunnels seemed to lead back to themselves or else identical to each other, while others opened up into other chambers. In one such chamber, he found a library. In another a collection of weapons (none of which appealed to him more than the one he already had). Still another held nothing more than a large mirror and... Myrtle?

It wasn't until ten minutes of pointless, frantic wandering did he even think to use his watch-compass. Even then, it took another ten to find his way back to the main chamber, opening up abruptly to dump him into a shallow pool. He tripped and floundered stupidly in ankle deep water for a moment, before pulling himself onto the dry...well, drier... walkway and just lay there. Exhausted.

Umbridge was no where in sight.

Had she left, thinking the basilisk would do its thing? Or was she searching for him? Or Snape and Hermione perhaps? Was she hiding in the shadows even now? What had happened to the basilisk anyway?

He didn't know and he didn't want to find out any of these things. Regardless of the answers he couldn't just stand around. After a moment to catch his breath, he rolled to his feet and made his way back towards where he had hid Hermione. She was still there, still unconscious, though not quite as pale.

"Ah, there she is. Very clever, Mr. Potter."

Not again.

He spun around, a Freeze Hex on the tip of his tongue, but she beat him to it. He didn't hear the spell she cast, but both his sword and his wand flew out of his hands while he himself was thrown in another direction. He landed at an angle, sliding across the slick floor and half way into one of the bottomless pool. His glasses fell away and sank to the bottom. He managed to pull himself out, but now he was freezing cold, unarmed, and almost blind in the dim light of the chamber. Still, he was able to make out a vague pink blur he assumed to be Umbridge.

She let out an exasperated sigh.

"I really didn't want to cast anything on you, Potter. Spells can be traced after all. Oh well, I suppose I'll just let the basilisk eat you. HE'S HERE! COME AND GET HIM!"

And it did come, fast and angry through one of the passages directly behind Umbridge... putting the toady woman right in his path. Too late to consider the basilisk's blindness and rage, she hadn't so much as gasped when it's massive body rushed past her, knocking her into a pool.

Harry heard her splashing and screaming, but any dark joy he might have taken from her predicament was overshadowed by the basilisk's blind attacks, venom filled mouth snapping wildly at the air and quickly moving towards him. If there was any nearby escape, he was too blind to see it and the snake too fast. His one option lay in fighting, however impossible the odds, but he needed a weapon!

"COME!" he cried, hand reaching out into the darkness.

The basilisk heard, sliding into a pool and swimming directly for him, reaching him within moments. For a second time it poised for its strike, yet again Harry found the sword grasped firmly in his hand. More ready, Harry did more than simply swing the sword wildly, but sprang up, catching the basilisk under its throat and using its own momentum to drive it clean into its brain.

The snake, killed instantly, curled and thrashed in a death spasm, pulling Harry into the water yet again. Panicked, he gripped his sword and pulled it from the convulsing body, stabbing it again and again, shoving himself away from it even as it continued to drag him deeper and deeper. His panicked scream came out as nothing but a gurgling release of bubbles.

Darkness was everywhere, and even as he finally pulled himself free he became disoriented. Six ways to swim and only one was the right way. He swam in a random direction, hoping against hope it was the right one. The sword was still in his hand. It glowed in the darkness, yet there was nothing to illuminate.

Pressure and the need to breath finally forced his mouth open, releasing the last of the air in his lung and water rushed in. He convulsed once, twice, then even the light from his sword began to fade...

Harry let out a startled gasp, eyes flying open and wincing close again. The darkness was gone, though he was still wet and cold. Above him, the blurry outline of Snape loomed.

“Don’t speak, Potter, you’ve just woken from drowning,” the potion’s master said, irritation clear in his voice.

“Her-Hermione,” he managed between coughs, pointing a shaking hand towards the statue where he had hidden her. Snape left him for a moment, then returned.

Harry wanted to protest, but what was the point now? He was right, they needed to get out of this place. While Snape gathered up his unconscious goddaughter, Harry stumbled about the cavern in search of his wand. Luckily, it managed to stay on dry land and in plain view (which meant Harry practically tripped over it before finding it). He managed to summon his glasses from the pool that had nearly drowned him, but was too magically and physically exhausted for much of anything else. He found the sword, once again, resting near where he had been laying. How had it gotten there?

How utterly preposterous... and yet.

“Where did you find it?”

Harry turned to him, so utterly pale after everything, green eyes enormous with images Snape couldn't even begin to imagine.

"In its nest."

A shiver ran down Snape's back at the mere implications.

"Bring it then. The Dark Lord will wish to examine it."

"Where's Umbridge?" Harry asked, the woman's absence finally wheedling in past the shock. Snape paused, absorbing the revelation.

"She... is not here. She was the one controlling the basilisk?"

"She wanted to kill Hermione and you, and then kill the basilisk so she could be Headmistress... or something. She was crazy."

Nothing else was said. The fear and horror of the last hour was over, and everything fell back into a semblance of disjointed normalcy. Snape, albeit with an unconscious girl in his arms, was once again a cold and unreadable bastard. Harry got into trouble and was now followed obediently towards inevitable punishment. The grand and mysterious tunnels and chambers of the Salazar Slytherin's secret lair gave way to the grand and more familiar halls of the dungeons.

"Harry! Severus!"

Professor McGonagall was there to greet them the moment they appeared from the girl's lavatory, for once on at a loss on who to check over first; a conscious but battered Harry or an unconscious Hermione with unknown injuries. Flitwick, Toure, McNair, and pretty much the entire teaching staff were there as well, though none quite as quick as her. Snape didn't seem prepared to hand over the girl, so she turned to Harry.

"Harry, are you alright? You're bleeding," she said, brushing lightly against a cut on his forehead. The boy looked at her oddly for a moment, before bursting out laughing.

"You... you..." he laughed, "...should see the... other guy."

Harry's laughter faded into brief hysterical giggles before dying altogether, leaving the boy looking haunted. There was a tense silence as everyone regarded him with varying degrees of alarm.

"He's gone nutty," McNair snorted.

"But not deaf, you fucktard!" Harry snarled, jabbing his sword in McNair's general direction. Everyone leapt away in surprise, except for Snape.

"I believe Mr. Potter has had a bad day and requires a nap... followed by a good spanking. Potter! Give Professor McGonagall the sword."

Harry reluctantly did so, offering what he hoped was an apologetic look. He followed after Snape, who led the procession (sans Flitwick and Vector who were left to guard the girl's lavatory and McNair and Toure who were sent to search from Umbridge in the Forbidden Forest) to the infirmary, where he dismissed all the teachers except McGonagall.

Hermione was quickly settled, although Snape opted not to awaken her until later. She had probably been unconscious since her kidnaping, and why awaken her to a unstable situation? It was kinder to let her sleep for the time being.

Potter was another matter altogether.

Pomfrey quickly had him striped of his wet clothes, dried, and in hospital pajamas within a minute. Yet it was still long enough to glimpse the enormous bruises on Harry's back, side, arms, knees. There was only a few small cuts on his hands and face, but there were bruises there as well, some of them turning dark purple already. It must have been a fiercer battle than Snape had originally thought.

The medi-witch gave Harry a couple of potions, including a Calming Draught when he kept flinching at her touch, a salve to help with the bruises, and one for pain. She cast a few more diagnostic spells to check for internal bleeding and a concussion, then settled him into bed to rest. The Gryffindor remained awake, however, staring blankly

across the other side of the room at Hermione and the petrified Collin Creevey.

After she was done, Poppy was quick to pull both Snape and McGonagall behind a privacy screen. Her expression was uncharacteristically brutal.

“Far be it from me to question the ‘why’s and ‘how’s of what brings patients to my door, but this... this is madness. Potter looks like he’s been fighting Bludgers without a stick in the middle of a lake.”

Snape raised an amused brow.

“What a fascinating image you’ve conjured, Madam. How are they?”

“Miss Granger is perfectly healthy, if a bit chilled. A simple Enervate Spell should awaken her, otherwise she’ll come around herself in a couple of hours. Mr. Potter, however... he’ll recover. There wasn’t any serious damage, although the water in his lungs concerns me.”

“He did drown,” Snape offered, “but I managed to resuscitate him. I’m not entirely sure how long he was in the water, but it was long enough for his heart to stop.”

“Oh Merlin,” McGonagall gasped. Pomfrey took a deep breath.

“Which brings me to what really concerns me. I don’t know what happened to him, but he’s clearly traumatized. Shock is the least of it, though I don’t fancy the fall out when it’s worn off. I want you both watching him closely once he returns to classes, perhaps asking his friends if he’s sleeping properly or appears depressed or easily angered.”

“Do you think it’s really that bad?” McGonagall asked.

“Harry has experience dealing with these sorts of situations. You remember he was kidnaped last year and suffered no after affects,” Snape said, always skeptical when it came to the medi-witch’s fussiness.

"No way to know right now, but... just watch him. He'll need to talk to someone about what happened eventually."

"Sooner than he might like," Snape said, "The Dark Lord will be here any minutes, if he isn't already."

Pomfrey scowled, and shook her head.

"No, absolutely not. He's in no state to have an interview with... him. The shock hasn't even worn off. Do you want him to be around You-Know-Who when it does?!"

"That... isn't up to any of us."

The evil scowls that earned him was enough to tell him exactly what the two witches thought of that little bit of truth.

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Umbridge huffed and wheezed and shivered as she stumbled out of the back exit of the Chamber of Secrets, little more than big, dirty hole in the ground, and into the Forbidden Forest. A savage bitter wind lashed at her, and though she had spelled herself dry and warm, it gnawed at her like a living thing.

She didn't have time to wallow in her own suffering though. She had to escape and quickly. Potter was dead, she believed, but then so was the basilisk. But Snape and Granger lived, and Potter's body was still intact when she'd seen Snape drag it from the water. It would only take a few quick spells to find the magical signature she had left on him with her Disarming Spell. She had two hours at the most to get out of England before Voldemort sent his Sentinels after her.

Oh, what an utter flop this all had been. If it hadn't been for Tom being so bloody insistent about killing that stupid mudblood, than her stupid friend Potter wouldn't have shown up and mucked it all up. She was going to make him pay for that. She was going to make all of them pay.

First, she had to escape though.

She waddled through the dense vegetation, fighting against barren branches that gripped at her hair and clothes like skeletal hands. She batted them away, but still they seemed to reach for her. Alarmed she moving faster, ignoring the scratches and the tufts of hair she lost, knowing all she had to do was get out. She had come this way before, at least a dozen times, yet there had never seemed to be so many obstacles.

Angrily, she lifted her wand, intent to cut and burn away all that blocked her path. The ground rose up violently beneath causing her to lose her balance and her wand, and she would have fallen had those skeletal wooden limbs not suddenly grabbed hold of her and lifted her, dragging her up off the ground and into the trees.

Letting out a terrified shriek, she struggled, but all for nothing as she found herself suddenly high above the ground and right before one Thomas Matthew Rook. The Slytherin Fifth Year glared at her imperiously from a throne transfigured from the limbs of the tree that was currently holding her captive. He was as immaculate and dignified as always, the bitter wind and savage shrubbery not displacing so much as hair.

"You disappoint me, Madam," Tom drawled. "I would have thought you could kill one little mudblood before I disposed of you, but I see I've overestimated you. I suppose I can only blame myself. I should have gone to McNair. At least he was wizard enough to attend Hogwarts, unlike you..."

Umbridges face contorted in rage, but it didn't last long as he flicked his wand and she found herself plummeting to the ground. She hit heavily and something broke. Maybe everything as she choked on her own blood, the pain too excruciating to even roll over.

Tom dropped before her with the grace of bird.

"I had two very simple rules for you to follow, Madam, of which you've obeyed neither. First, you've disregarded my order that I should never be implicated in these acts by leaving the original Parselflute I gave

you in McNair's room, while you used a copy you made yourself. Did you really think I wouldn't have means to keep track of such things? It's a family heirloom after all."

A flicker of his wand and she was sailing through air and face first into a tree. She must have been knocked unconscious, because a unpleasant rejuvenation spell brought her around choking on her own broken teeth as well as her blood. Tom continued as if he had never paused.

“Then, you make the unforgivable mistake of trying to kill Harry. He still lives only because my Suspension Spell preserved his body long enough for Snape to rescue him. A Stunning Hex would have been sufficient to keep him out of the way, but no... you had to be ambitious.”

Now, Tom didn't even bother with his wand, but kicked her with own foot repeatedly, crushing her already broken bones as she could only lay there and wail in pain and horror. Then he stopped abruptly, lifted his head listen, and then grinned to himself.

“Ah, they’re here. I’ve invited some friends to keep you company, Madam. It took some convincing to get them to come out of hibernation, but when I mentioned how you had released the basilisk into their forest, they became rather... eager to meet you.”

He chuckled darkly, gliding away silently into the darkness. Before he was gone completely, he called out one last time.

“Send Aragog my regards, Madam.”

He was gone, and the worse of her nightmare seemed to have departed, leaving her to slip into death at last.

But then the sound of thousands of little feet on dried leaves filtered into her ears...

[illegible]

Harry didn't sleep at all, even after everyone had left. Instead, he crawled out of his bed and sat beside Hermione, watching her sleep peacefully. It had been a close call today, for the both of them. Had Umbridge merely decided to kill Hermione instead of knocking her unconscious this all would have been for nothing, and even if he had lived he would have lost the most important person in the world to him... again.

But he had saved her. Saved her as he hadn't been able to save his parents, and they would both go on being friends until they were both old and grey and senile. So why was he crying now? Why wouldn't the tears stop? She was fine, she was fine, they were both fine.

Why was he still so afraid she would die?

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Voldemort did not immediately summon Harry when he arrived at the school. He was sorely tempted, but Snape was strangely insistent that the child be left alone until the end of his investigation. The Dark Lord was tempted to throttle Snape then and there, but relented when the potion's master mentioned the drowning and resuscitation. His protégé deserved a little time to compose himself after that.

But only a little.

The subsequent 'Tour of Destruction' Bella and Severus led him through was interesting enough. The teachers had been busily returning order to the school, informing the students that Collin Creevey and Hermione Granger had accidentally released a pair of boggarts from one of Professor McNair's supply closets. Believing they were being chased by monsters, the second years panicked and ran. Creevey was said to have fallen down a flight of stairs and Granger had ducked into a secret passage and become lost. The students had been returned to their rooms so the teachers could round up the boggarts and find her.

A clever enough story, and one that both children would be able to verify with a little legilimency and memory alteration. Let it not be said that Bella lacked imagination.

She had wanted to alter Harry's memories as well, but Voldemort wasn't ready to commit to that course until he saw the boy himself. What Harry had achieved was... miraculous. Stupid, reckless, and suicidal, but still an amazing feat. He had toured the Chamber alone with Snape as the man recounted what he had seen and what he suspected happened. The basilisk's bloated body now floated in the pool that Harry had been drowned in, and he had it levitated onto the walkway to better examine it. The head was badly damaged by Snape's exploding trap, but it was clear the killing blow had come from the deep puncture wound under the snake's throat. There were other sword wounds as well, on the snout and side of the body, signs of Harry's desperate struggle to escape.

He left Snape to gather venom to make an antidote for the petrified students while he checked the rest of the Chamber. The lair remained mostly untouched except for the Nesting Room, where six eggs had been crushed and were now leaking yoke and partially developed snake fetuses onto the littered floor. Voldemort felt a pang of loss. Basilisks were the rarest of the rare nowadays, and if any others existed outside of the refuge Salazar had made for them he had never heard of them. Such magnificent creatures deserved better.

When Voldemort and Snape returned to the upper levels of the castle, Chief Sentinel Morgan was there to inform them they had found Umbridge. Dead. Eaten by acumantulas no less. They assumed that's how she died. It was hard to say. She'd been liquified from the inside out, after all. The only thing they had found intact was her purse, containing an imitation Parselflute.

It was an ironically fitting end, yet very suspicious. Few people even heard of Parselflutes, let alone had the means to create one from scratch. How had she found the Chamber and how had the idea come to her? Then the acumantula themselves should have been hibernating. Had someone woken them?

McNair was arrested on Voldemort's orders. Umbridge had been sent to guard the man, and as often as they had been stuck together it seemed inconceivable that he wasn't aware of at least some of her activities. Voldemort had an alternative suspect, of course, but McNair's arrest served as a convenient excuse to be rid of the incompetent Dark Art's professor. He had screamed bloody revenge, which was the only amusing thing the Dark Lord found about the situation.

Finally, after the initial reports had been given, Voldemort retired to his private office with the Headmistress and Deputy Headmaster. The sword Harry had used to kill Muchalinda was sitting on his desk, waiting for his expert examination, but he ignored it for the time being in favor of examining his minions.

"We were lucky. Very, very lucky," Voldemort said evenly, the underlying edge in his voice causing both Snape and Lestrange to tense. "All your careful planning would have been for nothing if not for the meddling of one precocious child."

Lestrange was quick to find blame. Snape had been the one to leave Umbridge in charge that night, making it possible for her to fiddle with the wards and let the basilisk back inside, and had also left Harry unsupervised outside her office.

"My Lord-"

All of her accusations were silenced by an angry hiss from the Dark Lord, his eyes flashing crimson.

"I don't want to hear your excuses," he snarled, stalking to the other side of his desk and throwing himself into his chair. "I don't care who you think is to blame. I know where fault lays."

They waited tensely for him to elaborate, but he let them mentally squirm for several moments while he sorted through his desk for appropriate forms and a quill. Finally, he spoke again.

"It was I who hired her. I knew from the beginning she was not to be trusted around children, but assumed the promise of a rise in status

would keep her on her best behavior. Apparently her best behavior is that of a pack-stabbing, homicidal bitch. I should have known better. Her service during the war in Ireland was... telling.”

Snape and Lestrage were stunned silent (not that they had much to say in the first place accept perhaps ‘please don’t kill me’). The Dark Lord ignored them as he filled out some of the paperwork, looked it over, and then handed a set of it to each of them.

“I want a full unbiased report of what happened by tomorrow night. You may not see or contact one another before then. For both your sakes I recommend complete honesty. Any inconsistencies I find will be thoroughly investigated. Bella, you need to hire a replacement Dark Art’s professor for the rest of the semester. Will the one you hired for next year be ready?”

Lestrage mentally scrambled for a reply, disconcerted almost beyond reasoning by all that had happened and was happening.

“Ah... yes, I mean no. She still has to complete a contract with some real estate company as a curse breaker until July, but I could probably convince Quirrell to return for the remainder of the semester.”

Voldemort nodded.

“Severus I will leave you in charge of brewing the antidote and casting the memory charms on the Gryffindors. I expect you to be thorough.”

Snape merely nodded, cringing at the combined task. Memory charms were a tricky affair, and exhausting to the caster. To perform three (possibly four if Harry was included) of them in a row was in no way appealing. The antidote would be challenging as well. It was better than the Pain Curse, at least.

“Good, I expect everything to be wrapped by the end of the week then. The whole affair has been a nuisance, and I want nothing more than to wipe my hands clean of it.”

Just as the Dark Lord seemed prepared to send them away, possibly after a couple of hexings, someone activated the ward requesting entrance. A crystal ball of dark green that appeared as nothing more than a paperweight began to glow and a name floated across its surface. Voldemort frowned curiously.

“Enter,” he commanded.

A figure moved through the wall, cloaked from head to toe in grey fur which was gradually turning colors to match the surrounding decor. It moved slowly and deliberately towards the Dark Lord’s desk and stopped between Snape and a confused Lestrangle.

“Harry, why aren’t you resting in the infirmary?” Voldemort asked, half curiosity, half irritation. “Does the medi-witch even know where you are?”

“I left a note,” he said, pulling back his hood.

“Potter,” Lestrangle growled, wanting nothing more than to throttle the boy who had humiliated her by succeeding where she had failed. If it hadn’t been for him, even if Umbridge had succeeded, she was certain of her ability to salvage the situation. The death of Severus and the mudblood was hardly a loss to her. His eyes flashed towards her like a Killing Curse, brilliant green and full of hatred. She stepped back, startled.

He had not forgotten or forgiven her for abandoning Hermione for dead.

“Harry.”

The boy’s eyes softened as they turned back to the Dark Lord, who was regarding him with unusual patience.

“What are you doing here, Harry?” he hissed in Parseltongue.

“I... I don’t know. I just figured... I didn’t want to wait for you to summon me.”

Voldemort stared intently into Harry's wide green eyes. They were puffy, likely from crying, bruised, and haunted. Why was the child so sad? Had he not come out victorious? Was he afraid of his punishment for his foolish adventure? Was he afraid the Dark Lord would be angry with him?

Harry had good reason to be afraid. Voldemort had wanted nothing more than to take a pound of flesh after hearing the initial report from Snape of Harry's escape from his dorm and then into the dungeons.

But such a thing seemed superfluous now. The child had been hurt, had died, and certainly been frightened enough during his battle. He was weak now. Punishing him could break him, and that wasn't what Voldemort wanted. Obedience would have to be a lesson for another time.

"I understand," he hissed softly, then turned to the others. "I will look after Mr. Potter, and return him to the infirmary later. You are dismissed."

Snape and Lestrage turned to leave, but Harry grabbed the potion's master's sleeve as he walked past. Snape looked down in surprise at the intent expression on Harry's face, which so reminded him of someone else from long ago. Someone who had not been James Potter.

"Thank you, Professor," the boy began, "for coming after us. For... saving my life."

Snape said nothing, merely stared back until Harry looked away nervously and down at his shoes. The potion's master smirked.

"I wouldn't thank me yet, Potter. I haven't told you about your detentions. Your many, many detentions."

Harry grimaced, and Snape fought the urge to laugh evilly. Ah, well. After the Dark Lord left. In the meantime, he tugged his sleeve free and stalked past Lestrage, feeling inordinately pleased all of a sudden. He adjusted his route towards the infirmary to see Hermione, suddenly feeling content.

Really, things could only get better from here. No one had been permanently hurt, except of course Umbridge (and really who cared?), the basilisk was dead, he had gotten away without any harm done to his person, Lestrage was no doubt going to throw herself into conniptions, and he had months of Potter torment to look forward to.

Yes, this was starting out as a fabulous beginning to a new year.

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Alone together, Harry and Voldemort wasted little time. The Dark Lord summoned some hot tea for the boy and moved him to the couch, while he sat in the chair across from him. He didn't even have to prompt the boy to start talking, he was already desperate to be out with the story.

"I didn't think I'd find her alive," he said at one point, "Giant snakes don't take hostages, so how could she be alive? I had to try though. She's like a sister to me."

There had been a long moment of silence, the haunted look in Harry's eyes deepening into barely suppressed horror, before he chased what ever mental image or memory he was imagining with a gulp of hot tea.

Voldemort asked no questions, nor did he demand Harry look into his eyes while the story unfolded. This was a confession, more than anything, and the Dark Lord had no reason to doubt the boy's words. There were gaps of course, perhaps to conceal some fellow student's assistance in his escape from his dorm or some secret method used to reach the dungeons faster than his professors, but nothing Voldemort found particularly significant.

"... and then I cast a Disarming Spell, but it wasn't my wand at all. It was a sword."

Here, Harry paused to look over at the weapon laying docilely on the desk. McGonagall must have cleaned it off for it shown sparkling silver with rubies the size of eggs embedded in the hilt.

“Where do you think it came from? I mean, it has to be magical since it didn’t rust in that place, but why hide it there?”

Voldemort wondered that himself, and stood up to see if he might gather some clues. Yet when he reached out to touch it, it sparked violently, singeing his fingers.

“My Lord!” Harry gasped in alarm

“I’m fine. There’s a curse on this sword, a mild one. You say you touched this without harm?”

“Yes. So did McGonagall. I handed it to her in the dungeons.”

“Come here and see if you can still touch it.”

Harry, reluctantly, did as commanded. Nothing happened.

“It must not like you,” Harry said, earning him an annoyed look. Voldemort studied it closely in the child’s hands, though he didn’t try to touch it again. Just below the hilt of the sword a name was engraved that he hadn’t noticed before.

‘Godric Gryffindor’.

“Merlin,” Voldemort breathed out, reached out to take the sword again, but quickly stopped himself. “I don’t believe it.”

“What? You recognize it?”

Voldemort smirked.

“Recognize it? Oh yes, it is a very precious item. This is the Sword of Gryffindor, owned by Godric Gryffindor, one of the four founders of Hogwarts. It’s been lost for centuries.”

Harry blinked in disbelief down at his prize.

“Well... I don’t suppose anyone would go looking for it in a basilisk nest...”

“Unless, they’re a Gryffindor, of course,” Voldemort said, chuckling at the irony. Oh, this was deliciously unexpected. Well worth the destroyed basilisk eggs. And his Harry had found it, or it had found Harry as the case may be.

“What should I do with it?”

Voldemort smiled.

“There are no heirs of Gryffindor, so it would be best to keep it in the school. The Headmistress’ office holds quite the display of Founder’s artifacts. It will be safe there.”

Harry frowned at the thought of handing the beautiful sword over to that woman. Voldemort caught his irritated look.

“The Sword will always belong to Hogwarts, not the Headmistress.”

“Yeah...” Harry conceded, reluctantly.

“If it’s any consolation, I doubt it will like Bella any more than it likes me.”

The Gryffindor smirked. That was, in fact, a very good consolation.

They marveled over the sword for a bit longer, Voldemort providing more history and legends about the sword and then theories about how it may have ended up in the basilisk’s nest (although he never mention his other suspicion that it had sought Harry out specifically). The haunted look receded from Harry’s eyes, to be replaced by wonder and curiosity. The boy’s pale complexion even managed a blush when Voldemort suggested a portrait be painted to commemorate Harry’s defeat of the basilisk.

In fact, though Voldemort only mentioned it to illicit such a response, it was a good idea. Such an adventure that had transpired below the dungeons was the stuff of legends, and a significant event in the history of Hogwarts. Even if Voldemort had to wait a hundred years before he allowed anyone to know the truth of what had happened, he thought it prudent to record it all while the memory was still fresh. The Dark Lord quickly switched topics, setting aside but not forgetting the idea.

After that, Harry's story became a bit more lively. The running and the fighting came out in quick excited descriptions with the occasional gesture to demonstrate how he'd maneuver the sword or when he'd lost his wand yet again. He grew quiet again when he recalled his drowning, and Voldemort fell into his silence as well. This was not a part of the story he particularly cared for, the possibility of Harry's destruction so very close it seemed inescapable, and yet the child rose triumphant with the aid of his own personal guardian, returning from the lair of the monster with the fair princess in hand.

Oh yes, this would all make a marvelous addition to 'Hogwarts a History'. Normally when this sort of thing happened, everybody tended to die or be maimed horribly.

But one should expect greater things from a true prince..

Dear Readers

As you may notice this is not another chapter of 'Prince of the Dark Kingdom'. My computer has been attacked by nasty adware and spyware, rendering it useless for both writing and posting. A friend helped me get rid of these problem, but I had to reboot my system and lost the Corel WordPerfect program I was using to write, making it impossible to open and complete my last chapter of Book II. I hope to find the program online and install it soon so that I can update, but it probably won't get done today. Sorry.

Mizuni-san

P.S. Congratulations to those of you who graduated this last week and in the next few weeks that follow!

Book II:

Epilogue

Hermione looked exhausted when Harry visited her two days after her hospitalization. The stark white of her hospital pajamas made the shadows under her eyes more vivid. That was suspicious in the young parselmouth's opinion, as she could have been released the same day as her abduction but had been held much longer to 'rest' without visitors, except for Narcissa Malfoy.

He had passed the aristocrat in the halls after another failed attempt to see Hermione, and she had stopped him for a few moments. She hadn't said a word, merely pulled him aside gently with a touch to his shoulder. Her expression was neutral, but her eyes were intense when they looked down at him. For the life of him, he couldn't unravel the knot of emotions behind her gaze, but the soft touch on his cheek seemed to convey a sort of gratitude she would not or could not speak.

"I don't know why I'm so tired," Hermione grouched, frustrated to have been separated not only from classes but the newspaper as well. She didn't voice her complaints directly, believing her stay practical and therefore beyond reproach, but the lack of mental stimulus didn't sit well with her.

"You're probably just bored," Harry offered, though he didn't believe it himself. "They'll release you tonight or tomorrow for sure. I heard Angelina and Colin will be back in class by third period."

"Oh, that's good," she said, curiosity peaked, "I'm surprised about Angelina though. I thought she wouldn't be back until next April. Did they find some *acumantula* anti-venom somewhere?"

Harry frowned.

"What are you talking about?"

"You know, the anti-venom?" she said slowly, as if it would make sense if he thought it through. He tried, but unless she was speaking

in euphemisms (and it didn't sound like she was), he had no idea what she meant. "To cure the acrumantula bite?"

Harry could only stare, until a sudden feeling of dread passed over him.

"Hermione... what do you remember about your attack?"

She huffed and rolled her eyes, impatience clear in her every gesture.

"Harry can me talk about that later? I've had to explain it over a dozen times already, and I'm going to have to explain it a hundred more times to the rest of school when I get out of here. Can we just wait until all of our friends are together? It's not that interesting a story anyway."

Not wanting to provoke her while she was already in a mood, he approached from a different angle.

"... I don't know. I've never seen a boggart before."

She shrugged.

"Lucky you. I thought poltergeists were bad, but that was ten times worse. I'm never going to be able to open a cupboard again without flinching... Harry, are you all right? Did I say something wrong?"

Her friend's expression was suddenly tight, almost pained. He shook his head.

"No, it isn't you. I skipped an appointment and now my watch is burning a hole in my pocket. Sorry, I have to go. I'll see you later."

He was up and out the door before she could even form a possible theory for his abrupt departure, and minutes later she could still think of nothing. Perhaps, indeed, he was running late for an appointment. After all, she couldn't imagine what she might have said to upset him.

It wasn't like he hadn't heard the story of the boggarts before.

Harry's entrance into the potion's lab was loud and melodramatic, and thus rather irritating to the already irritated potion's master. Snape had just finished up a rather abysmal session with his fifth year Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws, who were still recovering from their holiday sloth and sifting through vials filled with varying shades of red (and in one instance purple, stupid Hufflepuff), when the cheeky little buggler slammed open his door.

Snape cast him a reproving glare, taking in the boy's ruffled and sweaty appearance. He must have run from the infirmary all the way down to the dungeons.

“What did you do?” Harry hissed, lower and more threatening and in Snape’s opinion rather silly. Basilisk slaying aside, the twelve year old had a long way to go before he could intimidate him. He smirked at the child, his eyes fierce in the gloom of his own lair. Predictably, the Gryffindor lost some of his nerve and stepped back a fraction. The door behind Harry slammed shut, startling him badly.

Harry grit his teeth, biting back his initial impulse to swear horrid things at the man.

“She has a right to know the truth. She almost died.”

“And how, precisely, Mr. Potter, do you suppose knowing that would help her in any way? Would the death-that-almost-was ease her heart, clear her thoughts, thrill her? Did your brushes with death leave you a better person? Or is it that you wish her to know that you saved her? Her brave prince come to her rescue. And here I thought your mother’s influence had smothered that Potter conceit.”

“You’re a fine one to talk! Screwing around with our memories and our free will for ‘our own good’! What a load of swill. You did it because it got you and yours off the hook!”

Snape glared pointedly at Harry, then checked his watch.

“Your first punishment wasn’t suppose to be until after dinner, but since you’re here already, why don’t we get started. Expelliarmus!”

Harry’s wand flew from his grasp and straight to Snape, who snatched it out of the air and locked it in a desk drawer in one smooth motion. The young Gryffindor had only a moment to realize the trouble he had landed himself in, before the potion’s master was stalking towards him. He retreated instinctively, but soon found himself trapped at the door. Snape loomed over him, his expression cold and menacing.

“Mr. Potter, despite your precocious behavior, you are twelve, not thirty two or even twenty two. Twelve. A child only. You lack both the experience and the understanding to accept full responsibility over yourself and your actions. If you did, you would have obeyed me when I told you to remain outside the Headmistress’ office.”

“You were going to let Hermione die!” Harry snarled angrily.

“I would have done nothing of the sort!”

Snape flicked his wand at the chalk board and two large red circles appeared about two feet from each other.

“I would have found and rescued my goddaughter without your meddling, regardless of the Headmistress’ orders. Instead, I was forced to pursue you without a true plan or additional assistance.

Take off your robe and your shirt, and place your hands on the circles.”

“What?”

Harry cringed, his anger fleeing in the face of Snape’s unexpected wraith. In his own self-righteous indignation it hadn’t occurred to the boy that his accusations would be met with any sort of retaliation. Before his horrified eyes, he watched Snape transfigure his wand into a bamboo cane.

“I promised you a beating, Mr. Potter. Don’t you recall? I certainly haven’t forgotten. I believe ten lashes should be adequate. Unless you wish to dally, I can always had another five or ten.”

“I saved Hermione!” he objected. Snape wasn’t impressed.

“You died, Mr. Potter. If I had been as apathetic as you had believed or even a mere minute or two late, you would still be dead and so might Hermione. Undress. Hands on the circles. Now.”

There was no talking Snape out of his course, and though Harry felt no regret for his actions he had no choice but to accept punishment for them. With trembling fingers, he unhooked his school robe, his vest, and the white dress shirt underneath, folded them roughly and set them on a lab station. His trembling turned to real shivers as the chill of the dungeon air seeped into his dampening skin. With one last hate fill glare at Snape, he placed his hands on the circles. The potion’s master moved behind him.

“Despite what you may believe, I’m not doing this out of vindictiveness,” Snape said coolly. Harry snorted, and scowled at his hands. “I appreciate what you tried to do for my goddaughter, but she was not your responsibility. You had no right to risk your life for hers.”

Harry twisted back to snap about his right to decide what do with his own life, but the cane came down with a harsh crack, the sudden burning pain robbing him of his words. He faltered, instinctively jerking away, but his hands would not come free of the red spots and

he could neither retreat nor turn around. A second strike landed higher up his back brought out a startled yelp.

“Potter, hold still. Retain a little dignity.”

“Why are you doing this? I don’t get it! I don’t understand!” he cried, struggling to get free.

A hand grabbed him harshly by the back of the neck, stilling him instantly. Inexplicably, he was reminded of Voldemort and his random piques of temper.

“Hold still. When we are done I will try and explain it in a way any simpleton or a Gryffindor, which ever is dumber, might understand.”

The painful hold on his neck withdrew, and despite his renewed range of movement, Harry held himself still and tense. He didn’t have to wait long as the third strike landed, followed shortly by another and another. Gritting his teeth, he bore it as stoically as he could, holding his breath lest his choking sobs break free.

It was over faster than he would have thought, and his hands were suddenly free. He leaned heavily on the chalk board, the pain now secondary to a sudden weakness and nausea. Gently, he reached behind himself to touch his back, expecting to feel blood but found only bruises in the making. Snape moved towards him, and he scrambled away quickly

The bamboo cane was gone, his wand out of sight, and in its place he held out Harry’s shirt. The boy eyed him suspiciously for a moment before snatching it out of his hand. His back throbbed at the sudden movement, and protested when he lifted his arms to redress himself, but like hell he was going to ask Snape to help him.

The potion’s master watched Harry critically, determining how well this round of discipline had gone. Not well it seemed. Far from contrite, the child was angry now, perhaps angrier than he had been when he had first arrived. He let the child redress in silence and ignored the less than subtle swipe of sleeve under his glasses.

“Are you calm?”

The glare Harry gave him could have melted stone, but Snape continued anyway.

“Rules are made for a reason, Mr. Potter, as are my commands. We sent the students to their dorms for their safety, and I had you wait in the corridor for your safety. You disobeyed me, and you died. Do you understand that, Mr. Potter? Have you any concept of what that means, to be dead? You seem to think that means you got a little bump on the head and were knocked unconscious, but that isn’t what happened. You stopped breathing. Your heart stopped. Your spirit was slowly lifting out of your body to be lost forever.”

Harry swallowed. He knew that, all of it. He knew it but he couldn’t think about that. How could anyone expect him to sit through classes or laugh with his friends or just live in general with the knowledge that he had been dead?

“Things may have turned out for the better in this instance, but don’t you dare think such reckless behavior is always rewarded by fate. It will never be rewarded by me. If you ever find yourself in a position to disobey a rule or command laid down with the interest of your or anyone else’s safety in mind, I want you to remember what happened just now, and know that I will double the number of lashes for every time this lesson must be repeated. Is that understood?”

Harry, a bit more contrite now, nodded. Snape glared.

“Is that understood?”

“Y-yes, Sir.”

“Then you may go for now. You have another detention this Saturday at eight. I wouldn’t recommend eating much.”

His wand was returned along with the rest of his clothing. The door to the lab fell open as if opened by a breeze, and Harry scurried out as quickly as he could without actually running. The door slammed shut

behind him, leaving Harry sore, angry, and more than a little bewildered about what had happened.

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Tom oozed out from Slytherin's portrait with his usual grace, belying the nervousness he felt. Umbridge was dead, and he had removed all evidence she had left of his involvement from McNair's and Umbridge's quarters respectively. Granger still lived, which was regrettable, but he wasn't in any hurry to dispose of her before he had completely unraveled himself from the knot Harry had made of his scheme.

Voldemort had already called him to his office days ago, forcing him to wait in a virtual limbo within the painting as he completed his meetings with Lestrage, Snape, and then Harry. Tom felt his blood boil recalling the ease with which his older counterpart had charmed his 'mother' from his shell shocked state to one of a wide-eyed child. His anger only escalated when he saw the Dark Lord gently deny Harry's ownership of Gryffindor's Sword, which by all rights belonged to the child. So many things belonged to Harry that Voldemort had denied him, and Tom wanted nothing more than to pull the younger boy aside and explain all the wrongs that had been committed against him by the man he so admired.

But Tom could do nothing but wait and watch and seethe impotently. Today, wouldn't be any different. The Dark Lord was heading to London to oversee the Wizengamot's latest legal revisions (Voldemort had been tossing out so many old laws there was talk that the Book of Laws might be reduced to one hundred volumes from the twelve hundred it had been during the rule of the Ministry), and wished to see him for his latest batch of instructions or merely to be annoying.

"I'm having McNair arrested," Voldemort said, skipping over the pleasantries neither of them cared for. Tom raised a curious brow.

"Hardly a loss, but why?"

“Precisely because it’s no loss. Umbridge was supposed to be his guardian, and the fact that he needed one at all is a testament to his uselessness. Besides, without him here no one will question that woman’s absence, nor will I have to worry about his increasingly traitorous mutterings. Umbridge wasn’t the only one to report his attitude problem.”

Tom snorted. Only the Dark Lord would label psychopathic tendencies as an ‘attitude problem’.

“Quirrell will be returning. Unenthusiastic, but harmless and easily charmed. You might consider ‘befriending’ him. He would make a good spy. LeStrange and Snape overlook him too easily.”

A twinge of discomfort ran through Tom, not at the prospect of using Quirrell, but at the similarity of his using Umbridge for the exact same thing. He studied Voldemort intently for signs of mockery or suspicion, but all he saw was a distracted boredom. He hadn’t even looked up from the document he was reviewing.

“I will keep that in mind. Is there anything else?”

“Just the usual. I should be back at the end of the year to see how things went.”

Tom nodded, and left without waiting to be dismissed. Once he had disappeared through the portrait, Voldemort smirked. From under his chair, Pettigrew scurried and climbed into a chair where he promptly turned back into a man. He eyed the portrait suspiciously, but settled soon enough.

“I don’t understand why you don’t just kill him,” Pettigrew muttered. “I told you what I heard.”

Oh, and what horrific things he had heard. The little line of conquests hadn’t been the worst of it (in fact Pettigrew had enjoyed that part of his spying a bit too much), nor had the long rants about mudbloods, Voldemort, Wizzarding Weekly, or the inventor of the floo network. No, what was worst of all were the moments Tom actually appeared sane, talking quietly to himself as he sketched out his plans of murder and

betrayal and treason. Pettigrew had to sit soundlessly and listen to it all in excruciating detail, right down to the death of mudblood children and a slew of teachers. Whatever Tom was, and he was increasingly convinced the boy wasn't human, it was obvious he was ambitious, insane, and deadly.

Voldemort made an annoyed gesture, commanding him to silence, and ignored the question. There was no point to killing Tom at the moment. His death or rather his disappearance, could not be easily explained and would create more panic just as things were beginning to settle down. No, Tom was safe.

For now.

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The biting chill of January and February gave way to a unusually early spring, and with it Harry felt released from the lingering anxiety of winter. Despite the death of the basilisk and the danger it presented, it took weeks for Harry to stop expecting mysterious voices and danger in the gloomy halls. His dreams had been unsettling, if not exactly nightmarish (though he had plenty of those too), filled with desperate searches for Hermione or someone else that never ended and whispers from the dark corners of the castle.

McGonagall had been hovering since his release from the hospital, and in a strange way so had Snape, except Snape's 'hovering' involved detentions. Lots and lots of detentions, just as he had promised. He thought they might have suspected his uneasiness, yet neither had said anything directly. But as the days lengthened, and Snape's restrictions were lifted, Harry found himself outside more and more often, enjoying the openness and freedom a ride on a broom or a walk around the lake presented.

"And Potter catches the Snitch! Gryffindor wins the match!"

Harry circled the arena, snitch in hand as the crowd cheered (or groaned in the case of the Ravenclaws) before landed. His teammates had him quickly surrounded, smacking him on the back.

Angelina gave him a peck on the cheek, which had the Weasley twins demanding kisses from her too.

A week after the death of the basilisk all of the petrified students had been cured, and their memories rearranged. Angelina was made to remember only stopping in the hall to check her make-up and a sharp pinch in her leg, supposedly the bite of an acromantula. Collin remembered nothing after leaving the hall, but that was explained away as the result of a concussion from falling down a flight of stairs. Even Myrtle had returned to her bathroom convinced she had been badly pranked, and Harry had been sure to bring her a bouquet of dried flowers to wish her well. He sort of wishes he hadn't, as she now seemed utterly infatuated with him.

"Wait to go, Harry!" Hermione called from the bleachers as he passed her on the way to the showers. She was smiling and waving beside Ginny, wrapped in her cloak against the last of the April chill. Harry smiled and waved back at her, though his expression dimmed a bit as he was pulled out of sight.

Hermione remembered nothing about the basilisk. And he literally meant nothing. Her attack was nothing more than an unexpected awakening in the infirmary and the second hand story of a boggart. The days previous spent searching through ancient tomes and old newspaper articles for the truth were simply gone. Stolen by her own godfather.

Harry had resented him for that at first. Clyde and Ginny might still remember, but it was Hermione whom he wished to have shared his adventure with. Yet, she had been happier since she'd forgotten, less stressed about the school and about Harry. Harry and his fellow conspirators had each attempted at one point to tell her the truth, but soon realized she had more to lose from the realization than gain. In the end, Harry let her be and hoped it was for the best.

Besides, there was one other he had shared the entire fiasco with... with a few tiny rearrangements to protect his friends' names. Voldemort now knew everything, and Harry hoped the man had shared everything he knew with Harry. The Dark Lord had been so proud, he had commissioned an actual painting to commemorate the

event (even though it would have to remain hidden for another seventy-five to a hundred years). It hadn't been as exciting as it initially sounded. Serving three weekends of 'detention' in the Chamber of Secrets posing for said painting was not fun.

Although it did beat the next four weekends and half a dozen evenings of detentions under Snape's supervision. On the bright side, if such a side existed in the dungeons, Harry had found his Unsilencing Bell and was now the most skilled dissector of all things squirmy and slimy that could be used in a potion. He could render a flubberworm into all six useful components before half the class could identify the head.

Hogsmeade weekends, unsupervised extra curricular activities, reinstatement of the old curfew, and of course Quidditch all returned to Hogwarts. It was too late in the season for official tournaments to resume in Quidditch, but the teams had engaged in several mock tournaments with volunteer students as referees, commentators, and score keepers. Harry enjoyed several victories when Snape wasn't putting his growing skills with a parring knife to work in the dungeons, which meant Harry hadn't played a single one on one with Slytherin at all that semester.

Bastard.

Ron Weasley was now Junior Captain of the Dueling Club.

Spawn of the Bastard.

The title didn't mean much at the moment, since there wouldn't be any dueling tournaments until at least next school year, but that didn't stop the goon from gloating whenever he got the chance. Snape had not let them have a rematch, despite their mutual insistence. The Dueling Master said they set a bad example when they fought against each other. Harry assumed that meant Ron was a cheating little twat when a duel wasn't going his way. They were still locked in a Cold War, but the Slytherin Weasley was noticeably less reckless with his provocations. Draco, my contrast, was positively mutinous when it came to taking orders from his Captain. Their duels were almost as bad as Harry's had been. Almost.

Not all things returned to normal, though that wasn't necessarily a bad thing. McNair was gone. The official story was that he was dismissed because of his negligence in securing the boggart, as well as earlier instances of questionable conduct. No one inquired about Umbridge. They assumed she was dismissed with McNair and no one was sorry to see her go. Harry knew of her bloody end, and though he didn't pity her he wished Voldemort had spared him the details.

Quirrel took over DA&D class again. Rumors of his demise had apparently been exaggerated, and after half a year of retirement he was looking decidedly refreshed. It probably didn't hurt that the entire students body had stood up and applauded as if he were super star when his return was announced during breakfast. Harry had never seen the man look so flattered.

"Wait to go, Harry," Oliver Wood congratulated as he help secure their brooms in their special cupboards. "Too bad about all those detentions though. The substitute Seeker just isn't up to par when we face the Slytherins."

"Thanks, Captain," Harry said. "Next year, I'm following the straight and narrow. No more detentions for me. We'll win the Cup again for sure."

"No! Say it isn't so!" Fred cried, rushing from his shower with only a towel on, still covered in suds. "Our Lord of Chaos can't retire!"

"What's going on, Fred?" George asked, wandering over damp and still shirtless from his shower.

"It's awful! He's retiring!"

"NOOOOOooooooooooooo-"

"Guys, calm down," Harry begged.

"-ooooooooooooooooooooo-"

“Chaos will survive with out me.”

“-oooooooooooooooo-”

“George, will you...?”

“-oooooooooooooooo-”

“Please-”

“-ooooOOOooooOOoooOOooooooooooooOOOOOOOOOOoooo-”

“ALRIGHT, I’LL BLOW SOMETHING UP NEXT YEAR!”

“-oooooOkay.”

Fred turned to his twin. “You’re a genius.”

George nodded, and grinned smugly as he went to finish dressing, leaving Harry and Oliver to stare after him, dumbfounded.

Impending doom or not, some things never changed.

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Spring bloomed into summer, illuminating the Scottish country side in rich dark greens and splashes of wild flower color. Harry, Hermione, Clyde, Ginny, Draco, and Natalie abandoned the castle and the stuffy Great Hall for lunch down by the lake. It was only two days until they would all go their separate ways for the summer, and they decided to forego the mad dash of activity for what Draco described as ‘less plebian’ endeavors.

Harry wasn’t sure how hanging out with your friends by the lake was any different than hanging out with your friends in the Great Hall or the Library, but he wasn’t too concerned. They were all comfortable and drowsy, lounging on their giant checkered blanket after eating too many sweets. The Lacsa-Daisy tree (a magical tree that bloomed a different type of flower every ten days from May to August) provided

them with shade, semi-privacy, and a gentle rain of soft blue petals whenever the breeze blew just right.

Hermione was currently lecturing Clyde on his abysmal (in her opinion) study habits and the need to improve next year or suffer the consequences, and he was dutifully ignoring her in favor of playing cards with Ginny. Harry was sketching Draco and Natalie playing chess and discussing, of all things, politics.

"I still have no idea what that press conference was all about," Harry lamented, "I mean, I get all the new jobs for unskilled workers thing, but exactly what are they doing? And what does 'British Assembly of Cultural Preservation and Defense' mean? Your father is now head of something or other in that division now, you have to have some idea on what he does."

"Not a lot. It's very hush-hush," Draco replied apathetically, destroying one of Natalie's ponds with his bishop. "My father oversees the training programs for the different sections, and it seems kind of like Sentinel training, but at the same time its sort of the opposite. I don't know. Not much was happening until after we left home again. Why don't you ask the Dark Lord directly? You two seem pretty chummy."

Harry made a face. True, he and Voldemort were getting along, but then they rarely saw each other either. The longer the man was away, the less certain Harry felt about him. During the holidays everything had seemed like a dream, bizarre and yet natural in its progression. At Hogwarts, he woke up and Harry was left analyzing the dream and all its strange and subtle meanings, uncertain and cautious.

Snape was still the center of his anger, second only to Lestrage, for his role in the basilisk affair, but after a month and a half of Voldemort's absence he was starting to see things a bit differently. Now he understood that the Dark Lord had a greater part to play in the matter, and all that Snape had done had been by his Master's behest or permission, including the Contract and the memory charms on Hermione. It left him uneasy about seeing him again.

"Forget it."

Natalie took out Draco's Queen with her Bishop, sending the young Malfoy into a cursing frenzy. She turned to Harry.

"I know what it is," she said smugly. "You're thinking too hard on it. Just ask yourself, what government based organization requires a lot of people, little or no prior work experience, and the word 'Defense' in the title."

Harry considered, and after a moment his mind brushed lightly against a possibility, but then retreated from it. Seeing it flicker and go from his eyes, Natalie sighed.

"It's a military. The Dark Lord is building an army," she explained.

"That doesn't make sense. I thought the Sentinels were the army?"

She shrugged. "They're a traditional sort of wizarding army, but really they're not much good for anything other than upholding the law within Britain. This new army is meant for bigger things, I think. Like defending against attack by foreign wizarding governments, or local muggle ones, or invading other countries."

Harry considered, and found it tasted like truth. But why would Voldemort need that kind of an army? True, Britain wasn't exactly the favorite country in Europe right now, but they weren't bothering anyone either. He thought to ask her and the others as well, but movement near the castle drew his attention.

"I'll be right back," he said, and headed over to the clique of seven Slytherins striding out of the castle towards Hogsmeade. At the very center of the group was Tom, smiling indulgently as the others prattled on about something or another. When they spotted him coming towards them, they all stopped and stared.

Harry hesitated.

One of the girl's burst out laughing, and he felt his ears burn. Tom cast an annoyed look at the girl, before ordering them all to head out without him. Still, Harry hesitated. He hadn't spoken to the boy since

that day in the dungeons, and was expecting him to be nothing less than livid about what had happened.

“Hi,” Harry tried, and then cringed at how stupid that sounded. Tom’s expression was neutral, but the corner of his mouth twitch ever so slightly.

“Hi.”

Harry looked at his shoes, realized he was looking dumber by the second, and rushed straight to the point.

"I'm sorry about what happened... stunning you and everything. I know you were only trying to protect me..."

Tom blinked in surprise. Of all the things he was expecting, an apology wasn't one of them. For weeks he had expected Harry to corner him somewhere and demand to know what he had been doing wandering the dungeons that day and what he had done to the Weasley twins, and had been diligently avoiding him until he could come up with a reasonable answer or Harry forgot about it altogether.

“As I recall, it was the Weasley twins who stunned me. You just squirmed around a lot...”

The pink of Harry's ears spread to his cheeks.

“Er... yeah... well, they were trying to protect me... kind of like you were only... yeah... Um, any way, I’m sorry about what happened. I just wanted to let you know before you left for the summer. Uh... no hard feelings?”

Tom smirked, and ruffled Harry's hair.

“No, no hard feelings.”

[illegible]

Snape ascended the staircase to the Dark Lord's private office with a barely detectable spring in his step. Never had the idea of a typical school year pleased him so much until it was disrupted. The students were back to their usual ridiculous past times and activities, House tensions had died down to a normal level, no one had been sent to the infirmary due to hexing for three weeks, and thanks to Potter his stores had never been fuller and he had more basilisk venom, blood, skin, and meat than he could ever possibly use to experiment with.

The Dark Lord had given him a house.

Okay, technically this was the second house he'd been given, but it was bigger and had a larger laboratory in the basement and a green house in the back yard. He had only been there to visit it once so far, but what he found pleased him. There were three bedrooms, a small study, a smaller living room, a good sized kitchen, and a laboratory in the basement that was larger than the rest of the house combined. He wasn't much of a fan of home decor, but even he could admire the rich architectural detail in the Victorian style house with the abundance of green marble accent pieces (conveniently inert to most acids and potions). It wasn't large, but it was dignified, a bit dark, and decidedly masculine.

It suited Snape just fine.

Best of all, Lestrage hadn't gotten a house. Alright, technically she already lived in a mansion and was obscenely wealthy after a mysterious wasting sickness took her husband, but that wasn't the point. She had inherited those things. Voldemort had given Snape his.

He hadn't told the Headmistress yet, and didn't plan to until it would cause her the utmost humiliation and/or frustration. Letting her know before then would only give her time to vent her rage on him, and she had been holding back since the conclusion of the basilisk debacle. She wasn't technically on the outs with the Dark Lord anymore, but neither was she in his favor like Snape was. If an opportunity didn't present itself (or she didn't create one) soon, she might still be reassigned to something... less demanding.

A cruel smirk slipped across Snape's face as he thought of it, but it slipped away to something more neutral as he entered the office.

"My Lord, you wish to see me?"

Voldemort looked up from his paperwork, and gestured casually towards an empty chair. He was sorting through several letters, a miniature knife made of obsidian was slicing through envelopes with the precision of a surgeon. He had only stopped by for a brief visit to check on the status of the school and its students (one student in particular Snape didn't doubt), before heading off to Ireland to give the latest recruitment speech for the Wizarding army or the BrAss Cult, as some were already calling it. No doubt he had also come to inform Snape of exactly what warranted his latest gift, as the potion's master doubted it was due to the events of January that he'd barely bungled through.

After Snape had made himself as comfortable as he could in the Dark Lord's presence, Voldemort set his paper's aside.

"How do you like your new house?"

Straight to the point, very unlike his Master unless he was expecting some sort of resistance that needed to be mercilessly crushed. Snape had a bad feeling.

"It is a very fine house, well suited to my needs. I cannot thank you enough-

Voldemort made a sharp gesture, silencing the potion's Master's gratitude.

"It is not a gift."

"You do not give gifts," Snape conceded, "Only rewards."

"And you have not yet earned this one."

There was no arguing that... at least not without being permanently maimed or worse. He wasn't surprised, but relieved that the other shoe was about to drop.

"What must I do?"

Voldemort smirked, and settled back into his chair. Trust Severus to be quick on the uptake.

"Young Harry is in need of new residence. The Sleuws may have been enough for a muggleborn orphan, but my protégé needs... more specialized accommodations."

Snape's expression remained neutral, but inside he was cringing. He was a private man, and though he didn't begrudge sharing a giant castle with his students it was another matter altogether to share his home. It certainly didn't help that Potter was a Gryffindor troublemaker with a rather uppity disposition. The little bugger was STILL glaring at him in potions.

"If that is what my Lord wishes..."

"It is. Do not let it ruin your holiday, Severus. I have arranged for summer employment and etiquette lessons, as well as a week long excursion in August, to keep him suitably busy. You need only ensure that he is protected, completes his studies, and doesn't starve. I will consider this as fulfillment of your Community Service obligation in place of your usual WYRA responsibilities."

Well, that was something. Although, he certainly would have liked to have known all of this more than the day before the holidays began. He supposed it could have been a lot worse. With Potter around he wouldn't have to clean the house himself at least. He was exceptionally bad at housework yet couldn't justify making himself a house elf without any children to inherit it.

"As you will. Does Potter know?"

"I wished to speak to him tomorrow, over lunch would be most convenient. I shall tell him then."

"I will arrange it."

"Thank you, Severus. I knew I could count on you."

The potion's master stood, bowed respectfully, and left to see to his own affairs.

"You are too generous. He failed Harry once already," came Tom's impatient hiss, before Slytherin's portrait blackened and allowed him entry.

"Severus saved Harry's life," the elder wizard corrected, "And more importantly he taught Harry several spells that allowed him to protect himself. Besides, he has the most experience in dealing with him, and I trust his judgement."

"You should have let him stay with me."

Voldemort laughed, loud and mocking.

"With you? Oh, Tom I'm afraid that's impossible."

"Why? Who would question it?"

Voldemort smirked and stood, walking up to his younger counterpart. The boy took a surprised step back. They never touched, never got close enough where they might do so accidentally. It was an instinctive phobia they held for one another. Yet the Dark Lord seemed prepared to violate that taboo right there.

"It's not a matter of people questioning it," he said, and Tom started backing away, a sense of danger screaming at him to fight or flee. "It's simply that I can't trust my protégé with the person who nearly killed him. Did you really think I didn't know?"

Tom's eyes widen in surprise, his wrist flicking to draw out his wand from his sleeve, yet nothing appeared. He tried again and still nothing. The Dark Lord smiled malevolently.

“Missing something?”

He gestured back towards Slytherin's portrait where their ancestor's likeness twirled Tom's wand in one hand and stroked the head of a familiar with the other, his lips twisted in a mirror image of Voldemort's. He looked back to Voldemort only to be knocked to the ground with a savage backhand, rolled over to crawl away but was dragged underneath the Dark Lord. Voldemort straddled him, using his knees to pin Tom's arms to the carpet.

“What are you doing?! Get off me! You can't kill me, I AM YOU! Let go!”

Voldemort clucked his tongue, grinning with sadistic glee as backhanded him again, stunning him.

“I'm not going to kill you, Tom. That is, quite literally, self-defeating. But I can't let you live. You're too rash, too ambitious. Do you recognize this?”

From the folds of his robe, he pulled out a golden coin, ancient and shining and perfect as only a Wizarding coin can remain. Tom did recognize it. It was Merlin's death coin, one of two set over the revered wizard's eyes upon his death. One was taken by as payment to a death god, but as Merlin was part fairy, the other was given to his fae wife Nimue, who in turn gave it her daughter and down the line it went until it vanished three hundred years ago during a goblin rebellion. Its powers were a mystery, though the descendants of Merlin held onto it with the savagery of a mother protecting a beloved child.

“A gift for you, my brother.”

Voldemort shoved it into Tom's mouth, and held it inside with his hand. Tom choked and struggled and screamed, knowing what was going to happen next with a horrifying certainty. It was too late for resistance. The small obsidian dagger the Dark Lord had been using as letter opener was suddenly in his hands, and just as suddenly in Tom's chest.

Blood from the wound, shock silencing his victim's screams, but it was not enough to kill. Not yet. With savage glee Voldemort tore the knife free and brought it down again and again, the screams returned and then died away just as quickly, leaving the body still and lifeless. Voldemort took a few more stabs for the fun of it and then sat back, laughing.

It had been years since he had done this by hand, and he had forgotten the strange thrill of it, life and magic draining away through his blood-drenched fingers. And there Tom lay, wide green eyes slowly ghosting over, pale skin flecked with the red of his own blood splatter. He was almost pretty, and he was narcissistic enough to know and acknowledge it. All smooth and soft and still.

Or rather Tom's vessel was. An artfully composed golem made of meat and blood and magic. Most of all magic. It was a shame really. It was a magical item in itself, originating from no mortal flesh, and soon it would begin to rot.

Such a waste.

Unless...

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Harry entered Voldemort's office a quarter to one, hungry and a little intimidated. He had not seen Voldemort for months, and wasn't sure what this last minute visit would reveal. It seemed deliberate that the Dark Lord waited until the school was empty of students. His trunk, Elsbeth, and Inana were still in the entryway when he left, and when he had asked McGonagall if he should take them to the Sleuws, she had pointedly ignored the question and wished him a good summer.

"Ah, Harry," the Dark Lord greeted, dressed down from his usual formal attire to something more closely resembling Harry's outfit, and a traveling cloak draped over the back of his chair. The desk was gone, or perhaps it had been transfigured into the dining table that now occupied the office. A lunch had already been laid out, a simple

meal made elegant by silver dishes. The delicious smell of Swedish sausages, fresh bread, and something he couldn't quite identify. "Come, take a seat. We have much to talk about and little time to do so."

Harry took his seat directly across the table, and after seeing Voldemort had already filled his plate, did likewise.

"It is good to see you again, My Lord," Harry said politely, not entirely sure how honest he was being. "How is your military coming along?"

Voldemort looked startled for a moment, and then smirked.

"It's coming along... gradually, but that's a discussion for another time. I am here to talk about your summer plans."

Harry paused, hand halfway to the breadbasket.

"... I don't really have any... that I've been told about."

The older man smirked.

"Best remedy that now, yes? I've taken some liberties in arranging alternative housing and employment."

Harry's jaw tensed, but he buttered his roll as if everything were fine. Voldemort waited for a reply, but when none was forthcoming, he continued.

"Professor Snape has agreed to house you for the summer. I believe it will be advantageous to the both of you. Your recent potion work has been consistently good. Perhaps he will allow you assist him in some of his more advanced work."

Harry bit into his roll to hide his grimace. If his potion work was good it was no doubt due to the fact that so many of his detentions were spent in the potion's lab slicing, dicing, organizing, and labeling the ingredients. The idea of doing all of that during his holiday, with the man who beat him with a cane no less, was utterly unappealing.

"That is, if you complete your summer assignments first. Oh, and etiquette lessons on Tuesday afternoons."

"Etiquette?"

Voldemort nodded.

"Good manners are essential to successful diplomacy, between enemies as well as allies. It is good for confidence, as well. I have also been contacted by a large pharmaceutical and potion's company, who have offered to pay a hefty sum to make use of your parselmouth abilities. I thought it a good opportunity for you. Mondays, Wednesday, and Friday mornings only. Plenty of time left to finish your studies and play."

"Er... what will I be doing for them exactly?"

"Snake venom harvesting. It'll be fun."

Harry wondered if the Dark Lord did that sort thing for 'fun'.

"And one last thing. I have been invited to a summer festival by Fenrir Greyback for little over a week. I was wondering you might like to attend."

At this, Harry's interest was definitely perked.

"Will my godfather's be there?"

"Yes. All the werewolves will be there. It's a very important festival for them. So are you interested?"

"Yes! I mean, yes sir. I would love to go."

"Then it's settled," Voldemort said, settling back to enjoy his own meal. He was quite pleased with this meeting. The boy had looked rather reluctant if not exactly reticent of his first intercessions, but the third, and really the most important matter, was accepted with real enthusiasm. He hadn't mentioned that it was essentially a pagan festival, but he doubted it mattered. No doubt Harry would have a

wonderful time, and after seeing his own godfathers practicing it, he would be that much closer to accepting Her over Him. Marvelous.

Harry, distracted from his earlier misgivings by curious musings on his upcoming visit with his godfathers. And werewolves! Alright, his last experience with them was hardly ideal, but if he were under Voldemort's protection he was sure to be safe. What were they all like in their daily lives? What sort of festival were they celebrating? Would he be asked to join or merely watch? Did it fall on a full moon?

His thoughts dizzy with possibilities, he took a bite of his sausage. Ooohh... that was good. Just like Miss Agnethe used to make for Oktoberfest. Juicy, faintly sweet, with just the right amount of spice.

It took Harry only a moment to realize Voldemort wasn't eating the same thing. Rather than sausage or any of the other dishes on the table for that matter, the Dark Lord's plate was laden with some sort of red tinted meat, thickly sliced into diamond shaped cuts and drenched in a dark brown broth. Was that the delicious, yet unfamiliar scent he'd smelled upon entering? Why would Voldemort eat one kind of dish and yet serve another to his guest? His host noticed his curious stare and smiled, a clever and wicked and curved like a butcher's knife.

"You wouldn't like. Trust me," he said. "It's an acquired taste."

"Smells good," Harry said, feeling it was a challenge to sophistication more than a warning.

"It tastes good too, but when I say 'acquired' I mean it's toxic. It's made to my specifications, and no one else's."

This was entirely true. If the incompatible and rather malevolent magic that saturated the meat didn't kill someone, the venom it had been boiled it to soften the meat, certainly would have. Of course, though not technically the same entity any longer, Tom and he still shared the same magic and of course there were few venoms his own body was susceptible to.

And who would have thought it? Tom, the little prat, was yummy?

Venom and all.

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British Assembly for Cultural Preservation and Defense BrAss Cult. Also named because their uniform buttons and insignia are made of brass, at least for the typical foot soldier. The higher the rank, the more expensive their uniform fixtures.

No, Severus was arrested for flying while intoxicated. Community Service in the wizarding world is a legal obligation all adult wizards have to perform or else pay an increase in taxes. Snape's CSO is collecting muggleborns for WYRA during the summer. Rich and powerful wizards like Malfoy and Lestrage usually just pay the increased taxes.

And yes, Voldemort did in fact, just eat Tom. No, Tom isn't actually dead. He wasn't really living to begin with. He was always a horcrux, just now he stuck in a different object.

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READ:

I know this is bothersome, but due a rather inconvenient alterations of living, ie looking for a new job, new apartment, and a family vacation I may or may not attend, I won't be able to update for a while. I do intend to keep writing during this break, but won't be able to post anything consistently so I'm just going to wait until my situation settles. I might even have some time to go back and further proofread previous chapters. I should be able to start updating early this July.

I AM NOT ABANDONING THIS STORY.

It will get done. This is just an inconvenient blip. Thanks to everyone who has been so supportive! You guys are wonderful! I'll see you again in July!

Book III

Chapter 1: The Giant

“Potter! Where are you?!”

Harry grimaced at the sound of his wretched teacher and guardian came storming up the stairs from the potion's lab. He was almost done drying the dishes from breakfast, and had been looking forward to spending the rest of the morning exploring the acreage around the house. So far he'd barely stepped foot outside accept to clean the windows and banish some gnomes from the garden, and though he didn't know if it was intentional he was getting extremely annoyed. It was summer vacation for the love of Merlin!

“In the kitchen,” he replied dutifully, biting back a sarcastic remark. Sarcasm got him nothing with Snape but more chores.

The potion's master stalked inside, an overwhelming shadow in the bright kitchen. He was dressed in his usual black robes, but his hair had been pulled back tightly and a cloth mask and goggles hung around his neck. Whatever he was experimenting with was obviously dangerous.

“What are you doing in here? Don't you have homework?” he said testily, stripping off his safety ware and tossing them in the sink beside Harry. Not bothering to wait for a reply, he rummaged through the cupboards. “Where is the bread? There was a loaf this morning.”

“It was moldy so I threw it away. Along with Thursday's leftovers. Milk is gone too, and I had to give Inana the last of the eggs. About the only think left is tea and some potatoes.”

“A simple 'You need to go shopping' would have suffice.”

Snape set about brewing some tea.

“We need to go shopping,” Harry said pointedly. “If I'm going to have to cook, I need the right ingredients.”

"You have homework."

"I've done nothing but homework and chores since I got here."

"All five days, oh how you must have suffered. Besides, you start work tomorrow, you'll have less time to do it then."

"Just let me come or you're going to have to go to town every other day because you didn't know what to get."

Snape snorted.

"This is why I never wanted to get married. Nag, nag, nag."

Funny, I was thinking this is exactly why you need a wife, Harry thought, but wisely didn't say, continuing to dry the remainder of the dishes. Life with Snape was pretty much an on going battle of wits and wills. Snape would have been more than happy to order Harry around all day long no doubt, but Harry had plenty of experience at avoiding house work and sneaking about from his time at the Dursley's. Additionally, since Snape proved very quickly he couldn't scramble an egg let alone make a meal, Harry had the power of food. A tired, irritated Harry meant Snape would be left to forage for himself. How he had survived without a house elf (or wife) for this long, the Gryffindor had no clue.

Snape never did agree to take him along, but by the time he was finished with his tea Harry had already finished the dishes, made a grocery list, and gotten on his shoes. The potion's master gave him an annoyed look as he traded his potion's robes for a lighter (although just as dark and plain) robe, but said nothing when Harry followed him out the door.

The day was typical English summer, hot and sunny and the air thick with a subtler magic Harry would never have noticed before that winter. The acreage around the house was mostly wild field surrounded by a low rock wall, two gravel paths leading from the house, one to a dirt road on the other side of the wall and the second to the back of the house to the green house and some woods beyond that. The fields were thick with wild flowers, and their seedlings

floated about the two travelers slowly, their defiance of gravity casting the place in a sense of time slowed. Harry peered about, feeling a strange sort of euphoria come over him.

“Potter! Stop daydreaming!” Snape snarled, crushing Harry's happy feeling. The sense of magic retreated, and the young Gryffindor scowled and trudged along unhappily after his professor. This was not the first time the strange distraction had come upon him, but it was always fleeting. He often wondered if his ability to sense magic was growing or he was imagining it. He thought occasionally of asking Snape, but one look at that scowling gob and he changed his mind.

They walked the mile from the house to the village of Elvenshire, just as the market was beginning to fill. Harry had only been through the village once while picking up supplies after leaving Hogwarts, and he had been too tired to take much notice of his surroundings at the time. It wasn't much different than Hogsmeade, with the exception of a collection of about eight stalls in the center of village. The witches and wizards wore simpler clothes than city wizards and his classmates, rough home spun material rich in needlepoint details as well as patches and stitches. If they weren't rich, they certainly weren't starving either, and the market was full of shoppers haggling for the best deals. Several of the merchants manning the stalls regarded Snape and Harry's gentlemanly attire with hungry eyes as they passed.

They stopped first at stall selling chickens. Live chickens. Now Harry thought he had a well rounded education, but nowhere in his school books or lectures had poultry come into play. Elsbeth didn't count. She wasn't for eating.

“A sickle for a dozen eggs,” the woman said, and despite being startled by the birds, he was aware enough to snort at the ridiculous price. Snape looked at him questioningly.

“You could buy a hen for that,” Harry said, though he didn't know if that was true, he did know eggs couldn't be worth more than a couple knuts. Snape turned a suspicious look at the woman, who paled and stuttered, then tried to laugh it off.

"Your son's a cheeky lad. Half a sickle for a dozen, just because I admire his spunk."

This clearly wasn't the right thing to say for Snape's expression turned from suspicious to down right livid.

"This," he hissed, pointing to Harry as if he were a malfunctioning house elf, "is not my son."

She looked flustered and a bit confused. After her absurd suggestion that he was related to Snape, Harry didn't feel the least bit sympathetic.

"I'm his father," Harry said, "Potion's accident, you know. I blame his mother for buying him the potion's set as a child."

"Potter, shut up!"

"Don't talk like that to me, young man!"

Snape slapped upside the head. It was almost worth it to see his professor cringe in embarrassment.

"Seven knuts," she offered, "Seven knuts for the eggs."

"Five," Snape said, clearly still irritated with her as well as his ward. "Five and I'll never bring him with me again."

"Deal."

The shopping trip didn't improve after that. For what ever reason, everyone seemed convinced that Harry was Snape's son and couldn't seem to comprehend any other situation where a boy Harry's age might be living with a man of Snape's age. Snape hated the presumption, but more so he hated explaining the same thing over and over again to strangers who didn't have any reason to meddle in his private affairs. Harry wouldn't have minded explaining, but the towns people's growing confusion was the most entertainment he'd had all week. So the Gryffindor said nothing except to point out

something on the grocery list or to prod Snape into haggling (the man was a natural if a bit uncertain about when it was appropriate or not), all the while thinking how he wished the twins were there to make everything ten times worse.

An hour later, the little square was buzzing with bizarre rumors of Harry being Snape's son, father, nephew, apprentice, servant boy, and shape shifting golem sent to torment the man by an ex-girlfriend. Snape was in a perfectly foul mood as they trudged back home, and Harry was on the verge of laughter despite having to carry all the groceries.

"Potter," the man said as they entered the privacy of the house, "if you ever breathe a word of this day to anyone, it will be the last you ever breathe."

Harry had to turn away on the pretext of restocking the cupboard, biting his lip to keep a series of very cheeky comments from escaping.

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Harry's first day of work started out as an exercise in well controlled panic. He woke up perfectly on time, and decided immediately it wasn't early enough. He hustled through his morning routine easily enough, until it was time to get dressed at which point he became inexplicably lost. What did one wear to a hospital for magical creatures? He had never even been to a muggle veterinarian's office, let alone a wizarding one. Should he dress in his nice school clothes or would this be a dirty job that required something sturdier?

Snape would probably have known, but if Harry asked him what he should wear he'd more than likely get a snarky remark like 'Anything that isn't blue. Blue makes you look fat,' or 'Do I look like the editor of Witch's Wardrobe?' He finally opted for a set of his older school clothes, but then had to spend an extra fifteen minutes ironing them out.

He set about making a simple egg and sausage breakfast, then remembered half way through that he hadn't made lunch for later. By

then, Snape had come down and grumbled about preferring his eggs over easy, and immersed himself in a newspaper. After rushing through the rest of breakfast, he rummaged through the cupboards but couldn't find anything to put his lunch in, and the only response Snape had given him was 'they have a cafeteria, you know'. No, Harry hadn't known, nor did he know if he would have to pay for lunches there or if they were provided. He didn't want to ask either.

He grabbed a couple of sickles from school trunk, the last of his previous job's wages he hadn't sent to the bank, and hoped he wouldn't have to use it. No sooner had he closed his trunk then the door bell rang. Rushing to tidy himself in the mirror (and realizing too late he was missing a button on his shirt and his hair was messier than usual, so he looked like a hobo), he descended the stairs towards the entry way.

Snape was already there, interrogating a skinny little man in pressed white medical robes whom Harry could only describe as 'antiseptic'.

"Really, Mister-"

"Professor."

"Yes, of course, Professor Snape, is this really necessary?"

Snape stared at him stoically, until the antiseptic man bent to his superior professional egotism. He let out a mumbled jumble of words that must have been his approved password, though Harry could only make out 'baby hippo' and wonder where Snape's sadism ended and his sense of humor began.

"Very well," the professor relented, a reluctance in his tone meant to prolong the other man's torment rather than any true suspicion.
"Potter!"

"Here, sir."

"Behave yourself!"

And he stalked off. Harry and the antiseptic man stared after him for a long moment, then hurried out the door.

“Sorry about that, Mr.?”

“Healer Meldwich,” he corrected pointedly, then seemed to ease up a little. “It's quite alright. Important man, Professor Snape, but a bit high strung. I hear teaching does that to you.”

Harry doubted that Snape had been any less of a prat before working at Hogwarts, but didn't contradict. They walked at a clipped pace towards the road where the anti-apparation wards ended. Harry caught Meldwich peeking curiously at him several times, always on the verge of saying something.

“Did you want to ask me something, sir?”

The man became flustered, but his eagerness sparked like a wildfire.

“It is just... I never thought... Would it be... uh...”

Harry waited patiently. Finally, Meldwich seemed to put together what he wanted to say.

“My colleagues and I were so excited when we received approval from your guardians to have you work with us. You have a rare and magnificent talent, and so little is known about it. I feel like a silly little school girl when I think about it. Would you mind terribly...?”

Harry felt a blush coming on, burning at his ears and thought of declining, but couldn't think of why he should be so shy. It was just talking. No different than talking in English or German. Yet to describe anything of his as 'magnificent' was intimidating.

“Ah... yeah, sure. Um, is there anything in particular you would like me to say?”

Meldwich's grin was awkward, unnatural, and perfectly genuine all at once.

"Lets do something simple... today's date?"

Harry tried, but came up short as if he'd been asked to name the King of the United States.

"Er... I'm sorry but I don't think snake's have a word for 'June'."

The healer looked startled, disappointed, and then delighted.

"Oh of course! Snakes certainly wouldn't use a Gregorian calendar to tell time. How silly of me! How about counting to ten? Do snakes count?"

Snakes apparently did count and Harry proved it easily enough, hissing out the requested numerals.

"Magnificent! So they do have a sense of numerical understanding. Healer Beets will be so pleased to have it confirmed! Marvelous! Learning something like this just walking down the road. What wonderful things we will accomplish, Mr. Potter!"

Harry wasn't so sure. He thought his job would be caring for animals they studied, but it seemed more and more that he was the animal they were going to study. He turned a bit to look longingly at the house, but all he got from that was the slightest glance at what may have been Snape watching from the window when Meldwich grabbed his arm suddenly and they disappeared.

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Snape moved from the window and towards the lab, wondering idly if he would be given an excuse to curse the ratty little creature that afternoon or if it would take a few days. There was no doubt the man would need a lesson in 'boundaries' eventually. He knew Meldwich's type.

Curiosity without conscientiousness.

He'd poke and he'd prod, test and record and test and interrogate and test again and again and again without consideration for the subject he inflicted his curiosity on. Or the fact that his subject was on loan from a very temperamental and possessive Dark Lord.

His Master's own decision to 'hire' Harry out, was of course more for the dictator's gain than Harry's. Voldemort was a powerful man, but also a bit conceited. Parseltongue was an ability he prided himself on, and his wide subject knowledge was another. The fact that he knew very little about his own talent was no doubt irksome, even a bit embarrassing. Just the same, allowing scholars to study and experiment on him was too undignified. Ignorance had been preferred until Harry conveniently stumbled into the picture.

Snape didn't envy Harry for a moment.

If the brat were of a meeker disposition, he might have considered chaperoning for the first day, but he wasn't so Snape didn't. It was only four hours anyway. Certainly, a couple of eggheads were no match for the Black Cat of Gryffindor. In fact, he should probably be more worried about them. Yes, he better go check his stock of anti-venom potions right now. The silly boy might have smuggled out a cockatrice egg under his shirt or something.

Damn, Potters. Inconveniencing him even when they weren't around.

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The 'veterinary' hospital Harry was led to was called a 'medical bestiary', more specifically Lanthrope University Medical Bestiary and Research Center, and more simply the LUMBAR Center. It was a four story red brick building, which would have looked perfectly at home in any English city but stood out like a sore thumb in the middle of a cow pasture three miles outside of the wizarding town of Bridges Burning.

A stable, a barn, and an aviary stood at three different ends of the building, housing the larger creatures in need of care and fresh air. There were several wizards and witches roaming about in white

robes and heavy galoshes, carrying medical equipment, feed buckets, and the occasional injured creature.

Harry and Healer Meldwich entered through the lobby, where a several people were waiting with their animals. Some of the animals were perfectly normal, a cat or dog or rabbit, but others Harry had trouble identifying, such as the six legged goat-like creature or the monkey that could take off its head. He had little time to gawk before he was handed a white lab coat and an identity badge by the receptionist. It read:

Harry J. Potter

Research Assistant

Herpetology

The very adult sounding title gave him a distinct thrill. The unfamiliar term 'herpetology' made him feel like an idiot.

They took the stairs to the fourth floor, Meldwich rambling distractedly and in no particular order about each floor, it's departments, Lanthrope University (which apparently taught Bestial Medicine and funded the building and its research), Healers, scientists, students, research subjects, the cafeteria, bathrooms, kennels, laboratories, exam rooms, the apothecary, supply closets, the library, and various other things Harry couldn't keep track of. The healer was clearly eager to get Harry to the lab, but it didn't stop him from introducing him to every healer they came across in hopes of inducing some sort of envy.

It seem to work in several cases, and Harry was getting increasingly uncomfortable with the attention.

"Here we are," Meldwich said at last, stopping in front of a plain office door with a golden plaque titled 'Herpetology' on it. Beside it was another plaque with a list of four names, one of which was Melvin Meldwich. Melvin?

"Melvin! Is this him?"

A young man, stocky and eager, was standing before him and shaking his hand before he had stepped completely through the door.

"Hello, hello! I'm Jarod Beets. It's ever so good to meet you at last!"

"Er... nice to meet you too?"

"Healer Beets, please refrain from using such familiarity. It's unseemly in a professional," Melvin scolded, but Beets paid him no mind and dragged Harry over to meet the other people there. One was a woman, plain by all account but for slightly wicked tilt to her lips that reminded him of Natalie. He barely noticed her however, for the last man was so stunning, Harry couldn't help but gape.

He was HUGE.

Easily as wide as three men, and he had to crouch so his head wouldn't knock the ceiling. Unlike everyone else Harry had seen, he was wild looking with a mess of a beard and scraggly hair, that his pristine white robes could do nothing to hide. He fidgeted nervously, clearly uncomfortable in the room and the white robe with the tidy little people crowding around him. Harry felt a wave of compassion come over him.

"This is Healer Gabriela Coulter," Beets introduced. "She specializes in lizards."

"But I'm interested in all sorts of creatures," she said smoothly. Harry felt a shiver run through him, as he felt her categorize him into said creature category.

"And this is Rubeus Hagrid. Officially, he assists in caring for all of our...er... more dangerous specimens. Unofficially, he's a bit of a dragon expert. You'll be working together a lot in the milking room."

"Dragons? Milking room?" Harry asked.

Hagrid puffed up a bit, but bumped his head into the ceiling and had to go back to slumping just as quickly. When he spoke, his voice rumbled gently in a Scottish brogue.

“Aye. Ya more than like be see'in a bit o' both. I be gett'n a new clutch of Irish Blues with'n the week. You might'n luck out and see'm hatch, eh?”

“Really?!”

Harry had seen an Irish Blue once, at a great distance during one of the summer class field trips. It had been massive, and strikingly blue so that if it had taken flight it would have been impossible to see against the clear sky. But it didn't take flight, instead it snarled and rubbed its body against a grove of trees, snapping them like bread sticks to relieve some minor itch. It never would have occurred to Harry that he could get any closer to such a creature.

Meldwich let out an impatient cough.

“Yes, well... perhaps. You'll be quite busy here. Now let me show you what you'll be doing... ah, Hagrid, would you mind stepping out for a bit? I'm sure you have plenty else to do...”

Hagrid hesitated, looking between Harry and Meldwich, something so clearly on the tip of his tongue. Harry gave the man a smile.

“Would it be alright if I had lunch with you?” he asked. “I'd like to ask you a bit about dragons.”

Hagrid grinned, straightened a little, and bumped his head again on the ceiling.

“Aye, I'da be liken that. Meet ya at say, twelve-thirty or so?”

“Sounds good. I'll see you later then. It was nice to meet you.”

“It was good to be meeting ya as well 'Arry.”

With that, the giant man ambled out, squeezing through the door awkwardly. When the door closed, Healer Meldwich gave a snort.

“You needn't pander to the oaf out of politeness. He's a fool with a fondness for anything that kill a man. Treats them like misunderstood kittens. He didn't even finish his schooling.”

Harry looked sharply at the healer, his expression turning very cold.

“I haven't finished my schooling either, Melvin.”

The healer was so utterly shocked, he fumbled for several moments between embarrassment and indignation, before Beets jumped in.

“Why don't I introduce you to our lovely ladies?” he said, beaming happily, he led Harry towards another door at the far end of the room, past a couple of cubicles and assorted office and medical equipment. “They'll be delighted to meet you, I'm sure.”

Beets opened the door, and a rush of heat and humidity immediately fogged up Harry's glasses so he missed Healer Coulter's look of predatory amusement as she gazed at her still befuddled supervisor.

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By noon, Harry was more than just eager to escape to lunch, he was desperate. Healer Beets was an alright fellow, cheerful and pleasant, but either very insensitive or willfully oblivious to everyone else's feelings. He's introduced Harry to some two hundred or so snakes in the 'specimen' room, a large room that looked and felt like the outside of several different places in the world depending on where you were in the room. The snakes were kept in individual territories using some sort of magical boundary, rather like a miniature version of the ones Harry had helped set up last summer, that the snakes couldn't leave without being held by a witch or wizard with a Herpetology Security Badge.

The hot, and occasionally humid, room smelled of vegetative rot and the musky scent of reptiles, and the sound of softly hissed whispers

gave the entire place an eerie feeling. The snakes themselves were alternately bored and resigned or temperamental and restless. All seemed quite pleased to meet him, though disappointed when he said he wasn't there to help them escape.

Meldwich and Coulter had followed Harry around as he greeted each snake, learning their names and their personalities. One snake, a highly venomous and imperious Rainbow Serpent from South America, even allowed him to help remove some loose feathers that were clearly bothering her, and Meldwich nearly fainted from the sight.

That all had been fine and dandy, if a bit disconcerting, but then they took him to the infirmary where they treated the injured and sickly serpents. It was awful. He was surrounded by broken and torn bodies, withering in pain and crying for relief that no one knew to give them. They were all already undergoing treatment, and there was nothing more Harry could do for them, but assure them that they would heal and be whole again soon.

Worst of all had been the questions afterwards, endless questions about each snake and their treatment effectiveness, and all Harry was hearing was a morbid curiosity about their suffering.

At noon, he quickly but firmly excused himself, and went to meet Hagrid.

"Eya, 'Arry, you alright'? Ya look'n a bit pale," the giant man said.

"Fine," Harry tried, "I'm fine, just... er..."

Hagrid nodded in understanding.

"It takes a some gett'n used to, all that suffer'n in one place. Breaks yer 'art, assum'n ye got one."

Harry smiled weakly. He knew what Hagrid was saying and he couldn't agree more. Hospitals were apparently unpleasant places regardless of species.

They chatted a bit inanely about this and that as they made their way towards the stables. Harry wasn't entirely sure what he was doing out there alone with this strange man. Supposedly, they were having lunch, but Harry doubted the cafeteria was behind one of the stalls.

The stable was about ten times larger on the inside than the outside, lined neatly with stalls and an exercise pen in the center. A few animals peeked out from their paddocks as they entered, gazing as curiously at Harry as he was at them.

"What are we doing here?"

"I was think'n ya'd be need'n a bit'o cheer. Thought ya might like to see Wind. She's good at that," Hagrid said, his dark eyes twinkling in good humor.

Harry was led to the very farthest end of the stable to a stall door that was locked and encased in several security wards.

"She's a very precious creature. 'Ave to keep 'er safe from poachers."

Inside the stall stood a creature of dazzling white, glowing in the dimness like a lantern though it cast no shadows. Harry had only seen pictures of unicorns before, and the real thing was as a like to those pictures as it was to a donkey.

"Oh..." was all he could manage, and spent several moments just gaping. Hagrid let out a chuckle.

"Yeah, she does that. She had a nasty run in with some rogue dementors. Came in looking about as bright and cheerful as an Irish bog. Ya can see she's doin better now, but the Court is still tryin' to round up the last of the dementors before they release her back into the wild, so she'll be here fer another month or so. Some things never change. Government still drags its feet where ever it can."

As he was talking, Hagrid handed Harry a few sugar cubes, and after a few moments of hesitation the unicorn took a few timid steps forward. Harry held perfectly still and tried to radiate an air of absolute

calm and innocence. Unicorns were attracted to innocence, but he wasn't sure he had enough left in him to appear at all appealing.

Eventually though, she took the sugar and nuzzled his palm.

A feeling of absolute joy ran through him, and in response Wind gave a sort of pleasant shiver and looked at him curiously.

"Ah, she likes you," the giant said, looking as if he'd just had a theory proven true. "I thought she would. Yer mother had a way with unicorns."

Harry gave him a startled look and the unicorn edged away.

"You knew my mother?"

"Aye, I did, and a fine lass she was. Yer father too. A brave and truer friend I've never known. I used to work at Hogwarts as the grounds keeper while they was getting educated. Of course, that was until after the war."

Harry's thoughts exploded into a thousand different directions. Who was this man? How well did he know my parents? Why isn't he the grounds keeper anymore? Did he fight against or for Voldemort during the war? Did he work with my parents? Does he know about my godfathers? How much does he know about me? How much should I trust him?

"Ya look just like your father, but you 'ave your mother's eyes," Hagrid said, then turned away, and sniffed rather conspicuously. It occurred to Harry that Hagrid wasn't capable of deceiving anyone.

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Harry arrived home at exactly one fifteen. He was tired, distracted, and completely ignored Snape's snide comment about his new white robe and badge. Instead, he went upstairs to shower and then pulled out his sketchbook. Yet his mind wouldn't let him concentrate on a single subject, and he found himself doodling and abandoning each

doodle randomly. An hour later he gave up, and went to his trunk to get something else.

The wooden box he'd received during his last birthday was still there. He sat on his bed and studied it for a long time, running his fingers over the engravings. The password, his mother's favorite flower, still escaped him, and none of his memories of his home in Germany brought it to mind. Had she even had a favorite flower? Listing off several flowers that came to mind yielded nothing, and finally he set the box aside as well.

Why did it even matter?

His parents were gone, nothing more than memories and stranger's stories. In the wizarding world, a world they had denied him, he doubted they would have recognized him at all. Wizard, monster slayer, quidditch champion, duelist, black cat.

Prince.

And yet they remained a part of his life, trailing behind him as he looked ahead. Dogging his steps, hinting at a mysterious path that not only lead him away from the wizarding world but also back into it.

Where would their secrets take him next?

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1. Herpetology is the study of reptiles and amphibians. Serpentology is the study of snakes specifically.

Book III:

Chapter 2: The Prince and the Moon Goddess

“Potter, stop fidgeting.”

Harry threw a mutinous glance at his potion's professor. He didn't know how the man could expect him not to fidget. Wizards had always seemed a very...er... proper(?) sort of people. For all their bad taste in fashion, one could rarely find a witch or wizard 'under dressed' or 'inappropriately revealing'.

Werewolves apparently couldn't be expected to adhere to the same unspoken dress code. Harry had understood this when he had met Sirius and the other werewolves, minimally clad in in leathers and furs.

Or at least he thought he had.

After two years of nothing more casual than a white button-up shirt, Harry had habituated himself to wearing layers outside of the bed and bathroom. Wearing only a pair of black drawstring shorts, his leather gauntlets which held his wand, and sandals left him feeling utterly naked, and standing in front of his potion's professor no less. Inana's cool, smooth skin encircling his throat and chest did nothing to distract him from that feeling.

He had been told not to wear anything else and to bring nothing but his wand and Inana, if he chose. It was disconcerting and thrilling and in this case a bit embarrassing. He was keenly aware that he looked scrawny despite his Quidditch exercises and his skin was pale and unhealthy looking from the neck down.

“Won't I get cold?” he asked, feeling strangely chilled already despite the summer heat.

“You will be provided for, as the Dark Lord's guest, but don't make a habit of whining about every little thing. They'll see it as a weakness.”

It had been two weeks since they had been informed of the date of the werewolf festival, and Snape's usual criticism of everything Harry

had gradually morphed into warnings of Harry's doom at the hands (claws? teeth?) of his future hosts. As with all things Snape, Harry took it all with a healthy dose of indifference and skepticism.

There was a loud pop, and an unfamiliar wizard appeared on the road. After a moment, there were several more pops and more wizards, and amongst them was Voldemort himself. The Sentinels were all dressed in their usual uniforms, but there was nothing usual about the Dark Lord's attire.

He was stripped down to a pair of black leather pants, and a leather gauntlet on each lower arm. Around his body was a length of dark cloth that appeared black and then blood red and then forest green depending on how the light caught it, and secured in place by a garnet brooch inlaid with a silver serpent. He was decorated from the top of his head to tip of bare foot with ornaments of bones, tooth, leather, and feathers. In his hand, he held a spear in place of his wand, ashen white with symbols burned into it and armed with an obsidian spearhead. Nagini lay at his feet, coiling loosely around one of his ankles so that he might slip from her grasp easily enough.

Shaman.

The word flitted through him, not from his mind, but deeper to the part of him he knew belonged to the Earth.

He scampered ahead, while Snape followed more leisurely behind, eager to leave and face his fears and see his godfathers and whatever magic werewolves practiced. Voldemort greeted him with a patient indulgence, ruffling his hair when he came close. Without warning, he plucked off Harry's glasses and handed them Snape.

"These won't survive where we're going," he said, and Snape pocketed them and waited. "How are you, Severus?"

"Very well, my Lord."

"Any problems? I trust Harry is behaving?"

"Well enough, though he takes a firm hand, like all children."

Voldemort didn't doubt Snape's ability, but he did find it a bit amusing that the man thought he had some sort of control over his protege, especially when said protege didn't hold back the series of nasty looks the potion's master's comment earned him.

"No doubt you'll be enjoying your ten day reprieve. I wish I could stay longer to talk, but I am expected soon. Good day, Severus."

"Good day, my Lord," he said dutifully.

Harry was about to say something, but his words were lost when Voldemort's hand suddenly seized his shoulder and they apparated away. They reappeared without the entourage in a forest Harry recognized, despite his sudden blindness. The scent of it all was familiar to Harry, warm and sweet and earthy all at once, and the birds and insects sang out in a familiar tuneless song. A few paces away, he could make out a glowing green line in the shadows of the trees marking off the border of the werewolf territory.

Voldemort took a moment to gather up Nagini, who flickered her tongue curiously, but was otherwise limp and sedate. Inana reared up and flared her hood as they became more level, but the larger serpent merely chuckled mockingly. The Dark Lord smirked.

"Come along, Harry, they are expecting us."

They passed through the barrier effortlessly, and once inside a feeling of being watched came over the young Gryffindor. He scanned the surrounding vegetation, but heard and saw nothing.

"They are there," Inana reassured him. "I can taste them."

Voldemort nodded.

"Low level pack members only. They are here to alert their alpha when we arrive, and too timid to show themselves."

Try as he might, Harry could find none of them, although he felt their presence as they walked the two miles to the werewolf commune. Voldemort held light conversation with him along the way. He was appraised of Healer Meldwich's research and the progress that had been made in deciphering the limits of Parseltongue-to-English and vice versa translation.

"Healer Meldwich is an idiot," Harry said at last. "He goes on and on about how little a snake can understand in comparison with a human, but that's a lot less than what a snake understands that a human can't. He never listens to me when I try to explain this. Just bushes it off as unimportant or changes the subject. If you ask me, Hagrid understands animals a hundred times better than Meldwich ever will."

Voldemort started, but he recovered so quickly Harry didn't even notice.

"And who is this Hagrid?"

"He's... a sort of magical creature enthusiast. He takes care of the really big or dangerous or troublesome animals, and not just the snakes. He's raising a clutch of Irish Blue dragons and a unicorn, and he showed me how to ride a Hippogriff. I don't care how educated all those healers think they are, Hagrid's the one that got it right. Well... except for this odd idea that all creatures, especially dangerous ones, are all misunderstood babies, but... well every wizard seems to have his quirks."

It had been years since the Dark Lord had heard the name Rubeus Hagrid, and he could still recall him both as a boy and a man with this extreme love of any creature with a nasty disposition. He wasn't quite sure what had made him spare the oaf, for he was an abomination and worse yet, an idealistic and naïve one. Ah well, he was harmless.

They continued to chat for another twenty minutes, when the sound of people caught their attention. They crossed a narrow creek and found a road of compact earth, along which was the occasional man or woman or child bedecked in leathers, ivory, and fur. The werewolves all paused when they spotted the two, and bowed low when they passed and didn't look up until they were well ahead of

them. Harry squirmed under their reverence and hoped none of it was directed at him.

At the end of the road, the werewolf commune appeared as a crowded mass of merchants, buyers, musicians, dancers, fighters, and riotous children. Many of the werewolves were painted with bright blue or red paint, some with runes, others with celestial symbols, and even more with shapes that seemed to signify some sort of status or occupation. The air was thick with the smell of cooking meats and somewhere a fiddler played a dancing tune over the merchants hawking their wares and the snarls of two young men boxing barefisted in a tight circle of spectators.

Harry tried to take it all in at once, but the commune was too crowded and quick and his vision too lousy to keep track of one thing let alone all of it. He was spared his dizzying assessment by the arrival of Fenrir Greyback. The Alpha was just as monstrously large and intimidating as Harry remembered him, and even Voldemort's solid presence couldn't keep Harry from retreating a few steps at his approach. The werewolf, dressed similarly to Voldemort, but for a sword rather than a staff and a fur of bright red in place of the shimmery tartan. Behind him followed some half a dozen other werewolves, attendants of some sort. Greyback's yellow eyes lingered on Harry's petite form for an intense moment, before he turned his attention to Voldemort. The two men, kings in their own right, greeted each other as friends and embraced as best the man eating snake between them would allow.

"Greetings to you, Lord of Snakes," Fenrir said in his growling rumble. "Arrangements for your stay have all been prepared. We are glad to have you. The moon will be in a powerful alignment this year."

"It is good to be here, Lord of Wolves. And yes, I have done the calculations as well. The signs are promising."

The two men turned away from their entourage and began walking towards the Western end of the grounds, discussing astrological alignments and goddesses and pack politics and various other things Harry could make neither head nor tails of. He hung back with the troupe that had accompanied Greyback to meet them, and noted

that a few of them were familiar. Athena, for one, who now carried a young infant in a sling on her back, and snarled at all who crowded too close to her and her fragile charge. Also Jackal, who flashed a hungry grin at him, before turning his attentions to a lanky female.

He was looking for his godfathers, but they still managed to take him by surprise. One moment he was scanning the crowd around a fighting circle, and the next he was seized by either arm and practically carried away.

“Prongslet! Fancy seeing you here!” Remus greeted.

“And without your robes on. How scandalous!” Sirius laughed.

They pulled him along so quickly, that he was dragged clear out of sight before either Dark Lord or Alpha could be notified, let alone interfere. Harry pondered any potential trouble he might be in later, and dismissed it in favor of playing with his family.

“Oh, no, I've been abducted! You're not going to eat me, are you? I'm terribly bony. You might choke.”

“Well, since you aren't very appetizing,” Remus said, looking thoughtful, “we could initiate you into our pack. What do you say?”

“Would I get to stay up late?”

Sirius and Remus laughed and released him, letting him follow them behind a tent. There a girl, no older than Ginny, sat surrounded by buckets of red and blue paint. Both his godfathers bowed respectfully to her, and she gave them a distracted smile and gestured toward a stool in front of her. Harry took it as an invitation or possibly a gentle command and sat.

“Harry, this is Luna Moonshine,” Remus introduced, “She's... ah... she's a ?”

“I'm a goddess,” Luna offered, “A minor one.”

He blinked at her, and couldn't help but stare. She was very pale, but not from ill health, for she glowed just as Hagrid's unicorn had with implacable and incorruptible magic. Stone beads of every color were woven into her pale yellow hair, and dangled from her ears and her neck and arms and just about anywhere her skin was bare enough to be decorated. A cloth of the same material as Voldemort had worn was wrapped around her body in a tunic and held together with crescent moons carved of ivory. Pale blue eyes stared at him and though him and beyond him not with intensity, but a sort of benevolent indifference.

He did not doubt her claim for a moment.

"She acts as a conduit for her mother, the Moon Goddess, during the festival. She will paint your markings to describe your position in the Moon Goddess' favor," Sirius explained and gestured at the red triangles running up each of his arms and the thick red stripe that ran from his forehead to his navel. "These mean 'leader' and 'equally balanced'."

Remus' were different. His markings were blue and covered only the right side of his body, consisting of three bands around his arm and a series of interlocking loops from the tip of his toe to the top of his shoulder and down his back again.

"Mine mean 'mediator' and 'faithful'."

Harry nodded and turned back to Luna, who had already selected a bucket of red paint and was sorting through a variety of brushes. Having made her selections, she gently unwound Inana from his neck and placed her around her own, and the serpent went without protest.

"You are many things," she began, lifting her paint laden brush to sweep over his eyelids. "Your present is composed not only of your past, but of your future. Your future defines your past. Your past reveals your future. Your life is composed of destiny."

She was silent for a long moment, concentrating on the mask-like band of red she was creating over his eyes. Every so often she would pause to blow the paint dry, and Harry could feel magic in her breath,

tingling like pins and needles. When he could open his eyes, his vision was perfectly clear.

“You are many things, more than destiny too. King and usurper. Truth seeker and conspirator. Soldier and ambassador. Earth and Heaven. In all things defiant. In all things defined.”

Her brush moved from his face to his neck, and he opened his eyes to watch. Luna was looking beyond him, looking to something he could only sense as the faintest touch of cool air at the base of his neck. Yet Inana was alert and focused on him, her majestic indifference replaced by a sort of fascination. Harry could not begin to guess what she made of all this. It might well be that she understood these symbols and Luna's words far better than he did. As a Queen of the Nile, she held some claim to the divine herself.

“Do you have any questions?” she asked, moving down to paint over his nipple. He felt himself darken with embarrassment and tried to think of something to distract himself.

“What is my destiny?” he said, though truthfully such a thing struck him as a bit absurd.

“To succeed or to fail.”

“To succeed or to fail in what?”

“Too soon for that,” she said, moving along. She stopped for a moment, and looked him in the eyes. It was very brief, but for a split second her unfocused gaze found his and there was a sort of kindness. Or was it pity? “You will discover it on your own, but it is not a destiny to be shared. Even I have not been told.”

And he said no more and she said no more, and behind them Sirius and Remus guarded their privacy and shared concerned looks over this latest non-revelation. Luna worked steadily, but even so it took her almost an hour to complete her painting. Unlike his godfather's markings, his were not simple or easily defined, but a true piece of art. In the Celtic style, a dragon twisted and knotted its way up his right arm and a lion mirrored the pattern up his left, while a circle with an

unfamiliar design rested over the center of his chest and a similar yet different symbol rested on his back. Finally, she painted a tiny little 'L' on his right pointer finger and then kissed it.

“She calls you Twilight Seeker, searching for truth in the light of day and the dark of night, but never becoming one or the other,” the strange little goddess said, smiling, and her eyes suddenly very definitely focused on him. “But I shall call you Harry.”

Heat blossomed from his cheeks and headed in every direction, darkening his skin like a evil storm cloud of embarrassment. He had thought Natalie very bold in her attentions at times, but even Natalie hadn't been so brazen as to paint her initials on him!

“Ah... I.. um... er... thank you?”

She laughed, and it sounded the same as the beads clacking together as she moved. Water and moonlight over stones. And somewhere the fiddler had been joined by a flute, and Luna leaped to her feet. She twirled around him, and with infinite grace replaced Inana around his neck and danced away. Harry could only sit and stare after her, befuddled, charmed, and embarrassed all at once.

A pinch to his cheek drew him out of his stupor.

“Ouch!”

Sirius laughed.

“Oh, if only your father could see this. His little Prongslet picking up girls. Ha ha!”

“Hey, I was not! I have no idea what just happened!” he protested, his face becoming even darker.

Remus wasn't at all helpful.

“I believe the muggle equivalent is 'she gave you her number'.”

He took Harry's hand, dangled the besmirched finger in front of his eyes. Harry quickly took his hand back and sat on it, scowling at the both of them.

"You're both being stupid! Why would a goddess flirt with a twelve year old?"

Sirius was grinning, so pleased by the turn of events and even more amused. Luna was an odd duck, there was no doubt about it, but she was beautiful and gentle and seemingly unreachable. Yet there she went, reaching out to his godson herself.

"A goddess wouldn't," Remus said, smacking Sirius upside the head when it appeared his musing were taking control of his reality. "But Luna is also a girl."

Harry gave him a confused look. Remus took pity.

"How to explain it? Well, lets just say that before Luna became a werewolf, she was completely normal... er... completely human, I mean. It wasn't until after she was bitten that she was able to commune with the Moon Goddess. Just like Sirius and I are part wolf and part human, so too is Luna part girl and part spirit."

"Guess which part likes you?" Sirius leered.

Harry petulantly ignored him. Seeing their godson's mood quickly souring, they dropped it for the time being, though there would be a more serious discussion between themselves when they were alone. They might be making fun, but the love of a goddess wasn't anything to snub, and could have serious implications later in the festival. Before that though, they had to properly prepare Harry for what he would see and do while there and what dangers to look out for.

"Come on, Seeker," the darker werewolf called, slapping his shoulder to get him up and following. "We need to get you some proper clothes. It wouldn't do to have my godson walking around looking like a weirdo."

"You're one to talk!"

Sirius just laughed and walked on, knowing both his mate and pup would follow.

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Voldemort and Fenrir had reached the Dark Lord's temporary domicile, a large tent lavishly decorated without a trace of magical illusion, when they finally noticed the absence of Harry. The serpent king felt a vague thrill of alarm, but his host just let out an annoyed grunt.

"Blackbone, that over grown fox," the alpha muttered.

Voldemort's alarm was now replaced with irritation. He had wanted Harry with him during the ritual preparations of the Marking and the Naming, and to ensure that all the werewolves present saw the boy with him and knew not to handle the human child too roughly. Yet the boy's godfather had run off with him. He was thinking very seriously about laying a curse on Sirius Black.

He passed the next couple of hours cleansing his tent with incense to entice spirits that associated themselves with the night, more specifically night times spirits that were affected by the cycles of the moon. Bird, insect, and flower spirits were the most common, and the weakest, yet they still had their uses. As did the demons, but he would need more than incense to entice those clever creatures into his claws.

From a particularly chatty dragon fly spirit he learned his ward had visited the child goddess and priestess Luna, and had been granted his pack name. Yet for all the spirit's cleverness it couldn't tell Voldemort what markings Harry had received, for dragonflies understood little about art or abstracts. The Mona Lisa would have held about as much meaning as a stop sign to it.

An owl spirit informed him that the boy was already mingling with some of the pack's children by starting a game of football. The boys, though the same age, were larger than Harry and leery at first of

playing too roughly with stranger of some mysterious rank, yet Harry was more than up for some rough housing. He fought over the ball savagely, and though he was knocked over several times, he didn't whine once and leaped right back into the game. Two adult male werewolves were refereeing the match, one urging more playing and less fighting and the other urging the exact opposite.

The owl understood abstractions, but all of the boys had been half covered in mud from their play and Harry was no exception.

Voldemort had no sooner decided to let the child be and meditate on greater powers when the boy appeared at the entrance of his tent. He was dirty, bruised, and looked roguish with his tattoo-like markings. The Dark Lord gave him a thorough once over, unsure of what to make of them. The dragon and lion tattoos were easily enough to interpret, but the symbol for 'heaven' on the boy's chest was a bit baffling.

"I'm sorry I wandered off," Harry offered politely, though not the least bit contrite.

"No doubt. You seem to be enjoying yourself. The packs are treating you well?"

"Yeah, they're pretty normal accept for being half naked and all."

Voldemort's mouth twitched in amusement.

"Go to the creek we crossed earlier and wash up. There will be feast in a short while and I want you looking presentable while eating beside me."

"Yes, my Lord."

Harry disappeared, revealing the symbol for 'earth' on his back as he went, but a moment later he returned.

"Um, my Lord... do you have a pack name?"

Voldemort's smile was all teeth and malicious glee.

“Why yes. They call me God Eater.”

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Harry hadn't felt so excited since he'd gotten his wand and a whole world of possibilities, most beyond his imagination, had opened up to him. Now amongst a people, at once alike and utterly alien to his own, he felt yet another world opened, if not a door, a window through which he could see clearly. He found himself rushing from place to place, conversation to conversation, idea to idea, and soaking it all up without stopping to consider.

He knew if he stopped and thought about any of what was happening around him, he would be afraid. The werewolves were not as savage as most witches and wizards thought, but they were by no means gentle. They were hunters and gathers, as untamed as the land and its creatures. Adults and children alike were quick tempered, prone to bullying, to teasing, to testing for weaknesses.

Harry had to act assertive, more than would have been tolerated among more 'civilized' company. He could not stop to think about his chances of winning a fight against one boy or whether that particular woman expected him to pay for the meat she offered him. He had to throw punches and accept them and get up and eat and run away before the woman noticed he was done. If a strange girl dragged him off to a dance he didn't know, he would just have to do the best he could until he figured it out. If a strange man snapped at him, he had to dodge rather than freeze.

These instincts came naturally, from out of no where, and as Harry finally had a quiet moment to think about it, he thought it might be due to Luna.

“Do you think she... I dunno... blessed me?” he asked Inana, as he washed, knee deep in the creek. The cobra was sunning herself on a near by rock, and hadn't paid much attention to him after his meeting with Luna.

“Probably,” came the disinterested reply.

“Am I her boyfriend now?”

Inana snorted. Feeling stupid for asking, he concentrated on his washing for a long time. The mud came off easily, but the paint remained completely unaffected, as it would until a special oil was used to remove it at the end of the festival. When he was done, he sat down on a rock beside Inana and waited to dry enough to dress.

A sudden awareness of presence filtered through to his senses, much like it had when he'd first entered the werewolf territory, and he quickly threw on his shorts and stood up to look around.

Fenrir Greyback stood some twenty feet behind him, his expression dark and unreadable. Harry found his eyes riveted to the alpha's bright yellow gaze, but then realized such an act was considered a challenge to a werewolf and looked away. The werewolf king stepped forward. Harry stepped back.

“Don't run,” Greyback growled, “If you run, I'll have to chase you, and you won't like it when I catch you.”

Harry froze and the werewolf closed the space between them. The young Gryffindor struggled with himself not to look the man in the eyes, not to run, not to fidget, not to do anything other than stand straight, motionless, and staring straight ahead (which was left him level to the head of the skinned animal and its empty eye holes).

“Don't wet yer self, pup, I only wanted 'ta see for myself.”

The alpha grabbed his arm, relatively gentle considering he could have ripped it out of its socket, to inspect the lion, and then took the other to inspect the dragon. He spun Harry around to look at the symbol for 'Earth' on his back, and finally released him once his curiosity was satisfied.

“Luna's doing, then?”

Harry nodded.

"Your name?"

"Ha- I mean, 'Twilight Seeker'."

Greyback grimaced.

"Awful name for a werewolf."

"I'm not a werewolf," he blurted, and wished he hadn't. The man glared at the boy, but he already looked contrite so there was no point in smacking him and he let it slide.

"True enough. Pity too. Luna doesn't take to very many, and never a man," Greyback said offhandedly. "Are you afraid of her?"

Harry looked up at him in surprise, then looked away quickly again.

"No... should I be?"

"Yes."

Greyback didn't elaborate. He walked off and within seconds disappeared completely. Harry didn't try to call back, despite the many new questions he had left behind on his brief visit. Why should he be afraid of Luna? Why didn't Luna get along with others? Had she done something that had scared the others? He didn't ask, and if it meant spending another minute in Greyback's dangerous company then he'd rather not know.

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The feast took place outside in a large clearing, with a series of low tables laid out in a spiral, at the center of which a stage had been built for performances. There were no chairs, but furs and pillows had been laid on the ground so that everyone might sit or recline comfortably. Greyback sat closest to the stage, with his wife and brood of young but fierce looking offspring to his right, and Voldemort to his left. Harry was placed next to Voldemort, though he was

allowed to wander to other places since he was still too young to be bound to the etiquette of rank.

He found himself near his godfathers more often than not, listening to their wild tales and meeting their equally wild friends and associates. Yet even they couldn't hold his attention all night, and he found the company of children closer to his age alluring. They had seen him sitting fearlessly beside Voldemort, and were eager to hear about the Dark Lord and Harry's mysterious position by his side. Harry couldn't define the relationship exactly, but he was amused enough by their fixation that he told them he was Voldemort's apprentice and deemed it accurate enough in his own mind.

Eating was a very small part of the festivities, though it was all as lavish as any Hogwarts' banquet. There were succulent meats of every kind, some Harry had never tried before and still some he had never even heard of before, prepared in a variety of manners—barbequed, baked, broiled, boiled, roasted, grilled, fried, stewed, seasoned, unseasoned, stuffed, shredded, whole, minced, curred, and raw. More surprising was the array of breads and fruits and vegetables available as well. Some of the berries and unusual roots were clearly gathered from the surrounding forest and gardens, and some of them held magical properties (or else got everyone thoroughly drunk very quickly), but just as common were imported items from other countries. Pineapples, oranges, lemons, peanuts, seaweed, rice, and various other non-native foods. When he had asked, Voldemort had told him that werewolves permitted to do business directly with muggles, and much of their monetary wealth came from acting as middlemen between muggles and wizards. Despite their unassuming dress and lifestyle, the werewolves were actually quite rich.

Or at least Greyback was. There was a heavy tax on the trade, which went to the alpha to determine how it might best be used to benefit all werewolves.

Still, the food played a minor role, serving only to satiate and energize those gathered for what followed. There was a tournament for wrestlers and another for boxers and still another for knife fighters (and there were almost as many women involved as men), all of

which were fought in one round and were to be continued the next evening after the winners had rested and tended their wounds. Then there had been performances; dances, singing of ballads, acrobatics, fire jugglers, and a comedian who had Harry choking on his food.

It had lasted long into the night, and at some point Harry had leaned back into his pillows and nodded off. His dreams were strange, disjointed and abstract, filled with unfamiliar symbols and half-familiar places.

At one point, he dreamed of Luna, completely naked but for Inana wrapped around her shoulders, dancing on something that mirrored the three-quarter moon and the stars, but not Luna herself, who shone brighter than all of them. She danced and swayed and raised her arms to the sky and lowered them to his cheek, his eyes, his mouth.

When he woke up the next morning, he was exactly where he had fallen asleep, on a mound of pillows not far from the stage. What was not exactly the same was Luna curled up sleep beside him.

Completely naked.

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Author's note: Firstly, yes, Luna Moonshine is Luna Lovegood. With a name like 'Luna' I don't know how she didn't end up a werewolf in Rowling's stories. Secondly, no, she did not have sex with Harry. She just has no sense of modesty or propriety.

Book III:

Chapter 3: The Prince and the Wolves

"It's nothing to be embarrassed about."

Harry gave Sirius a look that screamed teenhood was well on its way, along with the belief that all adults were idiots. Waking up next to a strange naked girl alone was awkward and embarrassing enough. Waking up next to a strange naked girl and having several hundred people there to see it as well, meant that the world was quickly coming to an end. He would never be able to look anyone in the face again.

So he had left, quickly and quietly, without waking Luna or a majority of the werewolves. Voldemort was nowhere in sight, but Greyback was, and though he didn't bother getting up from the comfortable pile of bodies he was lounging against, his yellow eyes followed Harry's retreat intently. The boy couldn't go far though, knowing he couldn't leave the territory and completely unfamiliar with the terrain. His godfathers had found him early, and sensing his anxiety, had taken him deep into the forest to talk and think in private.

"Look, Harry, it's just a werewolf thing. I've woken up several times next to naked people and not remembered how... in fact, I was the naked person on several occasions," Sirius supplied unhelpfully.

Remus slapped him upside the head, and tried himself.

"What the big idiot is trying to say, Harry, is that no one is going to think it was odd or sexual or anything like that. Luna just had one of her... 'conversations' with the Goddess that inspired a good dance- which is too bad you missed because it was really something- and then was exhausted afterwards. She might have laid down anywhere, but it just happened to be beside you. Nothing to get embarrassed about. Alright?"

"Mmm."

Harry never really considered himself a sulker, and found the behavior extremely annoying in others, but try as he might he couldn't stop thinking about that morning and since none of his thoughts were particularly happy he wasn't either.

Sirius sighed.

"Harry, you can't stay out here forever. You're going to have to return eventually and face this. You'll just get teased more if you run away."

"I'm not running away!" Harry snapped, pride prickling. "I'm just trying to figure this out. I mean, how am I suppose to act? What is Luna gonna do? What does she expect? Why does she even like me? And what about the others? How are they gonna act to some outsider running around with their goddess? I mean, isn't that kind of... taboo? Or something?"

Sirius waved it off as insignificant.

"She won't be goddess for much longer. The fact she's showing you attention is just a symptom of that. She'll just be a regular girl soon."

"What?"

"Luna's divinity is fleeting," Remus supplied, "Once she... ah, becomes a 'woman'. Then her body becomes her own to do what she will, and the goddess inhabiting her body will move on. Treat her like you would any other girl. I imagine that's all she wants. She wants a boy, who hasn't looked at her as goddess all her life, to treat her like a regular girl."

Harry thought on Remus' words, found that they fit, and aside from the embarrassment of that morning, they cured most of his worries. He could be friends with a girl. He had several girlfriends...er... girls who were friends already.

"Will Greyback be alright with that?" he found himself saying, recalling the alpha's intent gaze that morning and the day before at the stream. "I mean... even if she isn't a goddess, she's still a werewolf of his pack right? Like a niece or a cousin twice removed or something? I

know he doesn't like wizards any... except for Voldemort of course, but he's... well...Voldemort.”

Sirius and Remus shared a look, and Harry caught it easily and frowned.

“What? What did I say?”

Remus looked away, and Sirius stood up and paced, trying to think of what he wanted to say. It made Harry nervous.

“Yes...” Sirius said darkly, “He is Voldemort. You have nothing to fear if Voldemort doesn't allow it.”

The hatred in his godfather's voice was earth shaking. Not even Greyback had earned that depth of venom and scorn. It brought back to mind that Sirius and Remus were a part of Greyback's pack, not as an eccentric lifestyle choice, but as a punishment for treason. Treason against the Dark Lord that had overthrown everything they had known, likely killed friends and family, chased his own family from their native land, and whom they had risked their lives to fight against.

And Harry had spent Christmas with him.

A great unease came over the young Gryffindor, a fear of what his godfather's must have heard about him and Voldemort, and what they thought of him because of it. He wondered what they would have thought if they knew the entire truth of what happened between them since that fateful meeting at the Welcoming Feast.

They hadn't accused him of anything, hadn't even asked, and he had naively assumed it wasn't important to them. But now Sirius was pacing, and Remus was looking anywhere but at Harry, and this was obviously something that was important to them.

After an awkward silence, Sirius spoke again, this time more calmly and looking directly at his godson.

“Harry... are you alright?”

The boy was baffled.

"I mean, are you alright with your situation? Are you unhappy or... scared? Does he treat you well? Does he make sure you are treated well by others?"

Harry fidgeted. He wasn't entirely sure how he should answer that, but he didn't want his godfather to hate him. What did he want to hear? That Harry was safe and happy and perfectly content with his excellent education, his new clothes, his chance to see his godfathers? That he was miserable, frightened, and hated the Dark Lord for trapping him in his own private library of lies where curses and monsters lurked in the aisles? Neither was true, neither was false, but his shelves were starting to creak under the weight of his falsehoods so he told the truth.

"I suppose I'm... happy and unhappy and scared and excited and... I dunno. There are some things I don't like... like having to lie all the time.. because I do you know. I have to lie to everyone, even you, even when I really don't want to. And I don't like living with Snape, cause he's a crotchety old bat..."

Remus' lips twitched, but Sirius remained oddly stoic.

"And some of the things I've seen Voldemort do... I hate it. He frightens me... but also... I sort of... he's shown me other things. Not all of it was bad. He showed me about where magic comes from and he gave me Elsbeth and this really neat compass thingy and let me write to you and visit this summer and I love all of that, so I'm grateful too. And the school, oh I love Hogwarts, even though it frightens me sometimes, just like Voldemort does. I have these great friends, and they're all so clever and interesting and brave in their own ways. We have so many adventures, and not just those little kiddy adventures you pretend to have when your small, but real, dangerous adventures that get to be put in books and newspaper articles. And Quidditch! I love flying in Quidditch! And Dueling Club too, even though Ron the Prat got selected as Junior Captain because of that bastard Snape. But... yeah. I guess I'm happy, except when I'm not. But everyone is like that, aren't they?"

Sirius said nothing for a long moment, simply staring down at Harry and weighing his words, his body language, and his scent in equal measure to discern the truth in that jumble. It was his duty and his privilege to protect his best friends' son, and not the law, his alpha, a Dark Lord, or Harry's own reluctance to worry him would get in the way of that. Yet he could sense nothing amiss. His godson, despite his admittance of being a liar, was being completely honest at the moment.

Yet, Sirius still felt ill at ease.

"Yes, I suppose that's true... but things can go bad real quick, especially when you're surrounded by powerful and arrogant people like Voldemort and his Death Eaters. Remus and I, we've been thinking long and hard about it, and we wanted you to have a way out if you had to or if you simply decided to."

Harry's eyes widened.

"A way out? Of what?"

Sirius hesitated, but Remus gave him a reassuring look and nodded at him to continue. They both looked around intently for a moment, wary of spies despite the unlikelihood of anyone sneaking up on the two lycanthropes.

"Out of Britain. If things turn ugly, you'll have to leave the country all together. There's no where safe here, if the Dark Lord turns on you..."

Harry felt a shiver run up his spine. He knew that wasn't true. There was nowhere safe anywhere if the Dark Lord turned on him. No where on an Earth that loved him more than anyone else.

Sirius gave him a sympathetic look, and continued.

"Anyway, I have a house, or rather I had a house. It's probably half rotted away by now, but it's under a spell so that no one can find it unless I want them to. I want you to know it. If you ever need a secret place to stay, go there, and no one will ever be able to find you. I

have a wizarding friend I've managed to give some items to. If you get to the house, look in the ice box, and you'll find everything you need to get to Europe, including a list of some people that would be willing to take you in, old friends of your parents as well as some of my own."

Harry could only stare at his godfather. It was true he had thought about possibly escaping Britain before, but that was a long time ago before Hogwarts had become a home and before he had made himself a sort of family. Now the thought of leaving was sad, terrifying, and lonely.

But if things went bad like Sirius said, they would go very bad, and wasn't it better to have a last resort than no options at all?

"Okay. What should I do if I... have to leave?"

Sirius sighed in relief, and gave him his plan.

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After the revelry of the day and night before, morning in the werewolf settlement was relatively lethargic. Many of the pack had moved from the feasting area to the shade of a tree or a tent to nap or do some mundane task in the shade. Fenrir Greyback was no exception. He and his entire family had moved to their private lodge.

Among them was Luna.

She did not have a lodging of her own, nor anywhere she stayed regularly, but of the places she liked best she supposed her alpha's home was it. It was crowded, dark, and smelled of earthy things. The children were napping upstairs, so it was less crowded, but that was good too because she needed to think.

Most people who watched her at all, thought all she ever did was think, but the opposite was true. Very little of Luna's mind was devoted to considering herself or her environment at all. Of course,

as a goddess, she never had to figure things out. She just knew. Most of the time anyway.

Today she didn't know something, and now she had to think about it. It was quite a wonderful experience. Full of strange emotions like uncertainty, frustration, and wonder.

It was almost enough to make her get up and pace, but Athena was sitting behind her on the kitchen bench, brushing her hair. That was wonderful too. Funny how she had never realized it before. The alpha female's rough, calloused hands threading through strands of hair, easing the knots away at the barest touch, and singing the only lullaby she knew.

"I'd put my own sweet childie to rest... In a cradle of gold... In the bough of a willow... To the sholuen sho of the wind of the west..."

It was slow and peaceful and so full of affection, and Luna felt herself giving as well as accepting it all for once.

"And the lullo-a-lo of the soft sea-lil-low... Sleep, baby dear... Sleep without fear... Mother is here, beside your pillow..."

Athena stopped for a moment, undoubtedly surprised, but a moment later she joined in and they sang together.

"Sleep, baby dear... Sleep without fear... Mother is here, beside your pillow..."

This was the happiest Luna had ever felt since she'd become a werewolf and a goddess. In fact, it was perhaps the only thing she had ever truly felt for herself.

And it all started with Harry.

Oh, it wasn't because of Harry. This transformation was inevitable, and she understood that, but it had begun with the boy. That strange boy with the pretty eyes and the proud mouth and the fearless body and that secret fate. It had to have been the secret that made her feel

this way. Nothing had ever been kept a secret from her before. Even when she prodded her mother for answers, the secret remained.

She had felt curiosity, and that in itself was curious, and thus this feeling of self awareness had grown. Then came the awareness of others. Awareness that some people were stronger than others, braver, more beautiful or handsome or fierce or kind, and then that she liked certain traits better than others. She liked the curious children more than the obedient ones, and the women who smiled over the ones who were more beautiful, and the men who laughed more than they fought.

She liked Harry most of all, she thought. He was curious about everything, smiled over everything, and laughed at everything. He wasn't afraid of the pack, though he was smaller than most and smelled of prey, and reminded her inexplicably of a young male buck. Proud, graceful, and energetic.

That's how she liked to think of him. As her 'Deer' one, and it was her first joke, even if it were only to herself.

Her singing trailed off, her rush of thoughts suddenly just too much and she felt herself sliding back into the all-knowing state that was the goddess.

That's when she noticed Greyback was watching her, and she knew what he was thinking too. He was thinking about her becoming his daughter when the goddess finally left, about Harry's hold over her, over Blackbone and Silvermoon, and over the God Eater. He was thinking about missed opportunities and opportunities to come. His thoughts were hot and slick like the blood she could always smell on him when he passed close to her.

Something in her trembled, beneath the goddess, and whether it was fear or pleasure she wasn't sure.

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The days passed with sun and rain in equal measure, and Harry found himself extremely busy and yet floundering for something to do. The werewolf boys around his age had taken a strange sort of liking to him, which very much resembled hate. They pranked him constantly, or tried to anyway, to see how many tricks he would or wouldn't fall for and to see just how he might trick them back. Harry, having the benefit of a wand and two years under the tutelage of the Weasley twins, won out more often than not.

The girl's weren't any better, and kept teasing him for being a 'cute little boy', kissing and pinching his cheeks, before running off in feigned terror when chased after them. It wasn't uncommon for him to be minding his own business, when some random girl would suddenly grab hold of him and drag him into a dancing circle he didn't know the steps to or tossed into a wrestling match over some one he'd never even heard of.

Sirius thought it was hilarious and slipped in a few jokes of his own. Harry was not at all pleased to find Inana missing and then found only when several woman came screaming out of the communal bathhouse.

He left the retaliation up to Remus though, whose experience ran decades over Harry's paltry two years.

Their talk that morning in the forest was not mention again, and by all appearances had never happened, but Harry recalled his instructions perfectly. It was suppose to reassure him, he knew, but it did exactly the opposite. Suddenly, he had a new option he had never considered before, and it was an unpleasant choice in response to even more unpleasant possibilities. Exile or worse, was what it boiled down to.

And yet another secret, this one he would have to keep from Voldemort and Snape, who specialized in uncovering other people's secrets.

He wished his godfathers had said nothing.

Perhaps he should have put ink in their flasks.

But there was nothing for it but to distract himself. The craftsmen and women were not secretive of their trade, and if ever he stopped to watch them work they readily explained. The leather smiths showed him how to use every centimeter of skin for something. The glassblower how to handle the hot glass so it didn't shatter, and what minerals would change the colors once melted. The weapon's smith showed him how to carve an arrowhead from obsidian, flint, and bone. Remus taught him how to care for a bow. Sirius taught him how to shoot with it.

Perhaps Harry's only true regret in coming to the werewolf settlement was that he couldn't bring his sketchbook with him, for everywhere he looked there was something he wanted so desperately to commit to paper. To make up for it, he tried his hand at some other crafts he thought to make gifts of.

Jewelry of turquoise for Hermione, green malachite for Natalie, and red carnelian for Ginny, all done in richly complicated patterns with the help of several of the more vain she-wolves to offer him tips. With Sirius and Remus' help, he was able to construct another two sets of personalized leather gauntlets for both Clyde and Draco, and while they were at it, his godfather's took measurements for a breastplate and leg guards for Dueling club. It turned out to be simpler than he thought to manipulate the leather, and the only really tricky part came when they had to varnish the leather so it would be waterproof and stiffen to provide the intended protection without chaffing.

After a hard day of working and playing and avoiding being played with, Harry would settle down beside Voldemort on the feasting grounds, and they would eat and watch the stage performances and talk of the day's events. Voldemort rarely had much to say, at least to him, but Harry suspected much of what the Dark Lord did involved earth magic and lots of meditating.

Even as the end of the festival drew near there was still much to see and do, and with each passing night the werewolves became more and more wild and unpredictable. The familiar traditions of fighting and merry making were gradually replaced with more mystical rituals. Bards that had sung of the seasons and love and foolishness began

singing of ancient legends, hunts, sacrifices, the moon and all her many faces. The stage had been torn up and mangled in a seemingly mad pique by several young adults, who set it alight so that they might dance around it late into the night, singing and howling and kissing and biting.

Tensions finally culminated with the hunt. One minute Harry and the rest of the pack were huddled together in their shelters during an afternoon shower, and then suddenly there was a sound from some sort of horn, and all the adult men and women moved out into the rain and into the forest without a word. Harry was too stunned to do anything for a moment, and when he finally realized something was happening, he got up to follow.

He didn't make it far before Voldemort stopped him, just outside the settlement. He did not look alarmed, but the grip he took on Harry's arm was firm.

"This is not an affair for men," the Dark Lord said, turning his ward back towards the shelter of the settlement. "The moon will be full tonight. You will remain with me for the rest of our stay."

Harry seemed disappointed, but that hardly phased the man. The lycanthropes would be at their most savage today, and tonight that savagery would peak in a transformation of both body and mind, so he could not risk having the boy wander the camp freely. He had seen too many interested in Harry to risk leaving him unattended.

"I would like your help," he said, hoping to turn Harry's disappointment into interest. It seemed to work. "I am going to set up a barrier so that we might observe the transformation safely, and I need to prepare it before tonight."

"We're going to see that? Won't they try to kill us?"

"Hence the barrier. This will be a time of intense magical resonance, and I intend to tap into that. You recall last winter?"

Voldemort watched interest turn into excitement at the prospect of another round of Earth magic, and felt a stirring of enthusiasm himself.

The Dark Lord always enjoyed those brief communications between he and the Earth, but before Harry he had never particularly cared to share the experience with anyone. Yet here was a pupil who understood the beauty of the magic itself, and not just the intended after affects of magical sensitivity and increases in power and otherwise unattainable knowledge.

For the first time since they arrived, they spent their time together in uninterrupted company. There was a brief stop at Voldemort's tent, which Harry was startled to find full of ... things. At first they appeared to be little more than random puffs of smoke, sometime in different colors and sometime moving around, but the longer he studied them the more they seemed to take form. In fact, if he stared at any 'puff' long enough it turned into something. A bird. A spider. A fairy?

"They're spirits," Voldemort explained. "If you grant them enough of your concentration, they can take more solid forms. The trick is getting them to come near you. Communing with the Earth helps a great deal with that. Come on, I will teach you that later."

They went back out into the rain, and into the field were a charred pile of rubble marked the former location of the stage. The tables and cushions had all been removed, leaving the area clear to work with.

First, Voldemort cast a spell to keep the rain out of the their work area, and then they both worked for almost an hour scouring a fifteen by fifteen foot area for litter and debris. Another hour was spend scouring the area clean of impure spirits, accomplished by burning a fragrant bush of some kind. Harry could feel the difference in the air afterwards, and marveled at how clean the air felt and tasted.

At last came the barrier itself. It was not the same one they used that winter. The outline was of two squares over-lapping each other at forty-five degrees, creating a perfect eight pointed star. In each of the eight points they buried a silver coin, each marked with a different rune and a moon at a different phase.

"This is what will keep the werewolves at bay. If even one coin were incorrectly placed, the barrier would fail."

"I've seen this before," Harry said, his brow creased in concentration. "In arithmancy class, but I didn't realize this is what it was used for."

Voldemort smiled, pleased that the boy had made the connection.

"Arithmancy as a study arose much later than the use of the geometric patterns themselves. The study was originally intended to explain how such symbols worked, and later how to create new symbols for different purposes. It wasn't until about the sixteenth century before it incorporated things like numerology, and its true purpose was muddled."

He let the possibilities of what he was saying sink in, and set about making the next symbol. Octagons were hard to work in because they lent themselves poorly to purposes outside of barriers and tended to disrupt the magic of circles. So he drew another square first, and set the four main elements to each side: a candle for fire, a bowl for water, a tiny sapling for earth, and a butterfly safely ensconced in a basket for air.

"These will counteract the magical disruption within the barrier, without affecting the magic of the barrier itself. Now for the hard part."

For this Harry had to wait outside the barrier, in the rain unfortunately, but he didn't utter a peep of complaint. He simply watched intently as Voldemort drew a circle and within that circle a pentagram, and within that pentagram a crescent moon surrounded by some twenty or so unfamiliar symbols.

Then Harry was called back into the barrier, and together they pricked their fingers on Voldemort's obsidian spear, and let their blood drip on to the ground

Nothing happened.

Voldemort laughed at Harry's crestfallen look.

"Don't look so upset. We're communing with the Moon tonight, not the Earth. She has to come out first. Come. There is still more to do."

When the werewolves all came back late that afternoon, Harry was ready to run out and greet them, but Voldemort held him back. It was a good thing too, for when they got closer, Harry could see they were all covered in blood.

Harry nodded, unable to speak as Luna, the most blood drenched of them all, saunter past them towards the main lodge. She offered him a bloody grin as she went, and still none of her ephemeral luminosity faded.

How Voldemort remained above such hungry regard, Harry couldn't fathom, but where ever the man went the wolves slunk away or bent to his demands, from oldest to youngest, omega to alpha. Only Greyback was unintimidated, though he too remained respectful.

Greyback's yellow eyes spun to Harry.

“Can he handle it?”

Voldemort didn't even bother to answer. Harry's defiant glare at the Alpha spoke for itself.

The rest of the day passed in a tense quiet, the werewolves busy securing their belongings from their own inevitable rampage of destruction, and preparing places to rest and recover for the morning after. Harry and Voldemort kept mostly to themselves, the elder teaching Harry how to give the spirits solid shapes. The boy was still too inexperienced to hear what the spirits said or to summon them, but even this faint relationship he formed with them pleased the Dark Lord immensely. More and more his knowledge made Harry closer to the Earth, and her hold over his soul strengthened.

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The rain stopped well before evening, and the clouds retreated to the south, leaving the sky clear for the rest of the night. The only two humans in the settlement went to the barrier an hour before sunset, and half an hour before the packs swarmed into the clearing like ants. The barrier was already active, and though they hadn't transformed yet, no one but Harry and Voldemort themselves were able to enter their fifteen ft² of space.

And that was a very good thing, because even before their shift, the werewolves were thrumming with latent violence. Fights broke out everywhere, between aggravated males, females savagely guarding their children, and the children bullying each other, and were suppressed even more violently by the pack alphas. Around their barrier, several men and women were pacing, and Harry could feel his heart hammering against his chest.

At last the sun sunk behind the trees, and a quarter of an hour later a fat yellow moon rose to take its place. The affect was instantaneous, and even if Harry had been deaf and dumb, he would have known something was stirring. The hairs on the back of his neck stood up and goosebumps shivered down his body. The barrier beneath his

feet started to glow, and a sort of humming started, like electricity through a power line.

The awareness sprung up through the souls of his feet, different than before. It was awareness from a different perspective, he realized. The Moon was not the Earth, and She felt and experienced things differently.

For one, She rather enjoyed insanity.

There was plenty to go around. The awareness was more focused as well, and it lingered around the mass of bending and breaking bodies crowded into the clearing. Hundreds of cries of agony and the crunch and snap of bone, failed to convey what it felt like. Harry felt as if his own body were changing, while at the same time perfectly aware that it wasn't, and the insanity brought on by the pain was nothing compared to the mad blood lust that soon followed. Screams gave way to howls until every werewolf, from the tiniest pup to the most wizen and frail called out in a deafening exaltation to the the sky.

Harry fell to the ground, convulsing in pain and fear, every part of his body and mind resonating and resisting the power of their savagery. But the Moon was not finished, for no sooner than he thought he was going to die of pain, it all retreated like tsunami back into the ocean. He lay there, wrecked and baffled by what had happened. Weakly, he turned his head to Voldemort.

The man was still standing, though leaning heavily on his spear, expression tight. His eyes were luminescent red as they found their way to Harry.

“Wait for it.”

And it came. Gently at first, like a soft breeze, warm with affection and tenderness. The werewolves around them shifted, feeling it as keenly as they, their muzzles pointed fixedly on the Moon. The feeling grew stronger, becoming joy and another jolt of awareness, bringing in to stark clarity all that hid from the sun. Night birds and beasts, the shadow fae, ghosts, and most vibrantly of all- dreams. Thousands and thousands of dreams, all with their own unique scent and flavor,

floating in the wind or caught in the boughs of willows and the blossoms of moon flowers.

Harry lifted his hands, wiggling his fingers as a nightmare slip through them, tingling and smelling vaguely of sulfur.

And the feeling grew and the awareness, spreading over wider grounds and delving deeper into things Harry had never conceived of. Love and blood lust and freedom from fear found in bondage to rage and the Earth sighing blissfully under the Moon's passionate touch.

The werewolves knew only a fraction of it, but that was enough to have them trembling with power and need. Quickly, they dispersed, forming into smaller packs to scour the surrounding forest for food and enemies, in the back of their primeval minds the Moon ran Her fingers through their fur affectionately and urged them on.

At last, the field was empty of all but handful of females with pups too young to follow and...

Luna.

Harry knew her immediately. Of all the werewolves, she was the most beautiful. Brilliant white with silver eyes that stared with curiosity rather than hunger as she trotted towards the barrier. He was aware of her, and yet he was only aware of her enough know that she was hiding from his awareness. She was not open like the other werewolves or the rest of the world or Voldemort who was now as keenly interested in her approach as Harry was. Still, she was so beautiful, and his body hummed with the special love the Moon felt for its daughter.

He sat up, swooned a bit, but managed to climb to his hands and knees and crawled a bit closer to meet her at the barrier's edge. He watched her sniff at the ground, the air, huff in annoyance, then trot away, circling the perimeter.

"What is she doing?" he asked.

"I don't know."

Voldemort was uneasy. Harry could feel it through their connection, not as deep or loving as it was in the Earth Circle, but clear and telling just the same. Luna was a goddess after all, and despite his pack name, Voldemort wasn't entirely sure he could defeat her while she was in her most powerful form on the second most powerful moon of the year.

This uncertainty should have bothered Harry, but he was finding it hard to concentrate on anything other than how beautiful and graceful Luna looked as she circled. At last she stopped and sat down in front of Harry and waited. He smiled at her. She smiled back, and that made Harry laugh riotously. Luna just kept smiling and wagging her tail, asking to play, and Harry wanted to.

Everything was tilted and skewed. The word 'lunatic' stumbled through his brain like an answer searching for a mystery to solve.

Was that what was happening? Was the Moon driving him insane?

It must be, because he was crawling closer to the barrier's edge to Luna, reaching out towards her.

"Harry, stop."

It took a moment for Harry to realize it was Voldemort who had spoken, which was funny, because he was supposed to be aware of him, but the only thing in his attention was Luna who he wasn't aware of at all. His didn't stop, possibly wasn't able to, and his hand touched fur and sunk deep into it. It wasn't very soft, but it was thick and warm and so bright against the dark of his skin.

Luna just kept smiling at him as he ran his hand over her shoulder, her neck, her ears which were the softest part, and finally towards her face. She nuzzled his hand affectionately, her mouth opening to lick his palm, to nibble gently with her great white-

Voldemort's hands pulled him away harshly, and Luna snapped after the retreating hand. She snarled when Harry moved completely out of range, snapping and clawing angrily at the air. Gone was the playful

pup, and in her place raged a scorned goddess. The barrier rippled under the force of her magic, and the Dark Lord spun quickly to defile the crescent moon symbol with the obsidian head of his spear and draw a new one. Dazed and finally frightened, Harry could only shuffle out of the man's way until it was complete. Immediately, the barrier strengthened and cackled with renewed magic, causing Luna to yelp and retreat a ways.

Voldemort and Harry could only stare at one another and wonder what had just happened.

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Harry arrived at the house shortly after noon. He was bone tired, and wanted nothing more than to take a real shower and go to sleep till the beginning of the school year. He dragged himself up the gravel path to the house, a satchel full of souvenirs slung over his shoulder that felt like it was full of bricks. The front door was lock when he tried it. Unsurprising since he was a day earlier than expected.

The full moon had left everyone exhausted and several injured, which meant the festivities were officially over. Voldemort hadn't wanted to linger after Luna's botched attempt at turning Harry into a werewolf, and told Greyback as much. The Alpha couldn't really argue, although even Harry could tell he was disappointed that the young goddess had failed. Harry would have liked to have said goodbye to his godfathers properly, but hadn't been able to muster the effort in the face of the Dark Lord's insistence.

He shook his head, bringing his thoughts back to the present. Everything else could be dealt with after he slept. He rang the door bell. A moment later the door opened.

Harry blinked in surprise.

Hermione blinked back.

“What are you doing back so soon?” she said, moving so he could step inside. “And what in Merlin's name happened to you?”

He was too tired to be embarrassed, but he could just imagine what she saw. Harry, sun-baked, half dressed, still in his paints, laden with all sorts of primitive ornamentation, and without his glasses no less.

“Bloody hell, Potter, did you go to visit the werewolves or go undercover to spy on them?!”

“Good to see you too, Malfoy, now what are you both doing here?”

Draco was too busy ogling Harry to bother with a reply, so Hermione explained.

“Narcissa always sends us to spend a week with Uncle Severus in the summer. We were going to surprise you when you got back. Ah... surprise?”

“Yes, Hermione, yes it is.”

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Since Harry's surprise was spoiled, they decided to surprise Snape instead. The man spent the entire afternoon in his potions lab, leaving Harry plenty of time to shower, nap, and then tell both his friends a little of what had happened before he appeared.

“That's insane,” Draco said, and the story was only half way through. “You're insane. Your first girlfriend was a werewolf?”

“Technically, she was a goddess and also, no, she wasn't my girlfriend... I don't think...”

Hermione had pulled out her quik-quotes quill and was scribbling down everything he said, completely enraptured with his tale.

“Oh, I never dreamed werewolves lived such magically rich and complicated lives. I don't think I've ever read even half of this stuff before.”

“Well, I doubt this sort of thing was normal before the Snake and Wolf Treaty. After all, werewolves didn't live in communities before that, did they? At least not in the last couple of centuries. I bet a lot of this stuff they just developed recently.”

“I suppose your right, but even that is interesting. Imagine building an entire culture in less than a generation? I would love to read a case study on their cultural anthropomorphism.”

Draco yawned.

“Oh, shut up, Draco!”

“What? I didn't say anything. Besides, we were talking about Harry's girlfriend. The one who happens to be goddess, not cultural ants, ropes, and morphisms. So what was she like?”

Harry thought for a moment.

“Well, she was nice I suppose, until she tried to eat me.”

Snape had chosen that exact moment to wander into the living room and find his godchildren sitting around a savage looking creature who happened to sound like the bane of his existence. He hesitated in the doorway just long enough to hear Draco's question and Harry's answer, before turning around again in search of the liquor cabinet.

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1. This is a real lullaby, called An Irish Lullaby with words by Alfred Perceval Graves and music by Charles Villier Stanford.

Book III:

Chapter 4: The Huntress

“That's enough, Shuref.”

The viper obediently pulled away from the 'milking jar', drops of his precious venom pooling at the bottom. Harry hissed words of thanks and praise to him, caressing the top of his head in the way he liked best, before returning the snake to its enclosure. He turned to Healer Coulter and handed her the jar with barely a glance.

“That's the last of it, I think.”

The woman eyed the jar and then Harry with a sort of fondness he didn't reciprocate.

“We'll miss you around here, Harry. You're a very interesting young man.”

Harry wasn't sure what she wanted, but he had made his dislike of her clear from the first day and if she thought he was going to change his mind now she was sorely mistaken.

“Goodbye, Healer Coulter.”

“Aren't you going to say goodbye to Healer Reed and Meldwich?”

He didn't bother to reply, but left the artificial jungle without looking back at her. After half a summer of being treated like a particularly clever guinea pig, there was only one person in the bestiary that he felt he owed a proper goodbye to. He descended the stairs, dropped off his lab coat and security badge at the front desk, and headed out to the recently added dragon nursery, little more than a dome of fireproof stone with a massive steel door. Hagrid was there, using his break to read the newspaper to his clutch of three tiny Irish Blues. The half-giant insisted that even though they didn't understand a word, they loved to listen to the sound of their 'mama's' voice. Harry thought this true, but only because the babies had very poor vision and liked to know in which direction they should blow their flames.

“... and despite the Sentinel's diligent search, no trace of the prisoner has been found. It is believed, that as an Auror of the old Ministry, Moody had inside knowledge of the workings of Azkaban and law enforcement procedures, which were used in his escape- oh! Hey, there 'Arry!”

“Hey, Hagrid. What'cha reading?”

The man smiled and showed him the article. The paper was badly singed, evidence of the Irish Blues enthusiasm for their 'story time', but Harry could make out the picture of a rather frightful looking man with a dirty eye-patch and a headline reading:

FORMER AUROR ESCAPES 'UNESCAPABLE' PRISON

“That there is an old acquaintance of mine, and your folks too. He was part of the Old Crowd. His name is Alaster Moody, but we all called him Mad-Eye. One leg and one eye and still causing the Dark Lord's cronies hell,” Hagrid chuckled, and Harry smiled.

All summer the half-giant had been telling him tales about the war, and some of the adventures he and the 'Old Crowd' had while working for Dumbledore to stop the Death Eaters. It was strange to hear names of people he knew and liked or at least respected being cast as both heroes and villains, but with Hagrid telling the tales it had all the wonder and believability of a child's fairy tale. It was fun, like making his mother Snow White, Headmistress Lestrangle the evil witch, and all his friends as the dwarfs.

“It's a strange world, 'Arry,” Hagrid continued, turning to stop a scuffle between two of his dragons, who thanks him promptly by setting his beard alight. The half-giant had it out again with practiced ease in a mere second or two. “Used to be men like Moody going around catching men like Malfoy. The whole place goes topsy turvy in a year, and half the time you can't even tell the difference.”

“Is it like that saying? You know, 'the more things change the more they stay the same'?”

Hagrid thought for a moment and then nodded in agreement.

“Aye, tha'd be it. Just like that. You're a clever one, 'Arry. You'll do good in life. Speaking of which, it's almost time for school again, ain't it? Ya ready ta go?”

“I can't wait. I haven't seen my friends since my birthday and then we only went shopping for school supplies. Plus, no more living with Snape for the summer or those silly etiquette lessons or Healer Meldwich or... is it bad that I enjoy the school year more than the summer break?”

Hagrid burst out laughing.

“Nothing wrong with liking school. It's probably more of a home than anywhere else at the moment. You wouldn't be the first to think so and you won't be the last.”

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Harry straightened his tie as an excuse to look at his reflection in the station house window, looking for any remainder of the pale band of skin over his eyes that marked where his ritual paint had been. After nearly a month, the untanned skin had mostly darkened to match the rest of his complexion, but underneath his shirt Harry could still quite clearly see where the symbols had been. He wasn't intending to make his vacation into werewolf territory public knowledge, and trying to explain his markings might prove a bit awkward.

“Mr. Potter, if you don't stop fidgeting with your tie, I will be forced to strangle you with it.”

Harry looked over at his potion's professor, standing stiffly ahead of him. The man was just as dour and unpleasant as ever, and despite spending almost an entire summer with him, Harry couldn't say he was any more or less fond of the man. Snape, it seemed, would forever be Snape, regardless of his setting.

“Yes, Professor.”

“I trust you can make it the remaining twenty steps to the passenger cars without falling into mortal peril or starting a riot?”

“Yes, Professor.”

“I should like to see you demonstrate.”

“See you at the Welcoming Feast, sir.”

He rolled his trolley over to the baggage handlers, leaving his trunk and Elsbeth's empty cage in their care, and took only his school satchel and Inana in her basket to the first available car. No mortal peril or riots presented themselves, and feeling quite proud of his success, Harry went in search of his friends.

The train was only half full, and Harry had the benefit of leaving his clunkier luggage in the baggage car, so he was able to navigate fairly well. Perhaps the only impediment was the number of school mates who stopped to greet him and ask about his summer and what his plans that year were. It was a bit odd since no one had seemed nearly as interested the year before, but the narrow and busy aisle of a train wasn't the place to ponder it so he focused on finding the right compartment.

He was coming towards the end of the passenger cars, when his way was obstructed by a woman heading in the opposite direction. Something about her immediately caught his attention. She was pretty with pale skin and chocolate brown hair cropped just under her chin in Parisian chic. She was only in her early thirties, but carried herself like a confident professional, vaguely arrogant and daring anyone to stand in her way.

Harry didn't particularly feel like taking up that dare, so he looked for a place to move out of her way but before he got the chance, she had spotted him.

“Harry!”

The Gryffindor jumped in surprise, and looked quickly behind him, but there wasn't anyone there but Colin Creevey and his brother. Turning back towards the woman, he found she had moved much closer, and he nearly stumbled back in surprise but she caught him by the hand and shook it firmly.

"You must be the infamous Harold Potter. I've heard so much about you!"

"Um... hello?"

"Oh, excuse me, I didn't mean to startle you. I am Professor Vesper Larousse, your new DA&D instructor."

Harry took another moment to reassess her. Still quite pretty, but on closer inspection he could spot a faint scar over her lip and one of her fingers didn't close completely over the case she was carrying. Her outer robe was a fashionable lavender color, but under that was a courser black set, and she wore boots with steel toes and short heels. Her dark brown eyes were alert, examining him while he examined her.

"I see. Well then, it's nice to meet you, Professor Larousse. I hope you enjoy your time at Hogwarts."

"No need to be so formal, Harry. I suspect we'll be good friends before the end of the year."

"Er... yeah, perhaps we will. Um..."

"If you are looking for Ms. Granger and Mr. Malfoy, they are three doors down and to your left," she offered, and neatly moved into one of the compartments to let him pass.

"Oh, yeah, thank you, Professor."

He hurried past her, and straight to the indicated compartment, barely making sure it was the right one before shutting the door behind him. Hermione, Natalie, and Draco looked up when he entered.

"What happened to you this time?" Draco drawled, fully prepared to accept a story involving unicorns and Viking invaders.

"Creepy new professor. She called me 'Harry'."

Hermione expression was condescending. "Well, that is your name. I don't think you should go around calling people 'creepy' just for that."

"Hermione, she called me Harry, she called you, Ms. Granger and Draco, Mr. Malfoy, and knew that I was looking for you without me saying so. And then she said we'd be 'good friends' by the end of the year. She was definitely creepy."

Natalie laughed.

"Presumptuous woman. I'd like to meet her."

"You'll get your chance. She teaches our Dark Arts and Defense class. Have any of you ever heard of Vesper Larousse?"

Hermione perked up.

"I remember her. She used to come to our Christmas parties. She scared McNair silly. I remember wanting to be just like her, but then I haven't seen her in years."

Draco and Natalie just looked blank, nothing coming to mind.

"Well, if she can scare McNair, at least she must have some clue about what she's doing."

"What ever happened to McNasty anyway?" Natalie asked.

"Azkaban, last I heard," Draco said, "Lets hope he doesn't pull a 'Moody' and escape."

"That isn't funny," Hermione scolded. "Moody is very dangerous. The newspaper says his cell was covered in pictures of him killing Death Eaters in all these horrible ways. A lot of people are really scared he'll decide to come after them. Lucius included."

“Father isn't afraid of anything. Besides, if the man is really clever enough to escape from prison he should be clever enough to get the hell out of Britain.”

“That' sort of the point, Draco. He's crazy, but he's clever too. Who knows what harm he could do if he isn't caught?”

Neither Draco nor Natalie were impressed, and Harry didn't understand her concern either. A crazy escaped prisoner was interesting, but hardly a concern at Hogwarts. He doubted she was worried about Lucius.

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“Hi, Harry!”

“Hi, Dean.”

“Natalie, you curled your hair!”

“Horrid, isn't it? You'll have to help me straighten it again, Pamela.”

“Good to see you again, Harry!”

“You too, Oliver.”

“Hermione, did you know when our first meeting is again?”

“Probably tomorrow! You'll get a note in the morning!”

“Welcome back, Malfoy!”

“See you on the pitch, Hughes.”

“Nice tan, Potter!”

“Thanks, Jacobson.”

"Can I have your autograph, Harry!"

"Scram, you stupid twit," Draco snapped, sending the second year Hufflepuff scurrying. They hadn't been off the train for even a minute, before they had been inundated with friends, classmates, acquaintances, and complete strangers all wanting to say hello or chat. It took another five minutes for Harry to realize half of these were directed at him specifically, and twenty minutes later as he walked through Hogwarts' entry hall he still didn't know why.

"Who was that?" he asked, not recognizing her.

"Who knows?" Natalie said, clearly uninterested in finding out. "Just another silly little girl with a crush. You're going to be quite popular this year, you know."

"No, I hadn't known," Harry admitted, "Why?"

His friends all gave him a disbelieving look. Clyde, who had shown up with Ginny shortly after the train left the station, was the most flabbergasted.

"Humility is grand and all, Harry, but now you're just being stupid."

"Hey!"

Ginny interrupted before a fight broke out.

"We talked about this last school year, Harry. You remember, right? Nice clothes, good at sports, special talents, Voldemort's favorite little tyke. Oh, and Jacobson was right That's a really nice tan... oh wait, all that blushing has gone and ruined it. You look like a tomato now. So much for your exclusive in Witch's Wardrobe."

They laughed as Harry turned darker and darker. He really didn't understand what they were talking about. Sure he was good at Quidditch and Dueling, but the rest of it? Parseltongue was little more than a party trick. Political associates? Voldemort? Did they really admire or envy his time spent with the unpredictable dictator? Most readily admitted that the man was terrifying. Why would they want to

associate with him? Why the heck would school kids care about that sort of thing anyway?

The cloths... nonsense. There wasn't anything cool or sexy about his cloths. Aside from a few of his formal things, most of what he wore was just generic school things. His new tailored clothes definitely fit better, but he didn't think they made him look any less like a geek. Frankly, he was afraid he resembled Percy Weasley a little too much. Most of the other guys opted for t-shirts and jumpers and jeans under their robes, and he thought those looked cooler than his mini-accountant look.

Oh, Merlin, who was he kidding? He did have a lot going for him, but he knew something his new admirers didn't. He had twice as much going against him. Things that could send him fleeing from Britain or living as a werewolf or ...well, dead.

"Hurry up, Potter, or you'll have to sit next to the first years," Draco said, breaking him from his thoughts. "We'll see you in class, tomorrow."

With that Draco and Natalie moved ahead to crowd into the Great Hall and towards the Slytherin table. Harry and his remaining friends moved to their own house table, and squeezed in with their fellow third years, except for Ginny who went to sit with a group of second year girls who giggled and glanced at Harry furtively.

He ignored them in favor of checking out the teacher's table. Voldemort was there this year, looking particularly mysterious and intimidating in blacks and blood reds. They hadn't spoken in a month, and Harry still had no idea about what had happened at the full moon. He wasn't going to ask either, and unless he was expected to return the following summer he didn't see a reason why it should matter. He would just prefer to forget about it all together. Besides, the Dark Lord wasn't there to answer to Harry. He had learned from Snape that Voldemort had taken time out of his busy schedule to make an important announcement regarding the school, and he would leave immediately afterwards.

Speaking of Snape...

He found his potion's professor a little ways down the table.

Along with Professor Larousse.

Who was smiling at Professor Snape. She seemed to be engaging the taciturn man in conversation, and despite his obvious displeasure it seemed his usual insults were not successful in ending her interest in him. In fact, judging by the way Snape somehow choked on his tea, Harry suspected the woman had gotten in a few successful jibes of her own. She had just graduated from 'creepy' to 'scary' in his young mind.

"Wow, she's cute!" Clyde said, beside him.

"Who?" Harry and Hermione asked in unison.

"The new teacher, of course! What's her name again?"

"Larousse," said Hermione.

"No, I mean her first name."

"Why would you need to know that? You think you'll ever be in a position to use it? She's a teacher."

"I'm only curious."

Apparently, he wasn't the only one. Several other boys at their table were asking the same thing, and commenting on how pretty she was. No one but Harry seemed to notice that she her taste in men seemed to lean towards tall, dark, and unpleasant.

The girls were all amazed that a teacher would have such a daring haircut and bright red lipstick, which was like sticking a rose in a bouquet of daisies. Striking and completely out of place.

It was such a silly topic, he thought, and turned to Hermione to say so, but she was staring at the other woman, completely smitten. Oh, for Merlin's sake...

Finally the Welcoming Feast began with the sorting of the first years. Harry tried to stay interested, and looked for any potentially interesting new students, but they all looked the same. Young, timid, and... short. Really short. God, had he been that short two years ago?

Soon enough the seventy or so new students were sorted and settled at their House tables, and Headmistress Lestrangle made the usual announcements, warnings, and introduced their newest teacher.

“... Professor Vesper Larousse-”

And there was a round of very enthusiastic clapping, as the woman stood and smiled at them.

“- will be teaching Dark Arts and Defense this year. She has a very extensive resume, but as this is her first year of teaching I expect everyone to demonstrate why Hogwarts students are renown as the elite of the wizarding world.”

Lestrangle gave a brief, but very pointed look in Harry's direction. The Gryffindor fought the urge to shove his finger up his nose and drool into his dinner, but just barely managed to contain himself. Another teacher, Professor Mothman, part of a completely new class for seniors involving ancient magical texts and artifacts, was introduced and received with considerably less enthusiasm. He didn't seem to notice, but then if he coke bottle glasses and the funny little funnel he held up to his ear was indication, it was probably because he could neither hear or see well enough to tell the difference. A few more trivialities were addressed that Harry left to Hermione to worry about while he searched the student body for familiar faces. There was Horace McGunny, the Hogwarts Herald's editor and chief and Hermione's (recently usurped) hero, scribbling in his notebook at the Ravenclaw table. Cedric Diggory, the most popular sixth year boy (and that said something coming from Hufflepuff, long regarded as the dorkiest of houses) and Harry's potential friend ever since last year's Sweetey debacle. Further down his own table were Fred and George, strangely reserved since the train ride and thoroughly behaving themselves as they appeared to listen to the

announcements. Several students had been inching away from them, fearing the calm almost more than the storm they knew was coming. The twins spotted Harry, and broke character to offer him a mischievous smirk.

So many familiar faces after months of disassociation brought a feeling of warmth in his chest.

And yet, there was someone missing. Harry scanned the Slytherin table from one end to the other, but no sign of his friend Tom Rook could be found. Tom's usual cluster of friends seemed unnerved by their leader's absence. He turned to Hermione, but before he could ask her anything the Great Hall became deathly quiet.

Voldemort had stood and was preparing to speak.

"Ladies and gentleman," he said, his fierce gaze making it a command for quiet obedience as much as generic titles, "You are all aware of your schools importance to wizarding Britain, both historically and contemporary, as a sanctuary of learning for our country's magical community. What many of you do not realize is the state of decline the school has undergone for the last three hundred years."

This brought a confused murmur, and even Harry found the idea disturbing. Hogwarts was the finest school in Britain, some would boast in the world, and after centuries of magical advancement it was somehow declining?

"Do not be alarmed. I do not mean to say that your education is somehow lacking or the structure of school is deteriorating. Hogwarts' students are as bright as ever, and her walls are the strongest and the most numerous they've ever been. However, in the last three centuries, with the emergence of alternative schools, the number of students has greatly declined even as the school itself has expanded from the absorption of excess magic. To put it simply, compared to three hundred years ago, Hogwarts is four times as large with one fifth the number of students."

Another excited murmur, much of it confusion. Harry didn't understand much of what was being said either. Hogwarts was growing? Not being expanded, but increasing in walls due to magic it absorbed? From what? The students? Britain in general? And there was suppose to be more students? Certainly, the school had always seemed excessively large, and there were dozens, perhaps even hundreds of unused rooms, but had the school really held... he paused to do the math and the exact number escaped him, but it was well over two thousand students.

Two thousand students?

He looked again to Hermione. She didn't look surprise, and in fact was scribbling things down on a napkin. After giving the students a moment to absorb what he had said, Voldemort continued.

"I believe this to be an incredible waste of Britain's resources, and have decided to expand the school into a preparatory two-year college, accepting approximately one thousand students and seventy new professors."

The students started to panic. If Hogwarts was going to be a university, where would they go to school in the meantime? The Dark Lord glared, and everyone quieted.

"Hogwarts will continue as a secondary school, with very little change on the part of her students or teachers. There will be a rearrangement of classrooms, some expansions to the library, several renovations, and a few other minor accommodations, but little else will change. The college level students will have their dorms in Hogsmeade, and should not interfere with your usual pattern of living."

"All of this in fact, will take several years to accomplish, and the college itself will not be opening for another five to ten years. I am only bothering to explain this to you now, because of the engineers that will be roaming the school making measurements. You will not get in their way, and if one finds need of your assistance, you will be courteous enough to provide it. More specific instructions will be provided by the Headmistress and your Heads of House as the need

arises. That is all that need be said, I believe. Have a nice school year.”

The 'or else' hung in the air as the Dark Lord stalked off through one of the side doors, leaving the students momentarily struck speechless. It was broken by Fred and George's suddenly excited exclamation.

“COLLEGE GIRLS! YES!”

The Great Hall broke out into peels of laughter, and then into excited gossip. The Headmistress, finding no reason to break the festive mood, snapped her fingers to begin the feast. Hermione was on her feet before she had so much as a nibble of dinner.

“Harry, I need to go talk to McGunny. This news is HUGE!”

The young Gryffindor didn't doubt it, and he was interested, but there were several other things that he found more concerning. Like, where was Tom? and what was with Professor Larousse?

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There were no opportunities to learn the answers to his questions until the next morning, on the first day of classes. Hermione, who had spent most of the Welcoming Feast with McGunny and the newspaper crew, organizing for the first issue of the Hogwarts Herald, had heard nothing of Tom and had no idea what he meant about Larousse. The other Gryffindors were equally unhelpful.

“You can ask Professor Snape about Tom after potions,” Hermione said during breakfast. “He's the Head of Tom's House, so he would definitely know.”

“Do you think Draco would know?”

Harry would much rather ask his friend, than Snape and the cranky potion's master would probably prefer the same thing.

“You can try him, but he'll only know the rumors and hearsay. They weren't friends, so I doubt he knows anything concrete. Your most reliable source is definitely Professor Snape, and we have potions just before lunch today so it's would be convenient.”

There was nothing convenient about the snarky man, but Harry wasn't going to try and argue with her. The first class of the day was History of Magic, the worst sort of class to have first thing in the morning, even with a professor as zealous as Toure. He managed to keep awake through the first lecture of the day by worrying about his next class. Dark Arts and Defense, one of Harry's best subjects, loomed like an ominous storm cloud, threatening anything from a light drizzly to raining down fire and brimstone.

He was nervous, perhaps more nervous than he had been when Hermione had told him about McNair, and he couldn't say why. Larousse hadn't been threatening when he met her, quite the opposite in fact, and he was good enough in Dueling Club and his previous DA&D classes to feel confident of his skills. Still, there was something about the woman that made him uneasy.

Hermione on the other hand, couldn't get to class fast enough, and despite his misgivings he followed her into the lion's den and straight to the closest seats at the front. They were not, to Hermione's displeasure, at the very front, for several boys (including Clyde) had shown up even earlier than they to snag the choice spots. Larousse was already there, cleaning up after her previous class, which had something to do with the importation of non-native dark creatures, and hopefully wasn't a subject they would have to learn until seventh year. She had been ignoring the students until he caught her attention entering the room. She offered him a bright smile and wave.

It was odd enough that even Hermione seemed surprised, while the others turned jealous eyes his way. Harry shifted uncomfortably in his chair, and pretended to look over the text books. They were good books, Harry thought, emphasizing practical applications rather than theory or history, but he still had his misgivings about the woman that would be teaching them.

At last, the rest of the students shuffled in, and class began.

“Good evening, class. As you know, I am your new DA&D instructor, Professor Vesper Larousse. It is very nice to meet you all. Before I begin, I am afraid I need to rearrange you all a bit. Oh, do not sulk. It is only for a week until I can put all of your names with your darling faces,” she said, her smile so charming no one could muster up any resentment.

She had a paper with her and a pile of folders, and every time she assigned a seat, she placed one of the folders with that student's name on the desk. There appeared to be no rhyme or reason to where anyone sat, but Harry (and the boys who had arrived early) couldn't help but notice how very close he'd been placed next to the teacher's desk. At the very least, Hermione had been placed right next to him, and she was quite happy to be there.

“Now then,” Larousse began once everyone was settled. “I have given each of you a folder, and in each folder is your syllabus and assignment list, as well as an assignment journal and score card. Each of your folders are unique and keyed to you specifically. It will inform you everyday what we will be studying, what assignments are due, past assignment grades, study progress, and various other statistics and useful information. Do not lose it, it will be vital for your final grade and you will be completely lost within a week without it.”

Everyone immediately started browsing through the folder. Sure enough, it was crammed with information. Not only was there everything that she had mentioned, but also an announcement sheet for tutoring schedules, extra credit assignments, recommended reading material, and class ranking (Harry was number three).

“Rather than waste time handing out papers and returning assignments, they will appear in your folders at the very front. Check your folder everyday just before and after class. Further more, these folders are for you only. Do not show or share the contents with your fellow students, and do not ask to see or borrow them from others. I will deduct five points from each student I catch doing so. In case you are wondering, I am modeling this system after the Court Executive and Judiciary system, which emphasizes confidentiality and thorough record keeping. Many of you will go on to work at the Court after

graduating, and will be happy to have familiarized yourself with the system before hand."

"Oh, that's clever," Hermione murmured to herself. Harry wasn't so sure. It just seemed like a whole lot more paperwork to keep straight to him.

Professor Larousse gave them all a few more minutes to look through their folders, before beginning her first lecture on protective clothing. She called up Harry and Hermione to be her volunteer demonstrators. She transfigured them both a closet and had them change into some dueling gear they were both already familiar with.

"Most of you should be familiar with these," the professor said, gesturing up and down Harry and Hermione's uniforms. "They are used during official Duels. Now can anyone tell me why leather is preferred over metal?"

"Because it is lighter?" a Hufflepuff girl offered.

"A good guess, but no my dear. Metals can be magicked to be much lighter than even leather. Anyone else?"

Harry and Hermione both knew, but as volunteers they knew they weren't suppose to supply the answer. Snape had lectured them on it on the first day of Dueling Club, but even Clyde and one of the Hufflepuffs who attended didn't seem to recall it. Larousse, however, was prepared for that.

"Let's do an experiment then. Mr. Potter," she crooned, causing him to blush like a fool. "Would you cast a light stunning hex on each of the dummies over there."

She pointed to two dummies at the end of the room, quite the distance away in fact for a hex, one dressed in typical leather dueling armor and the other in a knight's metal armor. He did as she requested and hit each perfectly in the middle of the chest. The dummy in leather shook a little, but remained standing. The dummy in metal however, spasmed and sparked from head to toe and fell off its post.

“Wonderful aim, Mr. Potter! Three points to Gryffindor. Now can anyone tell me what happened? No? Well, you see, metal conducts most magics just like it does electricity. The hex traveled from the chest through the entirety of the armor, causing more harm than good to the body it was suppose to be protecting. The leather armor, however, is organic, magically neutral, and non-conductive, so it keeps the effect of the hex localized, even absorbing some of it.”

The lecture continued similarly, with Harry and Hermione changing into various articles of protection, some they were familiar with and much of it they weren't, and Larousse explaining how it all worked and why. Then they played a game, mixing and matching armor and protective pieces to see what would stand up best against certain spells and hexes. The combinations looked pretty ridiculous on their models, but Harry and Hermione took it all in good humor and laughed along with everyone else.

“Alright, everyone settle down,” Larousse said finally, looking more energized than when they had started. “That was an excellent practical, but now we must move on to theory I'm afraid. Please applaud our gracious volunteers.”

She gestured at the two Gryffindors, who bowed playfully as their classmates clapped and whistled. They changed back into their school robes and took their seats. The remainder of the class was notes and some assigned reading.

“Before you go, check your folder for today's assignment. You will all be given a scenario, a list of protective clothing and items, and you must select three items from the list you would wear or use and give your reasoning. One foot minimum and don't try to cheat off your classmate. You've all been given different scenarios. It's due Wednesday and be prepared to demonstrate your choices as well. Dismissed.”

There was some token grumbling, but it had been a good first class and everyone was feeling cheerful. Harry and his friends were already comparing scenarios, laughing at the examples that were

used. Who on earth would leave a three-headed dog to guard a bread box? Or a place a Hairy Hands curse on a bath tub?

“Oh, Mr. Potter, would you stay a moment?”

Harry and his friends stopped abruptly, looking over at Professor Larousse. She didn't seem at all upset about anything, but Harry couldn't fathom what she might want. She had been extra complimentary of him during class, subtly so, but he could tell every time she patted his shoulder and praised one of his spells. Not that she had ignored Hermione or anyone else, but there was a difference. Harry wasn't entirely sure what that difference was, but it was there.

“Uh, sure, professor.”

“We'll wait outside for you, Harry.”

“Thanks Hermione.”

Once alone, he approached the teacher's desk, and she smiled encouragingly.

“You look nervous, Harry. Don't be, you're not in any trouble, quite the contrary in fact.”

She had just called him Harry again, when during class she had referred to him as 'Mr. Potter', and it made him even more uncomfortable than before.

“You know I was looking over the students records- to better design the student curriculum you see- and yours caught my attention. You've had a very exciting couple of years, Mr. Potter.”

“Er... yeah, I guess so.”

“And Professor Snape is now your guardian?”

“No... well, sort of. He looked after me this summer, but I pretty much belong to the school.”

"Mmm... is that so? How interesting. I don't suppose you've made any plans for your future? You and Professor Snape?"

"Why would Sna- I mean, Professor Snape make plans for my future? I'm only thirteen anyway. Graduation is a long way off."

"Not so long, my dear. Besides, next year you'll have to take electives, and those will have a serious impact on your continued education and job opportunities. I only say this to make you aware of your situation. I know you do not have a parent to explain it all, and I wasn't sure if your Head of House or Professor Snape would do so."

Harry had to concede her point. Neither Snape nor McGonagall or anyone else mentioned it. He suspected Hermione would pretty soon, but certainly an adult should have made it known to him first.

"Thank you, Professor, for bringing it to my attention."

She practically sparkled with happiness.

"You're quite welcome, Harry. Now I don't want you to stress. You have all year to think about next year's classes and what sort of job you'd like, if not the specific field. You have excellent grades in all your classes so far, and your club activities increase your options, so I doubt you'll find yourself limited. In fact I think you'll have too many options available. If you find yourself stuck, I want you to know I'm here to help, if you ever need it."

"Oh... I... Thank you. That's very generous of you. Are you sure Professor McGonagall won't get mad at you?"

Larousse didn't look the least bit concerned.

"I don't see why. After all, she has all of her students to supervise in class and an entire House to supervise outside of class, and could use the help, I'm sure. Plus, didn't you say it yourself? You belong to the school? It's the entire staff that is responsible for your wellbeing, you know."

Now that was a bit of twisted logic, but Harry wasn't really in a position to argue with her. She was just being helpful after all, and he'd be some kind of jerk for fighting with her over that. So he smiled as best he could, thanked her again, and left to rejoin his friends in the hall.

"What did she want with you, Harry?" Clyde asked, obviously suspicious.

"She didn't want a date, if that's what you think."

The other boy turned pink around the eyes, then turned away to sulk.

"So what did she want?" Hermione picked up.

"Nothing really. She just wanted to remind me to think about what classes I want next year. She said, she didn't know if anyone else would bother to tell me since I don't have parents. Which they haven't...yet, anyway."

"Oh, so it was just a pity thing? Maybe that's why she's mother henning you?" Clyde said hopefully, earning him a hearty Hermione slap.

"So you noticed too? I don't know, maybe it is just a pity thing. Maybe she's sucking up to me to get in good with the Dark Lord. I don't know."

"Harry, I really don't think she's the sort to 'suck up'," Hermione insisted. "She seems pretty straight forward. Maybe she just likes you. A lot of the teachers do."

He didn't think a lot of teachers liked him personally, though he got along with them all well enough, and he didn't think Professor Larousse could have decided she liked him before they even met without an ulterior motive. He didn't say anything though. Larousse hadn't done anything or said anything that he could use in an argument one way or the other, and only time would tell if he was just being paranoid or if she had something up her sleeve.

“Well, lets find a teacher who doesn't,” Harry said instead, “Professor Snape is going to skin us alive if we're late to the first potion's class of the year.”

Book III:

Chapter 5: The Huntress

“What's wrong with him? Is it serious?” Harry asked worriedly. He had stayed back after Potions had ended, just as Hermione had suggested, to ask the Slytherin Head of House about Tom. Snape wasn't at all pleased to have him linger, especially over something as frivolous as 'friendly concern'.

“Mr. Potter, it is not my habit to break teacher/student confidence by releasing medical information to random students. Suffice to say, Mr. Rook was sick long before attending Hogwarts, and he suffered a relapse over the summer. Perhaps he will return later this year or perhaps he won't. If you wish to know anything more, I recommend writing to him yourself. Now if you'll excuse me, I have another class to prepare.”

Harry was in no position to fight with the professor, and stalked out of the classroom in a huff. Hermione, Draco, and Natalie were there waiting for him, but Clyde had seemingly disappeared.

“Any luck?” Natalie asked.

“Just that Tom is sick again. I'll have to write him myself if I want to know what's going on. At least he's alive, though. Where's Clyde?”

“He said he was hungry,” Hermione offered.

“Well, I am too,” Harry said, “Want to have lunch outside today?”

“Naturally,” Draco said, “We can't have a real conversation with all the plebs squawking in the Great Hall.”

Hermione shook her head.

“Sorry guys, but McGunny called an emergency meeting. You'll have to go on without me.”

"I don't know how we'll survive," Natalie mocked. So Harry went to the lake with Natalie and Draco, laden with a basket of sandwiches and apples. It was a little strange to be together without Hermione, but soon enough they were talking comfortably about this and that.

"You should show Natalie your tan lines. I bet they're still there, aren't they?"

"I'm not taking off my shirt to show her that. What if someone saw?"

"I don't mind," the Slytherin girl grinned, but then frowned again as she looked over Harry's shoulder towards the castle. The boys followed her gaze and spotted Hermione hurrying towards them. "Oh, bother."

"Do you think something happened?" Harry asked. Draco shrugged.

"We'll find out soon enough. What's wrong, sis?"

Hermione looked frazzled, although not quite panicked. In fact, she looked more indignant than anything.

"This is so utterly ridiculous, and to call an emergency meeting over it is... ridiculous!"

"We gathered that," said Draco, "Now what is so ridiculous?"

"Sara Bella Parker said she wanted to discuss rearranging the paper's format, but all she really wanted was more room for her gossip column, or more specifically, a new section of it."

Now here Hermione actually looked embarrassed and was having trouble meeting Harry's eyes. The Gryffindor boy was starting to catch on.

"It involves me, doesn't it?"

Hermione grimaced.

"Involves you? No, Harry, it is you. She wants to add a Harry Potter column and call it something stupid like-"

"If Only You Were Half This Cool?" Natalie offered.

"Read If You Have No Life'?" was Draco's suggestion.

A witty come back escaped Harry at the moment, being smothered in an overwhelming feeling of dread and embarrassment. Hermione picked up the slack for him.

"No, more like 'The Prince of Hogwarts' or something lame like that. Even worse is I think McGunny might do it. He kept saying things like 'human interest stories' and 'increased market appeal'. For once, Weasley and I were on the same side. I think we managed to scare Parker into dropping it, but now McGunny seems to have picked up the idea. I'm really, really sorry Harry, I didn't know what else to do."

Harry just nodded, unable to say anything. Increased popularity, he could handle that, but a newspaper article? He was too young to deal with paparazzi! What if they started following him around? What if they learned some of his secrets? About his parents, his godfathers, Voldemort, Sweetey?

"Maybe... maybe we can get Professor Toure to stop it. I mean, she has the final say about these things, right?"

Hermione's eyes widened.

"Of course! I can ask her after dinner... or perhaps you should ask her, since you're the 'victim' so to speak. It might be awkward for one of the reporters to object to doing a story."

"Er... yeah."

"There, there, Harry," Natalie said, patting his shoulder. "It was only a matter of time. What with you being Voldemort's potential 'love child', this sort of thing was bound to happen. Think of it as practice for the real world."

"I would have you know, I know my real father, and I look just like him. From my impossible hair to my knobby knees. I wish people would stop implying Voldemort as the alternative."

"Perhaps he's your grandfather? You could always ask Ms. Parker to investigate."

"Natalie..."

"It was only a suggestion."

"In the mean time, Potter," Draco said, "Be as boring and uninteresting as we know you can be."

That, despite being utterly rude, was probably the most helpful advice anyone could offer.

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Unfortunately, it was also impossible. Harry's life simply wasn't boring or uninteresting. Even the avoidance of the newspaper article was an adventure. Asking Toure to put a stop to it was like asking the Pope to worship Satan. When he had asked, she went into a very long spiel about the rights of the public and uncorrupted news flow, and Harry understood within the first thirty seconds she wasn't going to help and was crazier than he had thought. Despite Hermione and Ron's attempts to block the article, it had gained popularity with the rest of the staff and it was decided to officially incorporate it into their first issue of the school year by next Monday.

Defeated on one front, Harry had to battle for his privacy on another. He asked all his friends not to answer even casual questions about him, and talked to Fred and George about possible ways to discourage the reporters from asking. He should have known better than to ask, because they took his request for assistance a little too enthusiastically. They followed him around when ever they could between classes and meals, acting like bodyguards and frightening the reporters and his classmates alike.

The Hogwarts Herald crew, however, took on the challenge with a fervor. At least one person (usually Parker, who was the same year as him and was in several of his classes) followed him around, sometimes asking him questions, sometimes asking his friends questions, sometimes asking complete strangers if they knew anything. Harry had taken to using the Maruader's Map to sneak in between classes and avoided the Great Hall whenever the weather permitted. When it became clear that Harry wasn't going to be offering any information himself, the crew turned to McGonagall, who had nothing to say but 'student files are confidential' and listed the many possible punishments should anyone think to violate that privacy.

In the end, the Hogwarts Herald had to resort to scavenging off of Wizinging Weekly articles to put together an article of their own, but even so, much of it was speculation rather than facts. Monday's article took up almost half of the gossip column (which had already been expanded), and brought into question several assumptions about Harry. Everyone knew that Harry had lived in Germany, but few knew the reason why or how he had ended up in England. Fewer still knew about his parents, if he'd even been raised by both or one or neither of them, or if they had been from England themselves and fled during or after the war or originally been from the colonies, or if they had even been wizards or not. In addition to Harry Potter's mysterious origins, lay his mysterious abilities. Parseltongue, excellent flying skills, and unusually strong control of wandless magic. Where had these skills come from? Were they inherited by the mysterious parents? Innate? Or from something stranger? Certainly, Harry Potter had had strangely numerous run ins with danger. A kidnapping no one seemed to know the specifics of except for Morgenson and Whitehall, who had mysteriously disappeared after their expulsion. The closure of a business Harry worked at for the summer (now where had they learned about that connection?). Then of course, the attacks at the school that Harry had finally put a stop to. The relationship between Voldemort and Harry was equally as mysterious, and the only thing confirmed was that Harry spent last Christmas and a portion of that summer with the Dark Lord.

It all read like a Spanish soap opera commercial to Harry. Hermione didn't know what a Spanish soap opera was, but agreed that it was poor journalism.

"It's just a bunch of teasers. Parker is trying to get people hooked on 'The Mystery of Hogwarts', before she starts giving out any real information if she even has any. It even sounds like a cheesy mystery novel not a real article. 'The Mystery of Hogwarts'. Ppffftt."

Harry almost laughed at the sound from the normally very articulate Hermione, but he wasn't really in a laughing mood. They had gotten the paper that morning, and were now on their way to Potion's and pretending to ignore the whispers and speculative looks the students were sending his way.

"This is stupid," he said at last, "They all knew most of what she said before. Why is everyone so interested now?"

Hermione couldn't offer any answers, and the rest of the walk was spent in silence. If only Potion's class had been so uneventful.

"Potter! Detention!"

Harry blinked in confusion, turned to Hermione, who looked equally surprised. They hadn't even taken their seats yet. Class hadn't even started yet! The potion's master must have found something to get pissy about though, because his expression was down right livid.

"And see me after class, as well."

"Er..."

"Shut up."

Disoriented from this latest surprise attack, he let Hermione pick a seat and perform most of the potion work, while he tried to figure out what exactly he had done to earn Snape's ire. He could think of nothing, however, and nearly ruined the potion due to his distraction. The great bat snarling something at him every five minutes didn't help matters at all. After a grueling hour of uncertainty and annoyance, the

class finally finished and Harry found himself standing before Snape's desk. He told his friends not to wait up, since the potion's master often took his time with tormenting him, and Hermione left with her Slytherin cohorts to get lunch. For once, Snape didn't ignore Harry for the first five minutes like he usually did, but glowered behind his desk the moment they were alone.

"I trust you know why I am so angry?"

"You're angry, sir? Sorry, it's hard for me to tell."

Harry couldn't see Snape's eye twitching, but he could imagine it very clearly. The man startled him, however, when he suddenly slammed his hand on to his desk, bringing forth a copy of the *Hogwart's Herald*. Harry groaned. God, as if having every student in Hogwarts read that tripe wasn't enough, now Snape was getting into it.

"I demand an explanation."

Harry just stared at him. Snape stared back, and after a moment realized Harry really didn't have any idea about what he was talking about.

"About the article."

Still, completely blank.

"Involving you."

Nothing.

"Oh, come on Potter, I know you're a conceited little snot but I didn't think you were so conceited as to have it set down in paper."

Not so blank now, and quite thoroughly angry, just like Snape wanted.

"This," Harry hissed in what may or may not have been parseltongue, "was not my idea. I went to Professor Toure to put a stop to it, but she refused. I avoided being interviewed, despite being hounded everywhere I go, and asked everyone I knew to keep to themselves

too. What ever is in there is just speculations taken from common knowledge and old newspaper articles. As if I want everyone snooping into my business.”

“Don't lie, Potter. I've already heard about the 'exclusive' interview you promised Ms. Parker. You're playing a risky game, and you're a fool if you think you can win it.”

“I didn't promise that! Who said I did?”

“A source from inside the paper,” he said vaguely.

“Does this source have a name that bears a remarkable resemblance to 'weasel'?”

“Don't take that tone with me, young man. I-”

“Hellooooo?”

Teacher and pupil stopped, mid-argument, to turn their attention to the unexpected interruption. There was a light tapping on the classroom door, and then it opened to reveal Professor Larousse. She had relinquished her teaching robes for a set of light green ones, and in her hand she held a picnic basket. Both wizards tensed at the sight of her beaming face.

“Oh! I'm sorry. Am I interrupting something?”

They shared a brief look, deciding how much was worth giving away and how much to keep to themselves. Snape took the lead.

“No, I was just discussing an assignment with Mr. Potter here.”

Harry just nodded. Larousse looked approving.

“Hogwart's staff has always impressed me with its willingness to help their students,” she said, completely missing the glare Snape sent at Harry, who looked as if someone had punched him in the gut. “Well, since you've been working so hard, I was wondering if you'd like to

accompany me outside for lunch? The weather won't be this nice for long, after all."

"As much as I would like to madam, I am in charge of supervising my House during lunch," Snape said in mock regret.

"Oh, I know. I had Professor Vector take over for today. He owed me a favor."

"Oh..."

A moment of silence, while the dour potion's master mentally scrambled for an excuse to back out. Harry decided to leave the man to his fate, and turned to leave with a cheerful spring in his step.

"Enjoy your picnic, Professor Larousse, Professor Snape. I'll see you-"

"Why don't you join us, Harry dear?"

The boy stopped abruptly.

"What?"

"Since Professor Snape is your guardian, why don't we all have lunch together? We could discuss some of what we talked about last week. Have you thought about it at all?"

"Er..."

"That is a good idea," Snape said quickly, coming up to stand behind Harry, placing a firm hand on his shoulder. "I should like to know what you have been up to this week."

"But-"

The dark man leaned in and said more quietly than the other professor could hear.

"You can serve your detention now or tonight. You choose."

“... Sounds like fun.”

“Wonderful!” she said, and led them out onto the grounds. She found a nice little spot by the lake very near to where Harry liked to go with his friends. Summer was already starting to give way to autumn, and despite the heat of the day there was a cool breeze flowing down from the north, smelling of potential rain for later that evening. Harry and Larousse settled on the cheery little checkered blanket easily, and after an awkward moment of uncertainty, Snape sat down as well, albeit stiffly. Larousse wasted no time to start up a conversation.

“You know, I used to have picnics under this very same tree with my husband. He gave me my first kiss here, too. We couldn't have been much older than Harry when we started dating. It makes me quite nostalgic.”

“Fascinating,” Snape said blandly, accepting a roll from her, followed by some blueberry jam.

“Of course, you might remember it, Severus. You cursed this tree to throw its apples at every boy that got underneath it. It gave Jonathan a rather nasty black eye. Oh, I was so mad at you,” she said, laughing at the memory.

“I assure you, I wasn't aiming for your boyfriend. It just so happened this tree was very popular with several individuals with whom I was feuding at the time,” he replied evenly, although there was a touch of amusement. “As I recall, you unleashed a plague of maggots in my cauldron and ruined a perfectly good batch of Coughing Drought. Very nearly cost me my top spot in Potions that year.”

“You went to school together, Professors?” Harry asked curiously. It hadn't occurred to Harry that they might have known each other before, or even that Larousse had gone to Hogwarts. He couldn't recall anyone having mentioned it.

“I was in Ravenclaw and a year behind Severus, and my boyfriend, Jonathan, was a Hufflepuff and a year ahead of him. We were all in Dueling Club together, before the school dissolved the club anyway.

Some nonsense about encouraging House rivalry and violence. It was all pretty hypocritical since they kept quidditch, which caused ten times the number of injuries Dueling club did.”

“You threw quite the hissy fit over that as well,” Severus recalled, something very close to a smile tugging at his lips. “I was surprised you didn't go into politics. You seemed to enjoy arguing so much.”

“I very nearly did join the ministry, but those were bad times and I was very pregnant with Tony. Jonathan didn't want me caught in the middle of all of it in my condition, for all the good it did any of us in the end.”

There was a tense silence, and Harry felt the conversation had stumbled into a very sensitive subject, and anything he said might make it worse. So he waited, and at last Snape spoke again.

“I'm sorry about Jonathan. He was alright, as far as Hufflepuffs go. Very down to earth. And Tony, of course... so young.”

“Oh, shut up, Severus,” she said, not harshly, but firmly. “You never gave either a second thought after you first heard about them. So many people were dying left and right, what did a couple you barely knew matter? I can't say I thought about you or anyone else after glimpsing them in the paper. Our names never even got that far. The Ministry made sure of that.”

“ ... ”

“Poor Harry, you have no idea what we're talking about, do you?”

“I think I have an idea.”

“Half an idea is worse than no idea at all. My husband and I were making money as Harvesters- we caught and disassembled animals for potion ingredients- and someone told the Ministry we were performing dark rituals with animal sacrifices. About ten aurors barged into our house in the middle of the night without announcing themselves, and we both assumed we were being attacked by Death Eaters and tried to defend ourselves. Jonathan and my little Tony, not

even a year old, were killed. I spent almost a year in St. Mungos trying to recover. Even when everything was cleared up, the Ministry never apologized. Never acknowledged their mistake. I suppose that's why no one was really that sorry to see it go. It was rotten to the core by then... no, it was rotten long before."

Harry could say nothing. It was such a personal and tragic story, and bore uncomfortable similarities with his own. A sole survivor of a murdered family and even after the truth is revealed, justice fails, and they're left alone to make the most of things. Even Snape's vile insensitivity was held at bay by the aura of loss that hung around his companions. Larousse took a deep breath and shook herself from her melancholy.

"Why are we even talking about this? I came out to enjoy the weather, not reminisce on old wounds. Let's change the subject. So Harry, decided what you want to do with your life?"

"... not die?"

Snape rolled his eyes and Larousse laughed, the bitterness in her eyes retreating instantly.

"That isn't as funny as you think," Snape said. "I'm quite skeptical of Mr. Potter's survival into adulthood. Frankly, I doubt he'll survive puberty."

"... that pretty much sums it up," Harry agreed, taking a bite of his peach. "I think there are bets going around about how I'll die. I think I'll get eaten, but Hermione's quite convinced it will be the result of a quidditch accident."

"I put 20 galleons on poisoning."

"No one will accept a bet you could help bring about."

"Ah well..."

"Severus! That isn't funny!"

"Of course not," he agreed as blandly as he had every thing else.
"How else am I to reach early retirement, now?"

"I'll bequeath my glasses to you," Harry offered, "You could auction them out to the fan girls."

"How generous of you. Who gets your cloak? The one that changes colors?"

"Natalie. Hermione has a thing against furs."

"Severus, Harry, enough. That really isn't funny," Larousse said, any humor she'd had before completely evaporated. Harry looked away, staring at his fingers, shiny and sticky from the peach. No, it wasn't really funny in a 'ha ha' sense, but it was rich in irony. He wasn't kidding about the glasses or the fur coat. In fact, he had his very own little will written out and magically protected at the bottom of his trunk. Only Clyde knew about it, and he was the only one Harry intended to tell, but it was legally binding and should automatically submit itself to Robert Reiger, the lawyer whom he had met at his first adoption party and whose card was still settled snugly between the pages of a school book.

Larousse sighed as the silence stretched after her admonishment.

"Honestly, you two really are such boys."

"I believe I still have a birth certificate around here somewhere, if you doubt it," Snape said.

"I could get a note from the nurse."

"Now you're ganging up on me. Play fair, won't you? I'm only one woman after all."

"Maggots," Snape reminded her.

"Maggots aside, no ganging up on a lady. Besides, we've gotten off topic. We were suppose to help Harry figure out what he wants to do."

Snape gestured toward Harry to answer, already surmising what the boy would say.

"I really don't know. Am I suppose to? I mean, I haven't even gotten into the upper level courses yet. I don't know what I'm really good at. I don't even know half of what kind of careers are out there. I know most of the court positions and about teaching jobs and some research jobs and construction, but there has to be a lot more out there. Like... who collects all the ingredients for potion's class? Who runs the floo network? Who makes up all these spells and potions we learn about in class? If there are lawyers and doctors and veterinarians in the wizarding world, are there dentists and real estate agents and normal jobs like that too? What about art school? Or trade school? Should I-"

Snape held up a hand to stop him.

"The 'I really don't know' was sufficient."

"It seems you really have thought about it, Harry, and you've got a lot of questions too. I think you might try some aptitude tests to narrow down your search."

"They have those here?"

Snape shuddered. "Yes, but don't give them too much weight. I took one once."

Amused, Larousse asked what it suggested.

"Teaching."

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"Harry, are you alright?"

In the lamp light of the common room, Ginny Weasley was half shadows and half concerned friend. The subject of her concern was

curled up in the windowsill, looking out into the rain that had blown in shortly after nightfall. There had been rumors going around all afternoon that Snape and Larousse had both been absent from lunch and were secretly on a date, but Ginny knew from Hermione that Harry was with Snape, so that was impossible. Something must have happened with the potion's master, because the boy had been acting strange. Harry had returned from his meeting with Snape, very quiet and withdrawn, and despite his friends attempt to cheer him up, he had remained listless.

"Oh, hey Ginny. Why aren't you in bed?" he said, startled from his introspection.

"I could ask the same of you. What's the matter?"

"Nothing, really. Just thinking about things."

She moved to the adjoining windowsill and pressed her hand against the glass, feeling it cool and vibrating from every drop of rain that struck it.

"Sad things?"

"... Yes, I suppose so. I've been thinking about parents."

Ginny had suspected as much. She did not know all the details, but certainly more than the Hogwarts' Herald could claim. She knew Harry was an orphan at the very least, though not what had taken his parents from him.

"About how they died?"

"No... not that. Not just my parents. I was just thinking about all the kids who don't have their parents, and parents who don't have their kids. Like me and Hermione and all those boys and girls in WYRA, and how all their parents are either dead or don't remember their kids ever existing. Or all those people who lost their families during the war. Did you know Professor Larousse had a husband and son? I don't think even Hermione knew that. They were both killed by the old Ministry by accident. How awful is that?"

Ginny didn't say anything for a long time, taking in what Harry had said and how he had said it, his vibrant green eyes haunting in the white-gray reflections of the glass.

"It's very awful. I know how you feel Harry. I know my situation isn't the same because my mum's alive, but in some ways I think it makes things worse. After dad..."

She had to stop for a moment. It had been years since she had thought about it, locking the pain of it away for the sake of both her and her mother. But she would unlock it for Harry, and it was as shiny and sharp as it had ever been, kept safely in that little cabinet in her heart.

"After dad was arrested, everything fell apart. It wasn't just that he was gone, and that really hurt by itself, but there was no one to help mum. We all tried, we really did, but what could we do? Mum wouldn't let Bill get a job because he was in Hogwarts then, and that was really the only safe place to be at the time, and none of the rest of us were old enough to work or really take care of ourselves. I wasn't even old enough for kindergarten yet. But we tried to make things at least easier for her, but it wasn't enough. Everything so expensive after the war and jobs were hard to come by, so when she could find work she had to work really, really hard and still couldn't pay all our bills and keep food on the table. No matter how hard we tried to keep out of trouble and keep clean and help with chores and not eat much and look after each other, mum was always working and tired and cried at night when she thought we were asleep. I remember thinking once it would be better for mum if we all got taken away... and then we did."

Tears were falling, fast and hard, a dam released, and Harry's arms were suddenly around her, pressing her against his chest. His heartbeat pounded loudly in her ears, drowning out her own sobbing and he was trembling as hard as she was.

"Oh Merlin, I can't forget it," she wept, "I can't forget how those men and women came to our house to take my brothers away. Mum was screaming and screaming, and we all tried to run away from them,

but they cast stunning charms on us and mum just kept screaming. And when I woke up, she was crying and my brothers were all gone, and she couldn't stop crying and I couldn't stop either, and I still can't stop."

They were on the floor now, Harry rocking her against him as she sobbed into his chest. It was so strange and painful and wonderful. She hadn't told anyone about that day, about the days that had led to it. Her mother and brothers knew already, and she had figured that was enough, but this was so much better. Harry was warm and kind and so strong, and she knew he understood. And after a while the tears stopped, and she felt calm and strangely clean, her head still resting against his chest.

"You know, it's strange," she said, "But eventually, it did get better. It's still hard, it still hurts, but it's better. Mum misses my brothers a lot, but we still get to see each other, especially Charlie and Bill. They come over all the time and help around the house, and Percy has started coming over more often now that he learned to apparate. I don't know what's wrong with Ron though. He can be so sweet, he really can, especially to me and mum, but he's so angry too. Do you know why he's so angry?"

Harry said nothing for a moment, just continuing to rock her gently.

"... I can make a few guesses, but I don't know him that well."

"Do you ever get angry about it? I mean, that your parents died and left you behind?"

Another silence, and he stopped rocking her for a moment. She pulled back a little to look up into his eyes. Still so incredibly green even in the shadows and half light of the lamps, and burning even in their grief.

"Yes... sometimes. I know they didn't want to and they would be here if they could, but... there's a lot of things they never told me. Really important things, and now I'll never be able to ask. I think that's what really gets me some times. I should have grown up knowing I'm a wizard. I could have been so much more prepared for things that

have happened to me, but they... they wanted to live as muggles, even though they weren't, even though they must have known I wouldn't be one either. I feel cheated. That makes me angry sometimes."

Ginny nodded, wiping away the remnants of her tears. She sensed their time was coming to an end. She was all cried out and Harry was withdrawing into himself again. She wanted so badly to kiss him then, to draw him back into their brief moment of closeness, before it dissolved into the thing of dreams.

But she couldn't. Despite her House's boast of bravery, she couldn't bring herself to risk his rejection. It seemed impossible that he would accept her like that. There were already two beautiful, proud, and confident girls in his life. What would he see in a dumpy, broken little thing like herself other than a friend?

"You should get some sleep. Tonight's a school night," Harry said, helping Ginny to her feet.

"Yeah, you too," she finished lamely, finding herself now unable to look him in the eyes again. "Goodnight, Harry."

"Goodnight, Ginny."

She was half way up the stairs when he spoke again, just barely audible over the pattering of the rain.

"And Ginny... thanks."

"For what? You're the one who listened to me whine, not the other way around," she said meekly.

"For telling me... for telling me it gets better. That's what I really needed to know. That it will all just keep getting better. And that I'm not the only one who gets mad at dead people, even though it's a silly thing to do."

They chuckled softly, and she could look him in the eyes again.

"Your quite welcome, Mr. Potter."

"Until tomorrow then, Ms. Weasley," he said with an exaggerated bow, then retreated to his dorm. Ginny stood on the stairwell a long time, feeling all a flutter. She hadn't thought she could love Harry anymore than she did, but what she felt at that moment made any previous affection seem pale and frivolous.

"Until tomorrow..." she sighed happily.

Book III:

Chapter 6: The Siege

September was an awkward month for Harry. The transition from summer vacation to school, from one school year to the next was always a bit jarring, especially for someone as active as him. The classes all seemed to have increased their work load, complicated their subject matter, and given less time to study for it all. Professor Larousse's warning of next year's scholastic decisions were repeated in several other classes, and hung over the students' heads like a guillotine's blade, waiting to drop on anyone found guilty of slacking.

Extra curricular activities took a turn as well. With Oliver Wood's entry into seventh year, he was desperate for another Gryffindor victory, convinced his choice of university depended on it. The team practiced at least five times a week, usually more, with much of the team sacrificing their Hogsmeade weekends to do so, and their captain drove them like beasts. Dueling Club was facing a similar situation. Snape had submitted the Dueling Club's application papers to the League of Young Duelists, the official dueling league for students, and they were expecting a representative to visit in November and determined if they were skilled enough to qualify for competitions. Junior Captain Ronald Weasley, an utter prat to begin with, was now a prat with a mission, and bullied and harassed his 'subordinates' mercilessly towards some impossible ideal of perfection. It didn't help that there were twenty new members who were way out of their depth. Harry had unofficially taken them under his wing, and Ron was more than happy to let him while he focused on the more experienced members.

Harry was surprised at how much he enjoyed teaching his classmates, but the extra work load did little to ease his growing stress level.

And then of course there was the newspaper. Avoiding it took too much energy, and soon Harry had to resort to simply ignoring the students reporters. That was easy enough. Ignoring the rest of the students whispering and pointing and wondering every time he passed them was a bit harder. There was a particular group of

students, most of them second or first year girls, who had formed a sort of informal club and seemed to spend most of their time following or gossiping about Harry. They were called the Harriettes as a joke. Harry wasn't laughing.

Making things worse and occasionally better, was Professor Larousse. It was quickly discovered that the DA&D professor had a soft spot for Harry, which might have earned him a lot of enemies among the male students, if it weren't so obvious that her romantic interest lay with Professor Snape. Whenever he was feeling particularly strained or tired, she had a tendency to pull him away from what ever he was doing to have a 'chat'. It was awkward and rather annoying, yet strangely comforting. Despite being surrounded by teachers and friends, she was the only one who seemed interested that he not work too hard, and let him know that it was alright if he didn't take everything so seriously.

Nevertheless, Harry was immensely happy when November finally rolled around, and things began to settle into a workable routine. Even better, the Quidditch season had started, and wonder of wonders, Gryffindor's first match was against Slytherin.

"How you feeling, Harry?" Oliver Wood asked, looking him over from head to toe, making sure nothing was missing apparently.

"The same as I was the last time you asked. And the time before that. And before that. Not much has changed in the last five minutes, Wood."

"Oh, er... yeah."

"I hope that wasn't your motivational speech for the match," said George, coming around a row of lockers with his brother. Fred wore a matching grin and laughed.

"Oh, shut up, you two!"

"I've got motivation for everyone!" Fred said, then turned to the rest of the team. "If we win this match, less practice!"

"Hey, I didn't agree-"

Too late. The team all let out a cheer, Harry among them, and hurried to finish putting on their gear and headed out to the pitch. Clyde met them before they reached their destination, looking aggravated.

"They've tricked us!" the Gryffindor said by way of greeting, catching everyone's attention. "They switched out their Seeker, and get this, it's Malfoy."

That actually made Harry smile.

"Really?"

"How can you be happy about this, mate? He's your friend and he lied to you! This could screw up your entire game plan!"

Harry just kept smiling and shook his head.

"It was a bad move on their part. Malfoy doesn't have any experience playing in a real match, so even if he's better than their last seeker, it wasn't very bright to have him play his first match against us. Everyone knows Gryffindor-Slytherin matches are the trickiest."

George was quick to point out they did the same thing with Harry.

"Yeah, and we barely came out of that match alive."

Oliver rubbed his eyes and thought for a moment, then sighed.

"Nothing to be done about it now. Just do your best... or I'll double your practices."

They continued on towards the pitch, but Clyde grabbed Harry's arm, still clearly bothered by the turn of events.

"You're not mad at him?"

"Who? Malfoy? Why would I be? I didn't tell him when I got on the Quidditch team, so I can hardly hold it against him. Besides, I've wanted to see if he's as good as he says he is for a while."

"But what if he wins?!"

Harry looked at him oddly.

"Gryffindor loses, I guess. We've lost before, you know."

Clyde still didn't look happy, but Harry had more important things to worry about. Chances were if he won the match, his friend would be happy again anyway. He took to the field with his team, waving at the crowds cheering at them from the stands. With brief glance at the Emperor's Box, Harry was surprised to find that Voldemort had actually shown up. The Dark Lord nodded to him in acknowledgment, before turning back to talk with Lestrangle.

"Eyes forward, Potter. I want to see your face before its run into the mud."

Harry smirked as he looked over at Draco, standing amidst his teammates, broom in hand. The Slytherin offered a smug smile of his own. It was rare that they had direct competition, but as Harry's popularity had grown, Draco had been increasingly eager to test himself against his Gryffindor friend and Harry felt the same. This match promised to be quite exciting.

"Players, mount your brooms!" called Professor Grimm, drawing their attention back to the game. "Release the snitch!"

Draco was fast. Harry was faster. But the Slytherins were prepared for Harry's speed. Harry had just inched past the other Seeker in pursuit of the Snitch when a bludger caught him in the side. The force of it knocked him clean off his broom and sent him careening into the ground. Luckily, he had only been hovering a few feet. Draco had been so close behind him that he had been forced to break away. Both lost sight of the Snitch. Breathless and disoriented, Harry hurried back onto his broom and took to the air.

"Didn't I say you'd be face first in the mud, Potter?" Draco laughed, hovering nearby as they searched the arena for the snitch.

"Marvelous, Malfoy. You're assured a job as a fortune tell after this. A good thing since professional Quidditch player is out of the question."

"I'll show-"

"Found it!"

Harry was off and again Draco followed closely, but now Harry was more conscientious of the other players and easily avoided the bludgers and the Slytherins. In fact, Draco was having more trouble evading his own teammates than he was Gryffindor's, and barely avoided two bludgers meant for Harry. He was tenacious though, clinging closely to Harry and blocking much of his maneuverability whenever the snitch made an unexpected turn.

"Both seekers are clinging tight to one another, making it difficult for the beaters to get a clear shot with their bludgers. Gryffindor Seeker Potter is renown for his agility on a broom, but it seems he may have met- and Slytherin scores! Forty points to Slytherin!"

They dived and spun and twisted and pitched and just plain flew with all their might, the crowds and stands and players mere blurs as they rushed past so the only thing in focus was that little glittering ball flying even faster than they were. It was intense and liberating, and even if he lost, Harry didn't think he could have been any happier on a broom. His limits tested and exceeded and the danger of crashing sent his heart pounding and sharpened his senses, bringing his awareness of his body and his magic and Draco's magic and the hundreds upon hundreds of bodies of magic surrounding him into stark clarity.

His joy lasted only for a brief minute, when the snitch suddenly flew low over the stands. Draco bulked, pulling back to keep from careening into the spectators, but Harry had more confidence. He kept going, and sent several of the people below him ducking for cover.

Unfortunately, those several people who ducked didn't include one Colin Creevey with his ever present camera.

The flash of the bulb caught him squarely in the eyes, stunning and blinding him simultaneously. He pulled up sharply, only half in control of his broom. He was caught by one of the twins before he ran himself clean into the wall.

"You alright, Harry?"

"Argh! No! I can't see!"

"Give it a sec, it should clear."

"Where's Malfoy?"

"Oh..ah... just about ready to win the game..."

Harry squinted and managed to make out Draco's blurry form rushing towards the Emperor's box. The Slytherin Seeker took a sharp downward turn and reached out. Harry grimaced and turned away, not wishing to see his team's inevitable defeat.

Said defeat was interceded by a rather unexpected turn of events, most important being that the stands exploded. There was no fire or heat, but the sound of shattering wood blasted through the pitch. Draco had been the closest player, and was hurled from his broom and even higher into the air. Harry quickly focusing eyes locked onto the boy's falling body, unable to move or look away. Even before impact, the shock had gone straight to terror, and the screaming began.

From somewhere in the crowds Harry thought he heard Hermione's, but it was for her brother.

"Levi corpus!"

Draco's fall stopped abruptly, not by the ground, but by the spell that caught him a mere hand's length from certain death. Harry's line of sight brought him to a red head, but he didn't linger on which

Weasley Draco now owed his life to. His attention now turned to the shattered stands, the supports destroyed, the whole structure was starting to tilt forward onto the pitch. The men and women trapped there were thrown from their seats as it started to lean, scrambling to gain purchase and their wands. As abruptly as Draco's fall had stopped, so too did the collapse, and Harry felt the familiar electric tingle of Voldemort's most powerful magic pervade the air.

"Come on! We have to help get them down from there!"

Harry pulled himself out of the twin's arm and flew straight for the stands. Behind him, he heard some of the flyers rally the rest of their teammates to follow. Harry reached the stands first, taking hold of woman who had slid almost completely off the platform and was clinging desperately to Professor Vector's outstretched hand.

"I've got her! Let go!"

Harry and his passenger struggled for a moment as she tried to climb on in a dress not meant for movement, but at last they could pull away and move to safety. As he retreated, he could managed to glimpse Voldemort, standing perfectly balanced, both hands and one wand held out before him, eyes closed and chanting something that definitely wasn't Latin.

He dropped his passenger beside Draco, who had been levitated to the other side of the pitch. Ron was beside the blond, checking to make sure his former friend was merely unconscious and not as dead as he looked. They caught each other's gaze briefly, but Harry didn't have time to speak, and flew back to the stands for another passenger. The rest of the teams had cleared out most of them, leaving the least panicked for last. McGonagall mounted his broom with perfect poise, as if it were a mere bicycle ride and not a a rescue, and once on the ground she hurried off to help return order. Snape followed shortly after, not bothering to be rescued, he transfigured his robes into a set of black wings and glided down, Professor Larousse riding calmly in his arms. No sooner had everyone reached safety, then the stands collapsed into a cloud of dust.

Harry gasped. Voldemort had still been in there! He made to run for the wreckage, but Snape caught him before he got far.

"Wait, Mr. Potter," he said, holding firm. Harry hesitated, his eyes still locked at the other side of the pitch, unable to see anything. It was likely only a few seconds that had passed, but to Harry it may as well have been an hour. Yet the dust did clear, and slowly the form of a man began to appear, becoming clearer and clearer until at last the Dark Lord strode from the cloud of dust, perfectly at ease and perhaps a little annoyed at being coated with a layer of dirt.

"My Lord!" Lestrage called, striding quickly towards her master. Snape released Harry and followed suit, Larousse right behind him. Harry stayed where he was, unsure if his presence would be needed or welcomed at the moment, but close enough to hear most of what was said.

"Bella, I want you and Larousse to go ahead to the school and check for any curses or traps that may have been laid. I doubt anyone could get passed the castle's defenses, but I don't want to take any chances. Severus, I want you and the rest of the Hogwarts' staff to gather up the students, and take them back to the castle as soon as the all clear has been given. I will go to Hogsmeade and meet with my Sentinels. No doubt they are already on their way. We should have the culprit within the hour. Go."

"My godson..." Snape said quickly, as the rest hurried off to their assigned tasks.

"I will send a healer on ahead to the castle. There will likely be several amongst the Sentinels."

"Thank you, my Lord."

Snape moved away quickly, snatching up Harry as he went.

"Professor, what just happened?"

The man didn't even glance at him, shoving him towards McGonagall and the students that had begun crowding around her. Harry lingered

though, watching the man head towards Draco and Ron and a now very distraught Hermione, holding her brother's hand. He turned away, finding wreckage and a rather lovely view of the lake peaking in where the Emperor's box had once stood.

“What just happened?”

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“Mad-Eye Moody,” Ron Weasley said knowingly, surrounded by a crowd of students. Harry was amongst them, but kept towards the back of the Great Hall to listen. “I overheard some of the Sentinels talking while I was up in the hospital. They said 'This was definitely Mad-Eye's doing.'”

“But why?” someone asked.

“Why do you think, stupid? To kill Voldemort, of course. The papers all say he promised he would. They think he might have already gotten a Death Eater in Nottingham.”

Harry turned away and headed towards the tables to join the rest of the Quidditch players huddled into one corner. For once, their team rivalry had been put aside as they tried to make sense of what they had seen.

“Ron have anything to say worth repeating?” Flint asked as Harry entered their circle.

“There's a suspect. Mad-Eye Moody, the escaped convict, right? But I'd wait till Hermione and Draco get back before spreading that rumor. Ron's been known to latch onto an idea, even if it's a bad one.”

There was no need to explain what Harry was referring too.

“Know when they'll be back?” Angelina asked.

“I've been concussed before,” Fred said, “They kept me for a night and let me go.”

"Assuming a bump to the head is all that's wrong with him," a Slytherin chaser muttered.

"Weasley might know," Oliver suggested.

"He's sort of busy right now..."

They all shared an exasperated look at the redhead, shoveling out as much bullshit as the other students could swallow. Harry shook his head.

"Was anyone else hurt?"

"Some bangs and bruises when everyone tried to evacuate, but nothing as bad as Malfoy that we know about," Flint said. "We'll just have to wait till the teachers tell us what happened."

"Maybe we'll luck out and they'll tell the truth," Harry muttered, earning him a few curious looks. Deciding he'd said more than he should, the young Gryffindor wandered away, but there wasn't anywhere to go really.

"Potter."

Snape stood at the side entryway. After everyone had been herded into the Great Hall, the potion's master had left, presumably to help secure the castle with the rest of the Heads of House and several Sentinels. Harry glanced around to see who was watching. The Quidditch players had noticed, but Ron's audience hadn't. He moved quickly before they did.

"What is it, Professor?"

"Come with me for a moment."

Snape stalked off before Harry could question, and the Gryffindor had to jog after him to keep up. He didn't know why he had been called out, but he never would have thought the ruined Quidditch pitch to be his destination. Sentinels were scouring the remaining stands and

debris, crawling over it all like ants on the prowl. On the green stood Voldemort, Lestrage, and Chief Sentinel Morgan who watched Harry's approach expectantly.

"Um... how can I help you?" he tried.

"Do you have your wand, Potter?" asked Voldemort.

Harry nodded.

"I want you to cast a Lumos charm, making it as dim as possible and gradually making it brighter and brighter. You may begin at any time."

Confused, he did as instructed. He did not have a lot of practice with controlling the flow of his magic through his wand, but if he concentrated on the result he wanted his magic tended to regulate itself. Sure enough he managed the dulllest of sparks which slowly grew brighter, until it was about as bright as a votive candle and a ringing sound distracted him. He turned to Sentinel Morgan, who was holding a metal ball with all sorts of dials around it, spinning their hands this way and that. The man nodded, and looked to the Dark Lord.

"It didn't take much. Young Malfoy must have picked up some residual magic from Potter and that's what set off the explosion."

Harry's eyes widened in alarm.

"What? My magic set off the explosion? How?"

"The specifics are rather beyond your education level to understand," Snape said easily, "Besides, the better question would be 'why'?"

"To blow me up, I assume," Harry said tightly, then shook his head. "That doesn't make sense either. Why set it up in the stands? Wouldn't it have been easier and more certain if the bomb... spell? were in the locker room?"

Voldemort patted him on the head, and smiled vaguely proud, vaguely indulgent.

"You obviously weren't the only target. I, too, was probably an intended victim. A witness said they heard one of my private Sentinels send away someone trying to get into the stands. If that person was the culprit, they may have succeeded in killing everyone during the explosion. Well... everyone but myself. I am not so vulnerable as mortal men."

It would have sounded extremely conceited if Harry hadn't seen the truth of it himself. Voldemort was no mortal man.

"What about the sentinel?"

"He was very near the explosion."

Harry decided the details weren't really necessary.

"So someone is trying to kill me again, along with the Dark Lord... what now?"

"I haven't thought that far ahead. I only wished to confirm whether or not you were the trigger for the explosion. We knew it was someone, and Malfoy has already been tested. You were the next most likely person." Voldemort said, then turned to Morgan who was clearly thinking. "What do you intend?"

"The castle is secure still, and I intend to keep it that way. Potter shouldn't leave the premises without an escort, and only when it's absolutely necessary. Hogsmeade weekends and outdoor activities are on hold. I would recommend keeping your distance from the school as well, my Lord. The boy is only a secondary target, but he'll be more vulnerable to any attack meant for you."

"How serious of a threat do you think he poses?"

Morgan looked over to the pile of obliterated wood meaningfully.

"Fairly significant."

Chief Sentinal John Morgan had a love/hate relationship with anarchy. On one hand, he hated it. Plain and simple. On the other hand, he loved destroying it. Had made a living, a reputation, and even a few slots in history conquering it. So he liked to keep a fairly positive view when faced with the newest threat to wizarding society.

There had of course, been worse acts of terrorism in the course of his career. Relatively speaking, this rated a meager 7 on the one to ten scale, but it easily had the potential to turn into a 1. Voldemort had been present, along with a generation's worth of Britain's most powerful children. Things could have gone very, very badly.

He looked up from some documents to see one of his least experienced officers standing nervously before him, behind her was a familiar face.

“Do you believe everything someone tells you? I don't suppose you asked for identification?” Morgan asked, and the girl paled. He waved her off. “Check next time before you escort a potential assassin across the premises. I'll talk with her.”

The young Sentinel rushed away, and Larousse took a seat. It looked rather cozy with the lace table cloth and little vase of carnation sitting between them. The Court had temporarily requisitioned Madam Puddifoot's as base of operation until something more appropriate could be constructed. The rest of the village was empty, its inhabitants currently rounded up for questioning as their homes and shops were rummaged for additional suspects and clues.

"You look well, Vesper. Civilian life seems to agree with you."

"At least something agrees with me," she said, coyly, "But I'm not here to talk about the past. I want to offer my help."

Morgan felt uncharacteristically amused by that. He almost smiled, in fact. Almost.

"What sort of help are you offering?"

"I want to help guard Harry," she said. She was all smiles when she said it, but the glint in her eyes was hard. Morgan's amusement evaporated.

"What makes you think Harry needs to be guarded?"

"I know you called him out to the Quidditch pitch earlier, and I know you passed on instructions to Minerva that Harry should not be allowed out of the castle afterwards. That means he is either a suspect or a potential target. I'm going to go with the later. Am I wrong?"

"No, you are not wrong, but you're not honest either. How much snooping have you done to make you feel you needed my cooperation for this task?"

"Just enough, obviously."

He snorted.

"You don't need my permission to watch over the boy. He's your student after all."

"But I do need information on whom I'm supposed to protect him from. Who ever set that explosion was very good."

Morgan leaned back in his chair and thought about it. Larousse was good. Really good. If she hadn't been so vocal about her disagreements with certain Court policies, she likely would have become his second in command by now and he would have been

happy to have her. It wouldn't hurt to have another person looking after Potter, someone less obvious and more flexible than the Slytherin's Head of House. She understood discretion as well. Chances were, no one was even aware she was missing from the castle yet.

"Alright, I'll bite. Just tell me why? Are you trying to get back into the Court?"

She shook her head.

"I'm not interested in that sort of life any more. Like you said, civilian life agrees with me. I've been thinking about starting a family again."

That certainly surprised Morgan. Larousse was a beautiful, capable woman, and for as long as he had known her there had been men lining up at her door to be with her, and she had always kept the door firmly shut. He was not a family man himself, but he had seen enough tragedy in his life to know how the loss of one could damage a person. Larousse's damage had seemed unrepairable.

But that wasn't really the important thing at the moment.

"You didn't really answer my question. Why do you want to protect Potter?"

"Have you read his file?"

"Yes."

"Sad, isn't it?"

He hadn't thought about it at the time, but he supposed it was.

"I keep thinking Tony would be about his age now. I keep thinking about Tony living through what Harry had to. It really is too sad. I can't stand it. I want him to be safe and happy the way my baby should have been. Nothing more than that."

He didn't believe her, but he knew better to expect any more from her. Her discretion was just one of the things he admired about her, even when it was inconvenient. He turns to one of his men studying a map of the surrounding area.

“Crichton, get over here. I want you to take Professor Larousse and have her fill out a Civ-2-60 with level 2 clearance. Debrief her on our progress and then let her go. I want her back in Hogwarts within the hour.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Thank you, John.”

“Just don't make me regret this.”

She nodded once and left him to his work.

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Book III:

Chapter 7: Poison

Sunday morning found most of the Hogwarts' students huddled over copies of Wizard Weekly's front page, looking for answers and the names of people they knew. Harry had tried and failed to resist the temptation, and retreated into one of the deserted hallways with Ginny and Clyde to read aloud.

"... Thanks to the quick action of Hogwart's students, only a Sentinal guarding the stairwell of the platform was killed by the explosion. Despite the misfortune of such an attack occurring at a school event, Great Britain should feel proud of its young people. They showed great bravery and poise blah, blah, blah Britain's number one and everyone else sucks."

"Harry!" Clyde laughed.

"I think we can all do without the ego stroking right now. I just wanted to make sure Draco was okay and see if they have any leads."

"They said it was Moody just like Ron did."

Harry shrugged.

"I'd rather ask Hermione and Draco myself. They're better at telling when the paper is just throwing out ideas and when they've got something to back it up."

"You're just grouchy because they canceled quidditch," Ginny said knowingly. "We should see if McGonagall knows when they'll be back."

They did as she suggested, but it turned out to be unnecessary. Hermione was just stepping out of the Head of Gryffindor's office when they arrived. She gave each of them a warm hug, even Clyde who looked rather embarrassed.

"How is Draco?" Harry was the first to ask.

“A bit shaken, but perfectly alright. He was quite thoroughly irritated that he didn't catch the snitch before he was nearly killed. Boys! Honestly!”

Even Clyde found that pretty funny, and they laughed as they headed towards the library.

“Seriously though, it was a close call. If Ron hadn't...”

She sighed.

“I've been giving him grief all year and now he turns around and saves my brother's life. I've been a real snob to him, and I didn't realize how much of one until yesterday. I'm definitely going to have to apologize to him.”

Harry grimaced at the thought. True, he and Ron weren't fighting anymore and had fallen into a tense sort of neutrality, but both knew the other was just waiting for someone to falter, to push, and they would be back to warring as if they'd never stopped. A subject change was in order.

“Did you learn anything about the attack?”

“Moody is still a strong suspect, but with all the parents coming in through Hogsmeade, no one has been able to figure out who or how he disguised himself. It would have to be difficult to cover up a lost leg and eye.”

“I don't know,” Harry said, “Muggles are pretty good at that. I've seen men with these really neat metal legs that they can run and even jump in. If they're wearing pants you can't really tell they're injured at all. And glass eyes aren't uncommon. Surely magic can make better ones than those.”

“Maybe...” Hermione conceded, her thoughts drifting off to new theories as Harry presented her with a completely foreign idea. Wizards hiding amongst muggles? What a fascinating concept!

The library was fuller than usual, but not enough to discourage them from finding a table to themselves. They cast a silencing charm and checked for ease-droppers, and continued.

"I was the trigger," Harry said immediately. His friends were, unsurprisingly, startled. "The explosion was linked to my magical signature. It was suppose to go off when I got close enough to the stands, but Draco was flying so close to me he must have picked up enough of my residual magic to set it off himself. That explosion was meant to kill both me and Voldemort."

Everyone was quiet for a long moment.

"Why you?" Ginny asked, almost in a whisper. Harry shrugged. He really didn't know either.

"I think," Hermione began. "I don't think it was about killing Harry per se. I mean, for the explosion to be set off without killing the culprit, he'd have to... no, he could have used a timer. Setting it to a quidditch player's magical signature was much riskier. You all fly around so quickly and randomly he risked blowing himself up. But how do you know it was set to you, Harry? It could just as easily have been set to Draco or one of the other players."

"I got called out and they tested me. They were certain my magic was the trigger. But they didn't say why I was chosen. If he intended to use a quidditch player to begin with, it might just have been bad luck."

Clyde shook his head.

"No way your luck is that bad. I bet Moody believes all that stuff in the paper. You know, like you possibly being the Dark Lord's illegitimate son or grandson or something. He probably wanted to kill off the man's entire line."

"That's just silly. What good will killing a kid do? It's not like he's listed Harry as his heir or anything," Hermione said.

"Crazy person," Clyde pointed out. Hermione conceded that with a shrug.

"Do you think Harry's still in danger?" Ginny asked anxiously.

That was a rather good question, and no one seemed certain of the answer.

"Don't worry, Ginny. There are Sentinels crawling all over the place from Hogsmeade all the way to the Great Hall. Plus Voldemort would be his main target, and he's gone back to London. I'll be fine."

"That's right. And don't forget we've all got your back, Harry. Ain't no one who'll sneak up on you while we're around, right?"

Harry smiled.

"Thanks, Clyde. I appreciate that."

"Welcome, mate. That's what friends are for. Although that reminds me. Where are Cypher and Malfoy? Shouldn't they be hearing this too?"

Hermione sighed.

"Can't be helped. Draco was talking with Ron last I checked and Natalie decided to stick around to watch for potential bloodshed. I think she'll be disappointed. They both looked pretty mellow."

"Do you think they're making up?" Ginny asked hopefully.

"It'd be the gentlemanly thing to do. Ron did save Draco's life after all. Draco might even owe him a life debt."

A pang of guilt hit Harry. It should have been him who saved the boy. He was the Slytherin's friend and would have been happy to help him without calling on any compensation for it. Instead, he'd frozen like an utter fool and nearly allowed his best friend's brother to die. He might even have been responsible for it.

"Harry, stop thinking morbidly," Hermione said, rolling her eyes. "You look utterly silly when you mope."

"I was not moping."

"Fine, festering in internal torment then. Just stop. It's not like any of this is your fault. You didn't set up that explosion. You didn't hurt my brother. So stop feeling bad about it. Look on the bright side. Perhaps you can use this opportunity to try and get along better with Ron. He is the captain of the Junior Dueling Club, and you're probably his best duelist. It wouldn't hurt to be on better terms."

That sounded about as much fun as testing potions in Snape's class. He forced a smile anyway.

"Sure. I can try."

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Harry had plenty of time to practice his diplomacy skills on Ron in the following weeks. Without quidditch practice eating up so much of his free time, he found himself filling it studying and practicing for Dueling Club. Professor Larousse had offered her time to supervise practice duels on Mondays and Tuesdays, which is exactly how Harry enjoyed spending his afternoons. The young Gryffindor did not really consider himself much of a scholar, but he loved the practice of magic itself. The entire art of dueling held many elements that he enjoyed; competition, challenge, unpredictability.

However the duel turned out, long, short, victorious or defeated, Harry felt energized at its conclusion and eager to try again. During the spare time between matches, he drew sketches, working on his technique for action rather than the still lives he was used to. Some of the better ones had been framed and placed in the new display cases, filling the spaces where their trophies would go once they began competing with other schools.

The Weasley twins were happy to lend themselves to him for private tutorials, as well. Their spell repertoire was second to none amongst the student body, and their ingenuity was geared toward offensive and defensive reasoning to begin with. Hermione had accompanied

Harry on one of his tutorials, but she was too focused on the mechanics of their techniques to really understand the art of them and was mentally overwhelmed within minutes. Harry on the other hand had the problem in reverse. He fell into the art of it, their speed, their ingenuity, their mind games, but lacked the knowledge of their specific techniques. Unlike Hermione, however, this didn't intimidate Harry, but merely motivated him to finding the answers.

“Oh, Lord of Chaos, exploder of things and maker of mayhem” Fred gushed after one session that had Harry on his back, “You make us so happy. If I could feel my arms I'd hug you.”

Fourteen spells that could keep that from ever happening immediately popped into the younger boy's head. Not that he wasn't grateful. Thursday club meetings held little practice value for Harry, who was still overseeing the rookies, and the only ones who held a real challenge for him in the junior division, Draco and Ron, never attended Larousse's practices. Harry suspected Snape was tutoring both of them in private, but couldn't muster the energy to be resentful. He didn't fancy anymore time with Snape after last summer anyway.

He did, however, miss Draco. The Malfoy heir wasn't around as much, having found Ron's company somehow more agreeable this year than last and Harry finding the exact opposite. They sat together during classes, smirking and joking to each other whenever the teachers' backs were turned, and pranked the younger students in the halls and meal times. Whenever the Slytherin Weasley caught Harry watching them, his obnoxious little smirk would get just a little bit smugger.

It might have been a bit petty, but Harry was really starting to wish Ron's wand would blow up in his face. Yes, he had plenty of opportunity to practice diplomacy, but he didn't. Perhaps he couldn't. The only tried and true technique for keeping peace between them was avoidance.

Even when they were standing right next to each other.

"Allbright is still struggling on shields. How can we get an endorsement when our duelists can't make a simple blocking charm?" Ron growled, staring directly at the struggling first year.

"You're asking too much. He's only had a wand for two months, of course he's struggling. He knows the spell, just give him a bit longer to control his magical output."

"We don't have that time. The representative from the dueling league will be here in two weeks."

"They're not expecting miracles," Harry said, impatience quickly descending. He didn't know why Ron was scolding him for this. He wasn't the captain. He wasn't even the vice captain, despite Ron's insistence that he was going to pick someone before the end of the month. Harry didn't get his hopes up that it would be him, even though everyone said he was perfect for the position. Draco Malfoy was a fine duelist himself, and if he wasn't exactly the sort of leader the other club members were hoping for, he certainly worked with the captain a lot better than he did.

"This is Hogwarts, they damn well better be expecting miracles."

The red head stalked off, snapping something at Hermione about being more aggressive with her hexes. Harry glared at the boy's back, but catching Snape in the corner of his vision, he headed over to assist the rookies. Allbright saw him coming, and looked pointedly at his shoes, fully prepared to be reprimanded for his shields that kept failing.

Harry just patted him on the shoulder. Allbright was the only first year Hufflepuff in Dueling Club, and the Gryffindor thought him very brave for staying after what must have seemed like failure after failure.

"First years over here," Harry called, "The rest of you can keep practicing your shields or go over to practice your aim with the others."

They all moved quickly and without question to do as he said. After two months, he had finally started getting used to that.

"Alright everyone, I've noticed you've been having trouble using the proper amount of magic in your spells."

"You mean Allbright is having trouble," grumbled a Ravenclaw girl, causing the boy to flinch.

"No, you've been doing it too."

She looked startled, then embarrassed, then predictably angry.

"I have not!"

"You're over exerting yourself on your offensive spells. How many Disarming Spells can you get out before you're exhausted? Three? Four tops. You should be able to get out a dozen before you even feel the strain."

She couldn't refute it. Hadn't even realized she was doing anything wrong in fact. She just assumed she needed to work on her stamina. Seeing she was suitably chastised, Harry continued.

"We are going to practice a very simple exercise that will help you learn to control your body's release of magic. You are all familiar with a Lumos charm?"

They nodded, it was one of the very first spells they learned in charms class.

"I want you to cast the spell, and then I want you to practice controlling how bright the light is. Stay aware of how the magic flows out of your body and how it affects the spell. I want you to practice this in and out of practices. It's perfectly safe and you'll find it helpful in your other classes as well as in duels. Any questions?"

Allbright raised his hand.

"If we can't do it... um... are we going to get kicked out?"

"Of course not. But don't worry about not being able to do it, until you've tried first. Go and-"

"HA! HA! HA! HA!"

All eyes turned towards the other side of the dueling hall and the source of the scornful laugh. Hermione stood, arms crossed, and sneering haughtily at an infuriated red head. Apparently, Ron had done or said something that had made the girl forget completely about her attempt to be nicer to him, and reminded her just why she had hated him in the first place.

"As if you're captain for any other reason than because you're Slytherin. Harry is twice the leader you are and a better duelist too!"

"As if! I could beat that little goody-goody any time, any where. I've done it before!"

"No you didn't! You dropped your wand and fought like an over grown monkey, not a wizard!"

There was a scattering of snickers. Ron's face darkened in anger.

"You think I can't do it? Are you really so sure? Care to make a wager on it?"

Hermione hesitated.

"What's the matter? Don't you believe what you're saying? Or are you really just full of it? The Great Hermione Granger of Malfoy, just another spoiled little girl hiding behind her money and family name. Well?"

"He could beat a horrid little toad like you in a heartbeat!"

"How much you willing to wager on that?"

"Gambling isn't-"

"Of course, I'd never suggest anything as- what's Draco's term for it?- 'plebeian' as money. Let say we make it more interesting? If Potter can beat me I'll acknowledge it and give him vice captaincy, but if I win, you have to go to the winter formal with me as my date."

For once in her life, Hermione looked completely without words. She just kept staring at Ron with a mixture of disbelief, horror, and embarrassment.

"I... um..."

"Well, if you think you'll lose, you could always just admit right here and now that you were just full of hot air, and Potter really isn't a better duelist than me. Don't worry, I'm sure everyone will understand. It was just a moment of female hysterics. It happens to woman all the time, I hear."

"Ron, you're such a pig. I can't wait to see Harry turn you into one!"

"I take it we have a deal then?"

"Fine!"

"Fine!"

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"Harry, I'm really, really sorry," Hermione said, pursuing her friend as he stalked down the corridors towards the common room. "I don't know what came over me!"

Harry stopped abruptly, turned to tell her exactly what came over her, then thought better of it and continued on towards his destination. He was madder than he had ever been at his best friend. After months of relative peace, Hermione had shot it all to hell in less than five minutes. She'd started a fight and dragged him in to it, not thinking of the consequences. And there were consequences.

He couldn't turn down the challenge without being seen as a coward by friend and foe alike, and any respect the rookies gave him would likely go up in smoke. The humiliation of conceding would be worse than defeat or victory. If he lost, Ron would never let him live it down. If he won, Ron would never forgive him, and he'd have Harry as a direct subordinate to take his revenge on. The club members would become confused on who was in charge. He didn't like the Slytherin, but he certainly didn't want a mutiny. Snape would kill him.

Snape might kill him anyway. It was clear to everyone who had seen his and Ron's first duel that their club supervisor had been keeping them from dueling each other since then and showed no signs of ever letting them face each other again. Snape certainly hadn't been happy about the wager being made in the middle of club practices, but he hadn't interfered. It wasn't his habit to interfere with student intrigue unless some school rule was broken and, technically, none had.

"Hermione, just... I understand losing your temper," he said, still not looking back at her, "But I really don't appreciate you backing me into a corner here."

"I know, I know. It was unfair of me to volunteer you without asking, especially about this. God, I'm such a hypocrite. All this time I was telling you to get along better with Ron and that you should avoid risky situations and here I go sending you into a fight with Ron, the one guy who might really be your match on the platform. I'm so sorry!"

Harry sighed.

"I know. It's fine. It was probably going to happen eventually anyway. At least now I have some forewarning."

"I'll help in any way I can."

"Well, do you think..." he paused, and looked up and down the corridor. It was almost deserted excepted for man in a green hard hat. The engineers Voldemort had warned them about had arrived at last, and were making themselves known by their hard hats, security

badges, and their ability to show up everywhere and anywhere without warning, tape measures and schematics in hand. Everyone had started referring to them as 'the Green Ghosts' or 'GG's. They never talked to the students and their sole interest seem to lay in the stones of Hogwarts, but Harry was a bit paranoid about anyone eavesdropping. He pulled Hermione a little further up the corridor.

“Do you think you could keep this out of the paper?”

She looked doubtful.

“Yeah, I guess not. Do you think you might get a reporter who isn't going to turn this into some sort of 'fight to the death' story?”

“I think I can do that. There's a Ravenclaw girl who I think has a pretty good head on her shoulders, but the decision is really up to McGunny. I can't do it because I'm already involved. This is so embarrassing. I hope they don't print that.”

Harry couldn't help but smirk at that. It would certainly serve her right.

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“I really don't know what she was thinking,” Snape grumbled as Larousse poured him his tea. The staff room was currently overrun by the engineers who, being the opportunistic bastards they were, had decided it was easier to 'share' with the teachers than set a break room for themselves in the hundred or so unused spaces. This had lead to the acquisition of one of the towers for his own personal use. He hadn't told anyone else about it, and so far only Vesper had caught on, and he suppose she was plenty.

The tea set was hers. The tea was his. They were quite complete without the twenty or so other people rampaging about with their clumsiness, their bad jokes, their complaints, or their god awful coffee.

“You can insult a girl's honor as easily as a boy's, Severus,” she offered, taking a seat across the little round table from him. “No doubt she was very flustered. Cream? Sugar?”

"A little cream, thank you. Then why drag Potter into it? I've been very careful about keeping those two from each other. Do you know anything about their last duel?"

"I've only heard a few rumors, and mostly how it ended. However, if Harry's current skill level is any indication, they both must be quite gifted for their ages to have lasted so long. I am quite interested to see it for myself."

"No doubt it will be fascinating, but it's also problematic. An open feud between Slytherin and Voldemort's favored? I could ring my goddaughter's neck right now."

He took a sip of his tea and leaned back in his chair, trying to clear his head. This was hardly a crisis situation, he reminded himself. Pride was at risk, not lives. He would be there to make sure things didn't get out of hand, and Vesper would be there to back him up.

It was strange to trust someone after so long, especially a woman, not just for her support but for her competence in supporting him. The last woman he had truly trusted had been Lily Evans, and that had ended badly. Vesper was no Lily though. That was probably for the best. She was not as naive, not as idealistic as his childhood love, and she understood loss and sacrifice just as much as he did and was stronger for it. She had unnerved him at first with her straight forward approach, but he was starting to warm up to her. He already respected her.

In the warm sunshine of the tower, sitting as poised and elegant as the porcelain tea cup in her hand, he could even admit he found her attractive.

"She's a smart girl. No doubt she is regretting her hasty words already. Perhaps some good might come of this. Do you suppose Harry would make a good vice-captain?"

"Certainly. Weasley is good at pulling the others after him, and Harry pushes from behind. They would make a great team if they could look at each other without bursting a blood vessel."

She smiled at that.

“Do you suppose Ms. Granger and Mr. Weasley would make a good couple?”

Snape choked on his tea, and she laughed at him.

“Woman, what are you thinking?!”

“I think they like each other already.”

“You're mad. Hermione hates that boy more than even Potter does.”

“She doesn't hate him. He just frustrates her, and she him. Have you ever noticed them watching each other? I've seen them do it during meal times. They're always curious about what the other is doing or saying. They seek out each other's company just to fight. It's really cute.”

Snape made a face that stated clearly that he didn't agree.

“A cobra and a mongoose would get along better.”

“At least you don't have to worry about her virtue then, or about rumors that she's secretly Harry's girlfriend. I know her father is looking into potential betrothals and that sort of thing could be disastrous for her.”

Clearly, Vesper was better at optimism than he was, for she did make some very good points. He raised his cup to her.

“Perhaps you are right. There's no stopping it at this point in any event.”

They spent the rest of their break in silence, enjoying their tea and their quiet company.

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By that Friday night, the entire school knew about Harry's duel with Ron, scheduled for that Monday. By Sunday night, Harry just wished it was over and done with. He hadn't bothered studying a lot so close to the day of the duel, knowing any attempt to integrate a new technique so soon would hinder more than help his cause, and the extent of his preparations were a few brief practices with the Weasley twins to keep him mentally prepared without exhausting his magic and double checking his equipment.

He would have been perfectly satisfied with that and spent the rest of his weekend on assignments and hanging out with his friends, but it seemed everyone else was bent on 'helping'. Every one seemed to have some sort of advice or secret spell they felt would ensure his victory. Finnegan had insisted aiming for the knees was perfectly legal (it wasn't) and impossible to block (it was). Hermione informed him Ron dueled like a chess player, thinking at least three moves in advance but was easily frustrated when the set up failed (true, but not really helpful to Harry who improvised rather than planned). Diggory said Ron didn't have as much endurance as Harry, so he should focus on that. Harper, his arithmancy partner, pointed out that just left him vulnerable until the Slytherin boy was tired.

To make matters worse, the paper hadn't assigned the girl Hermione had suggested, but a rather vampirish looking boy called Hadrian Greystoke, who stalked him relentlessly, asking questions and taking notes on every little thing he did.

"Mr. Potter, do you feel training with older students gives you an unfair advantage?"

"Mr. Potter, I see you have specialized body armor. Did you purchase them yourself or were they a gift?"

"Mr. Potter, what made you decide to challenge your club's captain? There are rumors that he insulted Ms. Granger, and you rose up to defend her honor. Is it true? Or do you believe him incompetent? "

"Mr. Potter... Mr. Potter... Mr. Potter..."

More than ever, Harry wished he could have gone outside. It was unusually cold for November and a heavy snow had been falling all weekend, leaving the outdoors pristine and empty and an excellent place for him to escape for a few hours. If he wore his Baluvian cloak, anyone following him would have lost track of him within minutes.

His professors had been insistent, however. No outdoors. No escape.

"You alright, Harry?" Clyde ask at Sunday dinner, peering at his rather glum looking friend. "You're not getting sick are you? That'd be lousy luck the day before the fight."

"Duel," Harry corrected. "It's not a fight. It's a duel. A game. No big freak'n deal everyone is making it."

"Yeesh, sorry I cared."

Harry sighed.

"Look, I'm sorry. I'm just sick of this thing and it hasn't even started yet."

"It's fine, man. I get it. I won't mention it again."

"Thanks."

He reached for his glass, hoping everyone else around him would have heard them and just let him have his dinner in peace. The glass disappeared the moment his fingers brushed it.

"Hey!"

"What is it Harry?" Hermione asked.

"My glass disappeared. What gives?"

"That's odd. Was it empty?"

Harry tried to think on it, but honestly couldn't remember. His cup reappeared, full of pumpkin juice, and decided it must have been.

House elves were known refill cups like that, although they were usually more subtle. He took a drink, choked, and spit it back out.

"That isn't funny!" Harry yelled at the Weasley twins, two just looked at him with innocent confusion.

"What did they do?" Clyde asked.

"They switched my drinks. Tasted like swamp slime and vinegar."

Hermione grimaced.

"Lovely."

"Ugh, I'm going back to the common room. I'm not going to be able to eat anything until I get this taste out of my mouth."

"Alright, Harry, we'll save you a potato."

"Thanks."

Once Harry had disappeared, Clyde look disapprovingly at his uncles, who were still acting innocent and went back to talking with Angelina.

"We should turn them in you know. They get away with this stuff so often they don't think they can get caught."

"Too late," Finnegan said, pointing to the cup which slowly emptied itself of contents before their very eyes. "Damn, they're good."

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Harry's pranked drink was the beginning of a string of unfortunate events that lasted through to the next evening. While trying to brush the bad taste out of his mouth, he accidentally dropped his toothbrush into the trash can, and then swallowed his tooth paste while he was cursing. This resulted in a vomit fest and no toothbrush to boot. He was not in the mood for dinner afterward, so he stayed in the common room to read his Quidditch magazine, only to find it had

disappeared and wouldn't be found. To make matters worse there was a draft in the tower, and the fire place was blown out. Harry tried lighting it with his wand, only to have his wand catch fire. He managed to save his wand by dunking a vase full of water on it, but got drenched himself.

Frustrated, cold, wet, and still slightly nauseous, he gave up any hope for the remainder of the evening and went to bed.

He might have given up on the day, but the day was not finished with him. He was missing a blanket on his bed, making it too cold to sleep, and when he called on the house elves to get him some more, they put it on the wrong bed. The bed's owner walked in just in time to see Harry 'blanket stealing' and a thirty minute argument resulted. At last allowed to retire, he realized that his dorm mates weren't ready to sleep so early, and he could hear them for several hours before they came up stairs, turning on too many lights, and still not shutting up. When at last they had settled, Harry thought he would finally get some peace and quiet.

It wasn't so.

One of the boys had congestion, and the series of snorts, whistles, squeaks, chuffs, huffs, and sniffles that emanated from his nose was enough to leave Harry staring wide-eyed at his ceiling until dawn. His silencing charms all failed after thirty minutes regardless of how strongly he cast them.

Morning brought no relief. One misfortune after another strove to kill Harry or make him want to kill himself. He lost everything he could conceivably lose, from his wand to his socks to his book bag, two of the three showers Harry tried sprayed him with cold water, he lost two buttons, broke a shoe lace, lost his wand again, tripped down the tower stairs and ripped his school robe, snapped at his friends when they laughed, missed breakfast, and of course Toure decided to start the day with a pop quiz. He forgot his homework for DA&D, and couldn't recall anything they had studied. Half way to potion's he realized he had lost his wand again and gone back for it, and was late for class. That earned him one detention with Snape that night, and the potion he ruined meant he had to stay during his lunch break to

finish if he planned to get a grade, which he did, but not a good enough one to justify missing another meal over.

And so went his entire day, one mishap after another, everything that could conceivably go wrong short of a dragon falling through the roof. By the time his afternoon duel had rolled around, he had six detentions, failed two pop quizzes, lost all of his assignments, ruined a text book, fought with all of his friends, was sporting several bruises, a stubbed toe, a twisted ankle, and was ready to kill God.

“Christ Potter, what the hell happened to you?” Ron said upon his opponent's arrival at the Dueling Club. The entire Dueling Club, seniors and juniors and professors, as well as several others who really didn't have any business being there were milling about anxiously. Harry flashed Colin Creevey a glare that probably would have melted his camera if he'd been pointing it.

“Shut. Up,” he snarled, stalking straight to the supply closet.

Ron merely sneered and waited, already prepared. He took Harry's brief absence to irritate Hermione. She too, had had a fight with Harry, for the stupidest reason now that she thought about it, and she was starting to worry about her friend now.

“I want you to wear a red dress,” he said.

She glanced at the Slytherin, before looking back to where Harry had disappeared.

“What are you babbling about?”

“On our date. I want it red. You're a Gryffindor, you like red, don't you?”

“Only covering my enemies.”

“Ouch. So you really are a Malfoy, after all.”

She gave him sour look, and he felt deeply satisfied to have earned it. Harry appeared dressed in his usual white with brown leather. If

possible his scowl was even deeper than before and he was clenching and unclenching his hand, as if it were bothering him.

"Someone left their dueling knife in the closet," Harry remarked sourly as he passed Snape. The potion's master studied him for a long moment, and was becoming increasingly disturbed with his semi-ward's state. He was clearly exhausted, hurt in some manner, and in a bad temper. None of this was particularly unusual for Potter, but it wasn't an ideal state to be in just before a duel.

"I will see the culprit punished. Do you wish to have the match delayed?"

"God no. I can't take another day of this."

Larousse came around from the other side of the platform to have a look at the boy herself, and what she saw disturbed her.

"Harry, are you-"

"I'm fine. Let's get this over with," he said shortly, and stalked up to the platform. The third step collapsed under his weight, sending his foot clean through the wood, while the rest of him stumbled forward, smacking the platform with his head.

There was startled scream and several gasps by the on lookers.

"Harry!"

The Gryffindor groaned, but lifted himself up. Gingerly, he pulled his leg free.

"I'm fine."

His leather leg braced had protected him for the most part, but a large splinter had found an opening in the back and causing a trickle of blood to stain his white pants. Irritated, he pulled it out sharply.

"Potter! Stop that," Snape snarled, coming forward to inspect the wound himself, but Harry pulled away from him and up onto the platform.

"It isn't bad. We can fix it after the duel with whatever other injuries I might get."

"You can't be serious."

Harry's reply was to turn his back on the man and face his opponent. Ron was looking a bit confused, but eventually smirked.

"Good to see your balls have dropped. Fighting little kids just ain't sporting."

"But you'd do it anyway."

"Fuck you!"

"Gentleman, positions!" Snape demanded, determined to get this all over with as quickly as possible so he could find out what was going on. Both boys dropped their argument, and rearranged themselves. They placed their wands in front of themselves, their free hands behind them, saluted, and turned their bodies sideways, their wands ready.

"Begin."

The left lens of Harry's glasses popped out.

"What the fu-"

"Fastidium facio!"

The Nausea Curse hit Harry dead center. If he had had anything in his stomach, he would have been sick, but at this point it only left him slightly disoriented.

"Comprimo!"

The Squeeze Curse missed, more from Harry's lack of vision than Ron's dexterity in dodging.

"Aracnisortia!" he tried, sending out a wave of spiders crawling towards Ron. The vaguely squirming motion of the hundred little bodies had the unintended effect of making him dry heave. The Slytherin bulked for a moment, but then destroyed them with a Fire Hex that Harry barely managed to block. The curse bounced off his shield and hit the wooden chandelier above them, setting it alight. Another curse, this time one Harry didn't recognize, forced him to dodge rather than block. Unfortunately, when he jumped out of the way, his foot landed on his missing lens, causing him to slip. He smacked face first into the platform, and his mouth was instantly filled with blood.

There were shouts for Harry and shouts to stop the match and shouts to keep it going. Not knowing who would win the argument, he rolled to avoid any curses Ron might have sent at him, just in time to see the chandelier collapsing down on him. He rolled again, falling off the end of the platform and onto the stone floor. A deafening crash, a wave of debris, and several screams later found Harry alive and surrounded by his professors and several less welcome individuals.

"Potter, are you alive?" Snape demanded.

Dazed, and choking on the blood from his possibly broken nose, Harry couldn't come up with anything more witty than, "No."

"He needs to be taken to the infirmary, Severus," Larousse said, "Will all of you back up?"

The students retreated from Harry's blurred vision. He felt himself being lifted, not levitated, but actually carried, and it was so utterly strange and nostalgic that if he didn't feel like he were dying Harry might have enjoyed it.

"Potter, tell me quickly, have you ingested anything strange recently? Food or drink that didn't taste right?"

Harry merely turned his head and spat out some blood, not even bothering to answer the question. He didn't think he had, but he couldn't think of anything at the moment. Everything was spinning and painful. Hermione, sweet, quick thinking Hermione, was there for him though.

"Wait! Something odd happened yesterday. His pumpkin juice disappeared and then reappeared, but it tasted bad! We just thought the twins...er... I mean, someone, had played a joke on him! He spit it out though! Why?"

"I'll tell you later, but right now I need to get Potter to my lab. Clear the way for me, Professor Larousse, Weasley, go inform the headmistress of what has happened, and Ms. Granger I want you to inform Madam Pomfrey. The rest of you... go do your homework or something."

Harry closed his eyes, nauseated and unable to see clearly any way, and focused on breathing around his discomfort and listening to what the professors were saying.

"What's on your mind, Severus?" Larousse asked, flicking her wand this way and that to open doors and move aside obstacles as they strode quickly down the hall. Snape didn't speak until all the students were safely out of ear shot.

"The knife in the closet, the broken stairs, the glasses lens, the chandelier... there were several complaints during lunch about him misplacing homework and generally being an utter spaz before this too. It's too much coincidence working against him. Either Potter is the focus of a very clever and discreet prankster or he's been poisoned."

Book III:

Chapter 8: Discord and the Prince

"Poisoned? How could this all be due to poison?" Harry heard Larousse ask.

The air suddenly became very cool, and he knew they had entered the dungeons.

"You have heard of Felix felicis?"

"Yes... it's illegal, but hardly a poison."

"No, but its lesser known counter part, Infelix misera is."

"I've never heard of it."

"That's why you're not a potion's master."

"Severus," her voice warned. There was the sound of opening and closing doors, and Harry felt himself set down on what was probably a couch. Snape moved away, and Larousse moved in, bringing a tender touch and some cloth to stem the flow of blood from his nose. "What is Infelix misera?"

"A bad luck potion. Just as Felix felicis distorts one's magic to align with favorable lei lines, creating good luck for the drinker, Infelix misera aligns one's magic with unfavorable lei lines. Potter has been, ironically, rather fortunate. If his magic had come too close to a particularly hazardous lei line, he would be dead."

There was a tense moment of silence, and Harry could hear Snape ruffling through his cabinets and drawers, and Larousse's hand was softly running through his hair.

"Do you have an antidote?"

"Not exactly," Snape said, "It's a rare enough poison I haven't had to brew an antidote in years, and that batch is still probably stored

somewhere in St. Mungo's, and there's no guarantee it's any good now or hasn't been used already. Potter will not last another day at this rate."

"But you have an idea?"

"Of course. I can't neutralize the potion, but I can neutralize Potter's magic to keep it from aligning with lei lines. Are you listening to all this, Potter?"

"Yeah... someone's trying to kill me again?"

"It's getting rather redundant, isn't it?" Snape said, and Harry felt his presence replace Larousse's again. "Chew and swallow this."

Something touched his mouth, and he reached up to take it. It was some sort of vine with little berries on it. He bit into it and the closest thing he could describe the experience to was eating grass-flavored licorice rope. Even as hungry as he was, it was an incredibly unpleasant experience.

"Japanese Soul Eater? How on earth did you get it? It can't be imported."

"Professor Sprout has an entire green house dedicated to Asian plants. She is very generous in giving me her left overs from pruning and harvesting. This should be enough to hold him over until the potion breaks down in his system."

"And the rest of his injuries?"

"None of Madam Pomfrey's potions will work with this running through his blood, but first-aid spells should help with some of it. Potter, don't fall asleep. You need to finish it."

Harry made a face, but kept chewing. Snape and Larousse talked for a long time about what they should do next. Larousse wanted to take Harry out of Hogwarts altogether, perhaps to St. Mungo's, but Snape thought re-securing Hogwarts, already a necessity, would provide

enough protection. Besides, St. Mungo's was a quack shop in his opinion.

There was more talk about where to keep Harry until things were considered secure, then irritation about what was taking Lestrage so long, and several reminders to Harry to keep eating. Harry couldn't help but be reminded of his younger years, on the rare occasion when he was sick enough to be stuck in bed. His mother would touch his hair just like that. His father would pace and ponder and plan just so. And he, he got to just lay there and trust them to look after him, miserable but safe and cared for.

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At some point he must have eaten what was required, for he'd fallen asleep and no one had woken him for several hours. He was roused by someone calling his name, and opened his eyes to something crimson and blurry. A pair of glasses were slipped over his nose and his vision cleared.

"My Lord?" he said sleepily, and slowly sat up. He had been cleaned up while unconscious and stripped down to his slacks and shirt, bandages sticking out through the tears in the fabric. He felt around his person for his wand. He found it up a sleeve, but it felt strangely lifeless. Voldemort watched quietly as Harry slowly pulled himself together.

"How do you feel?"

"Alright. I've lived through worse."

That brought a hint of a smile to the Dark Lord, but it became neutral quickly enough.

"What are you doing here?" Harry asked.

"I came to see you as soon as I heard. I was worried."

Harry wasn't sure if he should be moved or suspicious, so opted for polite.

"Oh, thank you. I'm okay now. Professor Snape made me eat this nasty thing so I should be fine. Did you catch the person, yet?"

Voldemort said nothing for a moment. Slowly, he lifted a hand and lightly brushed a dark bruise on Harry's face. Most of his face was purple and blue from multiple face plants, his lip split, a cut just above his eye, and a nose Pomfrey said just barely avoided being broken. There were more injuries beneath his clothes, bruises and cuts and abrasions he had acquired throughout his night and day of misfortune. Harry looked to all the world as if he had been assaulted, and despite his protege's nonchalance, Voldemort found the current state of affairs unacceptable.

"No, he has evaded us again," he said at last, when Harry looked away nervously.

"Again?"

"We suspect it was Moody. I don't know how he breached the castle's defenses, but I have my Sentinels scouring every corridor and room from tower to dungeon. He will not be making fools of us again."

Harry's silence spoke volumes about his skepticism. The Dark Lord could hardly blame him after the debacle with the basilisk the previous year.

"So now what?"

"Now, Professor McGonagall is going to escort you back to your dorm room. There will be several Sentinels standing guard throughout the tower, so you'll be perfectly safe. You're excused from classes until your magic returns and the rest of your injuries can be healed properly."

With a little help, Harry managed to climb to his feet. Voldemort handed him a set of crutches, and together they moved out of Snape's parlor and into the corridor. Snape, Larousse, and

McGonagall were there talking to Chief Sentinel Morgan and some underlings, but they broke off once they spotted Harry. The boy hobbled over to them and managed a tired smile, and Voldemort stayed back to observe what he would do.

"Evening, Professors."

"How do you feel, Harry?" Larousse asked.

"I look worse than I feel." Undoubtedly a lie, but a Gryffindorish one. "It seems you're out twenty galleons, Professor Snape. I appreciate your sacrifice."

The dour man didn't have a witty come back for once, and nodded slightly in acknowledgment. McGonagall fretted over him for a bit, but the boy's cool disinterest made the attention seem rather ridiculous and she had to give it up in order to lead him back upstairs. Harry turned back to give him a tired wave goodnight, before hobbling up the stairs with her help. Once he was gone, Voldemort turned to his men.

"I will not have a repeat of last year. Discretion is not an issue here. I want Moody's crimes to be made as publicly abhorrent as possible and his capture equally as glorious," he said sharply. There was no opposition, but no one seemed to know what he intended them to do, and indeed it seemed to take the Dark Lord a long moment to come up with some ideas. When he did, however, a rather wicked grin found its way across his lips.

"This requires creativity. Something the old Ministry would never dream of doing, that Moody would never expect. I want to use the werewolves."

"My Lord, in the castle?" Lestrangle asked, seemingly nauseated by the very idea.

"In and out of the castle. Hogsmeade, the Hogwart's Express, London, Bristol, Canterbury, everywhere . They will sniff out his scent through every corridor, every secret passage, every safe house, and hostel

from here to the sea. And if he tries to flee the country, the Dementors will destroy him along the coast. He won't get away."

"Will Greyback agree though?" Morgan asked, tumbling the practicalities of the idea around in his head.

"If the payment is sufficient... He's been complaining about a lack of females for several years. They seem to have an unusually high suicide rate."

Of those gathered only Morgan seemed to be seriously considering the idea. Lestrage wasn't being vocal, but her body language was fidgety and irate, while Snape and Larousse remained completely blank faced. Voldemort could guess what they were thinking though. Both had a special hatred reserved for those of the lycanthropic persuasion, each for their own reason, but they would never oppose him. Snape because he was obedient and Larousse because she wouldn't risk her position at Hogwarts like she had at the Court. He gave them both a condescending smile.

"Of course, if you're able to find him before I have settled negotiations with Greyback, then releasing werewolves won't be necessary. I would be most impressed if you were able to accomplish this all on your own."

They shared a look, a quiet agreement, and nodded.

"Delightful," he laughed. He was starting to feel a sort of thrill that came with a hunt and the expected destruction of an enemy. His adversary was clever, dangerous, and doomed the moment he persisted on his protege's death. When he finally tracked Moody down, the man would look back on his time in Azkaban as a paradise vacation.

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Harry spent the next two days in his dorm amidst several get well tokens and jokes about 'princesses and towers'. He smiled for all his visitors and dorm mates, made a few jokes of his own, and pretended

to enjoy the lack of homework, but when he was alone he'd curl up in a window sill and wonder when the next attack would occur.

Not 'if'. 'When'. He had no doubt there would be another attempt, and while that frightened him, the thought of his friends and classmates getting caught up in it was heart wrenching. It didn't even have to be Moody necessarily. This wasn't the first attempt that had been made on his life, and some how he didn't think it would be the last either.

He was, for the first time, seriously thinking about leaving Britain.

It wasn't quite the situation his godfathers had been expecting, but it was close enough. He told himself the only reason he hadn't left already was because he was helpless without his magic and still in too much pain to play fugitive. The truth was that he was just as afraid of leaving as he was of staying.

He could remember last year, while under the affects of McNair's phobia curse, how his friends had suddenly disappeared as if they had never existed. If he left Britain, wouldn't the result be the same? His last attempt when he was ten, his escape from the Dursely's and the discovery of how truly helpless he was shortly after. He had since made huge leaps in self proficiency, and magic seemed to make all things possible, but if he did end up outside of Britain would he be any less helpless? He knew no one and nothing about witches and wizards abroad, and if he found himself in trouble where could he go? Would he be any safer in France or Germany as he was in Hogwarts?

Being alone again was just too painful.

Then he would remember Hermione laying unconscious in the infirmary and how afraid he was that she was going to die, and some how it hurt even worse.

So what should he do? What could he do?

Footsteps on the stairs drew Harry's attention, and he checked his watch. Classes should have still been going on. He snatched up a quidditch bat, a gift from the twins, from beside his bed and moved to

the side of the entrance way. The person who stepped through did not have their wand drawn, and the brilliant red hair was the only thing that kept him from smashing the person over the head. When Ron turned around, Harry sort of wished he hadn't noticed.

"Jesus, Potter!" the Slytherin yelled, stumbling back several paces. Draco's head popped into the room, looking over at Harry in amusement.

"I knew it was a good idea to have Ron walk ahead of me," he said, striding in confidently. It was then that Harry noticed both Slytherins were wearing Gryffindor badges.

"Did you steal those?" he asked.

"Of course not. Malfoy's don't steal. We file lawsuits."

Harry checked the stairs for any other possible visitors, then turned back to the intruders. They were wandering around the room in blatant curiosity, making comparisons with their own rooms.

"It's a bit small," Ron said.

"That's the drawback of living in a tower," Harry said, "The view makes up for it."

The Slytherins went to the window, and managed to look mildly impressed. From their vantage point they could make out the Forbidden Forest draped in its autumn colors and the lake reflecting vibrant sky blue.

"What are you doing here? How did you even get past the guards?"

"Don't get your knickers in a twist," Ron said, moving along in exploration, fingering through the various cards people had left on his bedside table. "We just wanted to see what all the fuss was about. The guards let us through when we told them we forgot our homework assignments. Rather pathetic security you've got, Potter."

Harry laid his bat across his shoulder, a clear reminder that his pathetic security nearly smashed the other boy's head in.

"If you're done gawking then, you can leave."

"No, give me another minute. I'm still gawking."

And Ron proceeded to just stare at him for several moments. Draco rolled his eyes.

"I came to get the story straight from the source. What gives Potter? People are saying you got curse, other people are saying you got poisoned, and some even say you're dying. Looking at you now I'm voting on the last one. You look like shit."

Harry shook his head and moved back to his bed, laying down. His ankle was starting to bother him.

"I was poisoned, but it's the sort of poison that acts like a curse. Some sort of bad luck spell. Everything that could have conceivably gone wrong, did. Snape made me eat some nasty plant and now my magic is shot to hell, but I'm not dead at least. I can't have any more potions until they're sure the poison is out of my system, hence the dying look."

"I think it suits you," Ron smirked.

"Care to try it on yourself?" Harry smirked back.

"Now, now, you two. Lets not fight. I came to check on you, but Ron has something important to say."

Perhaps to think of his next words or perhaps just to be annoying, the redhead turned his back on Harry in favor of another window, this one overlooking the roofs of Hogwarts.

"I've decided to make you my vice-captain," he said at last. "I'll need you to come to Dueling Club next meeting to make it official. The YDA representative is coming tomorrow, and I'll need you there to meet them. Can you do it?"

Harry just looked at him blankly.

"Potter, am I being unclear on something? You're my new vice-captain. Meeting tomorrow. Can you come?"

"... yeah, as long as you don't expect me to give a demonstration... what the hell, Weasley? I didn't win the duel. Technically, I lost spectacularly. Shouldn't Draco be taking over?"

Draco shrugged.

"I've got other ambitions. Did you hear I'll be taking over as Seeker for the Quidditch team?"

"No, I hadn't. Congratulations... well, congratulations when we're all actually allowed to play again."

Draco waved it off.

"Flint is graduating next year, so there'll be an opening in the team captain's position. You might be the youngest Seeker in a century, but I fully intend to be the youngest captain ever. If I'm going to do it, I won't have time to look after all those little idiots you seem so fond of."

Harry couldn't help but smile at that. So Draco was going for the gold, rather than settling for the silver? He had to admire that, despite the arrogance.

"Wait a minute, if Draco was never going to accept the vice-captain position, doesn't that mean... You asshole, you lied to Hermione!"

Ron laughed at that.

"Slytherin, remember?"

Harry looked to Draco.

"And you're ok with that?"

"I lost at chess. He gets one date with her without me spelling his nuts off. I'm amazed he even got the date."

"She's still going to go out with you, even though the match was ...sorta... rigged?"

"Yeah, you Gryffindors are a weird lot. She figured if I was big enough to let you be my vice-captain, she'd be big enough to go to the Christmas ball with me. So, thanks for all your help mate."

"Weasley, Draco may have promised not to curse you, but I didn't."

"Club meeting at five o'clock sharp. Don't be late."

"See ya, then, Harry."

With that, the Slytherins left on their merry way, leaving Harry exasperated and amazed all at once. It also made him realize he couldn't leave. It wasn't just the new responsibility he'd received, but the reminder that he had a life at Hogwarts. A life worth fighting for, perhaps even dying for. What would he have if he left?

What would he be?

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London had not seen a werewolf in seven years, but even before that it certainly hadn't been in the numbers gathered in The Iron House, Sentinel headquarters. There were nearly a hundred, men and women all strong and proud in their baring. Hunters, alphas, each and every one. Voldemort observed them closely from beneath a Notice-Me-Not spell as they explored the conference room and one another, sniffing and watching, but saying very little. Fenrir had been very generous.

But then again, Voldemort had been very generous with him as well. WYRA would hardly miss a couple of little girls, always harder to adopt away than the boys, but the sudden abandonment of a squib

work house would hardly go unnoticed by the local wizarding population. He had to be quite clever with his cover-up and it cost him dearly to keep everyone quiet.

The current selection was more than worth it. He could spot several werewolves he knew by sight and reputation. Alexis Bloodclaw, killed her pack's old alpha female by ripping open her neck with only her claws. Jackal, lanky and unassuming, but once he found prey he never lost it. And of course, Sirius Blackbone, next in line for Head Alpha.

Currently, he was moving through the crowd like a shark through water, target locked in his sights. His beta and mate, Slivermoon, kept close behind to protect his flank and snarled every so often if anyone moved in too closely. Now what was their goal?

Bitefirst, formerly the Slytherin Morgenson, and Hawkeye, once Whitehall, were the youngest werewolves present, and kept together in the corner. Voldemort hadn't thought much about them since their exile, but he couldn't help but feel vaguely pleased that the former Slytherins had both survived to become alphas. Very young alphas, little more than particularly ornery betas in fact, but alphas nonetheless. The two tensed when they noticed the approach of considerably stronger opponents.

They both shrank away as Blackbone stopped, towering over them.

"This them?" Blackbone asked his beta. Slivermoon nodded, glaring at the two.

"Yes, I recognize their stink. I could never forget it."

Hawkeye was soon all but cowering, while braver, more arrogant Bitefirst let out a warning growl. It had both larger werewolves laughing at him, before Blackbone snarled at him.

"Watch it, pup. I could gut you in the middle of everyone and it'd be in my right."

"What do you want?" Bitefirst snarled.

The blow Blackbone landed sent him sprawling to the floor with a pained cry. The other werewolves all turned to look, and one of the females broke off from the rest to step in front of Blackbone.

“What are you doing, Blackbone?” she demanded.

“Get out of my way, you mangy bitch,” he snarled back. “I’m within my rights!”

“You’re not Head Alpha yet! Until then you can’t go around beating up other packs’ members. Back off!”

Blackbone moved to shove her out of his way, but she knocked his arm aside and snarled back. Several other werewolves were starting to move in to assist their own, but the man’s next words made them hesitate.

“They tried to kill my godson! He was just child, only eleven! I’ll cut off my own arm before I let them get away with that!”

“Liar! We’ve never been near your mangy pack!” Bitefirst snarled, touching his bruising cheek gingerly.

“Eleven years old. Glasses. Messy black hair. A little bit small for his age. Ring any bells?!”

Hawkeye looked vaguely nauseous at the reminder, and Bitefirst eyes widened.

“That doesn’t count! We were all normal kids! And it’s not like he was hurt!”

Slivermoon, whom the female hadn’t been keeping track of, slipped by her to smash his fist into young werewolf’s stomach and then his uninjured cheek. Other werewolves joined the melee, pulling Slivermoon and Blackbone away from the clearly outmatched juveniles, but the two godfathers were incensed and their strength was nearly impossible to restrain.

A loud explosion rocked the conference room, sending the wolves scattering in different directions before turning to face the possible attacker. In the center of the room stood Voldemort, God Eater, and general nightmare of all those gathered. Most had the man to blame for their current condition, and as much as they hated him, they feared him even more. Of that fear, came a respect rivaled only by their Head Alpha, Fenrir Greyback.

"Tut, tut, Blackbone," the Dark Lord chided, wagging a finger at the volatile man, "You should be saving your energy for the hunt. Your godson has a more dangerous enemy now than a couple of arrogant little boys."

The hatred in the werewolf's eyes was positively delicious. Voldemort could feel the wild energy permeating towards him from all the way across the room. He strode forward, and not to be outdone, Blackbone came forward to meet him. At last they stopped before each other, scant inches apart. Voldemort all dark amusement and Blackbone all dark rage.

"Do you have something to say to me, boy?" Voldemort asked.

"This is all your fault."

The Dark Lord's hand shot out, faster than Blackbone could dodge, latching onto the werewolf's neck and squeezing. The werewolf struggled, digging his clawed fingers into his aggressor's arm, but his strength was more than a man's, more than a werewolf's. At last, Blackbone's legs collapsed beneath him, and Voldemort released him.

"My fault? Maybe so," he said, as the werewolf sat gasping on the floor. "But I'll take responsibility. So must you, Sirius Blackbone, once Sirius Black, godfather to Harold James Potter. You have failed him miserably so far."

That earned him a growl from both Blackbone and Slivermoon, who was moving steadily towards his mate. This only amused the Dark Lord more.

"I require some werewolves to search Hogwarts, ones who are familiar with the castle. Now that leaves either you and Slivermoon, or Bitefirst and Hawkeye. Since I've warned the other two of their immediate death upon nearing young Harry, I believe you both would make better choices. Am I wrong?"

Blackbone was looking at the floor by now, just as angry but more controlled. After a moment of silence, Voldemort smacked him upside the head to regain his attention. The werewolf glared up at him.

"Am I wrong?"

"No."

He patted the werewolf on the head, ruffling his hair affectionately.

"Good boy," he said, then moved away to face the rest of his new forces. Blackbone was easily the strongest and most dominant wolf among them, and having defeated him the others bowed to his authority without question. "The rest of you will be working in pairs under the supervision of a Sentinel. Obey them as you would me or I will take it as a personal insult and punish you accordingly. Line up. You two, follow me. We are leaving now."

The werewolves did as instructed, and Blackbone and Slivermoon snarled at the two pups as they slunk by them before following the Dark Lord. Neither were happy with their position, but James' legacy, the closest thing they would ever have to a child themselves, was in danger and needed them. Even if it meant following the lead of the devil himself, they knew they couldn't turn away.

Worst of all, the devil knew it.

Book III:

Chapter 9: The Huntress and the Wolves

“The herbology quiz focused a lot on explosive plants, so I hope you reviewed chapter seven. Also we have a transfiguration practical today, but you'll probably be able to get out of that. Did you do your DA&D homework? Of course not, you couldn't get to the library. I should have offered, but you did need your rest-”

“Hermione,” Harry sighed. He was heading down to breakfast with their house mates, having finally rid himself of the ineffectual poison and finally gotten the potions needed to fix the rest of his injuries. His wand still felt lifeless to him, but Pomfrey assured him his magic would begin to return by that weekend. Now he found himself assuring Hermione that his academic life wasn't over. “Chill out. I missed two days... okay, three days because of the 'Unlucky Day', but still not a crisis situation. My magic is still shot to hell, so I'll just catch up on everything instead of going to dueling practices. It'll be fine.”

“What about that meeting tonight? Don't you have to come?” Ginny reminded as she came up from behind with Clyde. Clyde was looking his usual sunny self, grunting occasionally when he ran into something and mumbled something that was either 'good morning' or 'sock puppet'.

“I'll show up for a bit to help set things up and greet the inspector, but I'll duck out after that. Like I said, my magic isn't working. My reputation will have to be enough.”

Hermione frowned.

“Harry, you're the vice captain now. All of the rookies look up to you. What are they going to think if you skip out early?”

“That I need to take my medication?”

“Harry!”

"Hermione!"

"Harry Potter!"

He turned around just in time to get a face full of recorder and Sara Bella Parker, tabloid terror and bane of his anonymous existence. Following like the ever eager puppy was her photographer Colin Creevey, who looked more like a kicked puppy when Harry sent a warning glare at his camera. Parker was less easily intimidated.

"Mr. Potter, now that you've recovered from your injuries would you mind answering some questions?"

"... I'm hungry. That's all I have to say at the moment."

With that he turned and moved purposefully towards the Great Hall. He was cut off once again by Parker and her recorder.

"You're going to take my eye out with that thing one of these days," he said, shoving the recorder out of his face. If only he could do the same to the girl.

"Please, Mr. Potter. All of Hogwarts, all of Wizarding Britain, in fact, is buzzing about Monday's attack. Won't you confirm some of the facts? Rumors are-"

"Listen, didn't Lord Voldemort," there was a gasp somewhere, reminding Harry that he was one of the few to use the dark wizard's name out loud, "already make a statement?"

Parker hesitated.

"Er... well, yes, but-"

"Well, I'm hardly going to contradict him, now am I?"

And with that he moved around her and Colin (or rather Colin fled upon his approach), and ducked into a secret passage behind a suit of armor. They couldn't follow him because the entrance locked for

thirty seconds automatically, and by then he had exited at the bottom of a staircase.

"You should probably give her an interview," Hermione said, waiting patiently as he emerged. "She'll just keep annoying you until you do."

"Can't you do it?" he groused, brushing off cobwebs from his robes.

"Conflict of interest. The paper would lose credibility. If you want, you can decline to answer certain questions, but you shouldn't deny all of them. It just makes them hungrier for answers."

"Then let them starve. It's none of their damn business."

Hermione was about to contradict him, but then wisely refrained. As much as Harry disliked his secrets, he guarded them fiercely. And who was she to say he was wrong?

"Just promise me you aren't going to punch anyone for asking?"

The silence that followed was not encouraging.

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It was a long day for Harry, who hadn't realized quite how much magic he performed in his daily life until he couldn't use any at all. The teachers were sympathetic for the most part, and the students predictably oblivious and insensitive. Parker hadn't given up, and hounded him mercilessly, but also ineptly. Harry had plenty of practice at evasion.

He supposed one day he would have to give in, but he didn't want it to be too easy. He wouldn't have her annoying him constantly with meaningless inquiries, so if she were intending to ask him something she had to expect to work for the answer.

By far the best tactic for keeping her away was Slytherins. It didn't matter how young or old, male or female, unfriendly or ... less unfriendly they were, if Harry found himself around them, Parker

found somewhere else to be. Slytherins were more tolerant of Harry and Hermione than they were of the other Gryffindors. Harry because he was in with Voldemort, Slytherin king as far as that house was concerned, and Hermione could play the perfect little pureblood sister to their up and coming golden (silver?) boy to a tee.

So if he happened to ask Flint if he had heard when the Quidditch pitch would be repaired or tolerated Ron's obnoxious smugness to discuss that evening's club meeting for a few minutes, no one could describe his behavior as unusual or suspicious. And when it came to Snape, nothing could send Parker further, faster, than an irritated glower. So it was with a somewhat more congenial mood that Harry entered Dueling Club, ready to impress (or ready everyone else to impress) their observer.

"Potter," Ron said by way of greeting, "check the supply closet to make sure everything is up to code. Make sure no one from the senior club left their knives in there again."

Cedric Diggory, Captain of the Senior Dueling Club, gave the other captain a rather unflattering look at the insinuation. It was technically a Junior Club practice, but since the inspector was coming to rate both divisions they were sharing space for once and were feeling a bit territorial. The seniors were congregating near the platform, while the juniors remained by the practice dummies.

"On it. How much time do we have?"

"Fifteen minutes, tops. Hurry it up!"

"Only because you asked so nicely."

The supply closet was unusually empty with the entirety of the club having donned their equipment, and while Harry changed into his own, he did a once over. No one had left out their knives or any other dangerous equipment, and aside from a few fallen gloves and boots, everything was in its place. Satisfied, he turned to go but found his way blocked.

"Natalie," he said, startled by her sudden appearance. She gave him an apologetic smile.

"Hello, Harry. I just wanted to see how you were doing. I haven't seen you since..."

She shuddered, recalling Harry covered in his own blood as Snape carried him away. She knew he had been seriously injured before, but never had she seen anyone so damaged up close. And for that first time to be Harry...

"Yeah, about that. Sorry if I frightened you. I'm told I was quite a mess."

She rolled her eyes.

"Idiot, you don't apologize for getting injured unless it's your fault. Which it wasn't, so... yeah."

He was bemused by her sudden lack of haughty eloquence, and she could feel her cheeks burn from the warmth of his smile. She was starting to feel silly, and if she didn't get her feelings off her chest quickly this was quickly going to turn into something horribly awkward and embarrassing.

"Listen, Harry," she began, "I know I can be kind of blasé about a lot of things even when they're serious, so everyone thinks I don't care, but I do. I really do. Especially with what happened to you."

It was Harry's turn to darken a few shades as Natalie took his hands into hers. Her expression was so uniquely serious and brave and beautiful.

"I suppose what I'm trying to say is," she said, stepping closer, her eyes locked to his so that she was so close he could feel her breath on his face. "I'm so happy that you're-"

His lips were suddenly pressed to hers, and he was stunned to realize it was he who had leaned down to kiss her, and it was

another shock when he felt her chest press against his own as she gasped. He nearly keeled over dead when she kissed him back.

Neither was very good at it. Their lips never aligned quite right after first contact and both were too timid to try anything with tongue, but it was thrilling and electric and vaguely dangerous too. She pulled back first.

“... okay...”

He smiled at that and she laughed breathlessly, and soon they were both laughing softly, giddy from the experience. A sound from the doorway simultaneously drew their attention and sobered them completely. A familiar figure stood, wide-eyed and pale, one hand holding her wand and the other covering her mouth. Harry felt his insides sink at her horrified expression, and Natalie's previous mockery of the younger girl's affection danced around his head.

“Ginny...”

She disappeared, and he instinctively went to pursue but Natalie grabbed his arm.

“Leave her be,” she said, and he would have ignored her, perhaps even blamed her if she'd adopted her usual aristocratic disdain. Instead she was reserved, staring at the spot where her common target of mockery had just been. “It won't do her or anyone else any good to cause a scene in front of the entire Dueling Club.”

“Shit,” he muttered, dragging his hand through his hair.

“Don't think about it for now. You've still got to go out there and give the rookies their little pep talk and make nice with the inspector... and pray to whatever pagan god you worship that no one else noticed.”

“I'm not a pa-”

She shoved him out of the closet before he could object, and he was forced to compose himself very quickly. No one seemed to be paying him any mind, except for Snape who was watching him suspiciously.

Harry avoided eye contact and looked for something else to do. Quickly enough, his attention was directed to a man in rather fancy dueling robes, covered in shiny brass fixings over deep purple leather. He seemed rather foppish to Harry, but he seemed to hold some sort of importance judging by the attention Ron and Professor Larousse were giving him.

This man must be the inspector, Harry decided, and made his way over to greet him before he talked to his rookies. He looked around for Natalie, but she still hadn't come out and he supposed she wanted rumors flying as little as he did. Or she was just being considerate to him. Which was sweet of her... or very politic. Oh, God, what if Luna found out about this? She wouldn't hunt them down in the middle of Hogwarts, would she? Could she? Crap. Did this mean Natalie was his girlfriend? Should he have learned to establish this sort of thing before he went around kissing girls or sleeping naked with them?

Okay, really he should be concentrating on the more pressing matter.

And just as he decided to do just that and attempt a convincing smile as he approached the inspector, he received the second surprise of the day. His only forewarning was a sudden jolt of unease when the inspector's dark eyes locked onto his, and the briefest lifting of the man's arm. Magically defenseless and caught off guard, he froze.

And everyone else around him burst into chaotic motion.

Two bodies, large and faster than the average human burst out from the shadows of the hall, careening with the inspector, and sending Larousse, Ron, and several other students scattering in surprise and fear. As the majority fled away from the attack, Harry could see his rescuers clearly, but for the life of him couldn't process the reality of it.

Remus.

Sirius.

Beating the living shit out of the man.

"Stupefy!"

Remus paused only long enough to bring up his wand to block Larousse's spell and snarl in warning. By now a third person had appeared, a Sentinel looking as horrified by their violence as every one else. He lifted his wand, as did Larousse, and from the corner of his eye he spotted Snape doing the same and knew Remus couldn't take them all on at once. At last, he found himself able to move.

"Sirius, Remus, stop! Stop, stop, stop!" he shouted, moving his body between the werewolves and wizards. "I think you've got him!"

Sirius and Remus both paused, looking over to Harry questioningly, before Sirius dropped his prey and jaunted over to his godson. The young Gryffindor found himself encased in a bear of a hug.

"There's my pup! We've missed you!"

"Phlaa..." was all Harry could gasp.

"Put him down this instant and step away!" Larousse commanded. Sirius ignored her, instead setting him down to get a better look at him.

"You smell a bit off, Harry. Are you alright? I heard you had a bad couple of days."

Harry could only blink at him dumbly.

"What are you doing here?"

The werewolf pouted.

"What kind of a greeting is that?"

"I would consider Mr. Potter's greeting worthy of your entrance, Blackdeath or Dogbreath or whatever they call you now," Snape snarled, stalking past Larousse and the Sentinel. "Is there a reason you're assaulting the YDL representative or did you just get an itch?"

"Bite me, Snivelus," Sirius growled. His distraction was enough for Larousse to grab Harry and quickly pull him away. The students were all recovering from their surprise enough that they had pulled out their wands in preparation of defending themselves and their professors, which made Harry extremely nervous for both werewolves. He knew they had attacked in order to defend him, but they needed to let everyone else know that as well.

"Please, Sirius, just explain. I'm kind of confused too," he begged. There were murmurs amongst the students, unsure of the situation and how one of their own could possibly know these crazy people. The alpha shrugged and wandered back to his mate who stood guard over the battered and bloody man. He was still conscious, flinching and cowering as Sirius grabbed him by his robe to drag him over to the other adults.

"This isn't a YLD or DLY or whatever you call it. This is a supposedly dead man making trouble," he growled, circling his terrified victim. "Meet Torence Quick."

Remus flicked his wand, and immediately the man's sleek appearance morphed into something haggard. There was an instant recognition amongst the adults, but the students were even more baffled than before. Who was Torence Quick? Snape took charge of the situation.

"Alright, everyone, it seems our debut into the Young Duelist's League has been postponed. You're all dismissed."

No one moved.

"Get lost, ya little punks!" Sirius snarled, and they all went scurrying. Snape and Remus both rolled their eyes. Larousse spoke to Harry, but kept her eyes and her wand directed at the werewolves and Quick.

"Harry, you should go with them."

"No way. I deserve to know who's been trying to kill me, and why," he objected.

Her voice turned hard with warning.

“Harry...”

He wasn't moved in the slightest. Sirius chuckled at his stubbornness. The Sentinel who had been watching things unfold, finally took charge.

“Professor Larousse, I believe it is best that you over see the students and then report to the Headmistress. The rest of us, including Mr. Potter, will report directly to the Dark Lord with... Mr. Quick here. He wished to be informed the moment we made progress, and I dare say that moment is now. Professor Snape, if you wouldn't mind leading the way?”

Harry watched in fascination as Larousse's normally beautiful face, hardened with anger and hate as she turned to his godfathers, softened into something akin to worry when she turned to him, and then disappeared into a blank neutrality as she went to attend the other students. Amongst them were all his friends and Natalie, as confused and unsure as the rest. He offered them a reassuring smile, before following his party out of the Dueling Hall and into the castle's corridors.

“I'll be damned, Snivelus, you've found a woman almost as annoying as you,” Sirius quipped, pulling Quick to his feet and shoving him after the potion's master.

“At least I found a woman,” Snape countered, staring pointedly at Remus who just stuck out his tongue at the other man. To diffuse, or at least distract, any further arguments, Harry started asking questions.

“Who is Torence Quick and why is he trying to kill me? I thought it was Moody who wanted me dead?”

Sirius answered first. “The only one of those questions I have the answer to is the first. Torence Quick, the ornery little shit, was a former Death Eater. More specifically, the Death Eater who caught

me and Remus. I spent nearly three months in Azkaban before being thrown to the wolves because of him. Pay back's a bitch, ain't it, Torence?"

The man didn't even attempt a reply, merely limped along. Looking at the sniveling little man, Harry couldn't help but feel disappointed. This was who had nearly succeeded in poisoning him? To be nearly defeated by such an enemy tore at his pride.

They continued on through the castle in silence, passing the occasional student and teacher who all gaped and wondered at the odd procession. As they drew closer and closer to Voldemort's office, his godfathers began to pull back a little further from the others and more towards Harry. They obviously did not like where they were going and they liked taking Harry there even less. There was no avoiding it, however, and eventually they all crowded into the Dark Lord's office.

The Dark Lord himself did not look surprised, so much as pleased. Whether it was occlumency or cleverness, he could already tell something significant and in their favor had occurred. Sirius and Remus pulled Harry over to the couch nearest the door, sitting down so that their godson was safely ensconced between them. This seemed to amuse the Dark Lord, but he let them be for the time being.

"So what have we here?"

The Sentinel saluted sharply before speaking.

"My Lord, this one is Torence Quick, former Death Eater, believed to have been killed by Alastor Moody on September 3. Mr.'s Blackbone and Slivermoon discovered Mr. Quick impersonating a representative of the Young Dueling League sent to inspect Hogwarts' Dueling Club for qualification into said League, and... subdued him... before any harm could be done."

Voldemort smiled, darkly pleased that after less than a day he was already making progress using the werewolves. Already another assassination attempt appeared to have been thwarted. It was not Moody, yet that didn't exclude the convict as a suspect. He knew

Quick well enough to know he wasn't clever enough to come up with all of the attacks on his own.

"Thank you, Lieutenant. Have you anything else to add, Severus?"

Snape nodded.

"Yes. I would like to say their actions were completely unnecessary," he said sharply. "Professor Larousse and I already suspected something amiss. She was moving in to confirm her suspicions and I was standing a distance to cover her in case he tried something. We could have handled this without all the theatrics."

Sirius made a very audible snort, but Harry believed his professor. He trusted the man, probably more than he deserved, but trusted just the same. Voldemort acknowledged his servant, but looked unconcerned.

"And you, Blackbone and Slivermoon? How did you know he was an assassin."

"We could smell the enchantment on him, and the stink of the man underneath it."

"You didn't explain this to your Sentinel?"

Sirius just shrugged, and Remus wouldn't speak out of turn.

"What about you, Harry? Anything to say?"

"Thank you for not letting me get killed?"

"You're welcome," the Dark Lord chuckled, before turning to Quick. The man was quivering pathetically, looking at the floor, unwilling or unable to move from where he had been dropped. Voldemort sauntered... yes, sauntered around his desk to stand before the man, smiling pleasantly. It was so strangely surreal Harry couldn't even blink. A pale finger slid under Quick's chin, lifting it so that he was gazing directly into crimson.

“And, of course, Mr. Quick, I haven't forgotten about you. Is there anything you would like to say? Some sort of explanation? You have to admit that your current predicament is very odd.”

Quick could only shake mutely. Harry looked around him and saw only cold regard amongst the adults, and felt a strange sort of empathy for the man. He was not sorry the assassin had been caught, and he wasn't sorry to be alive, but he wished they wouldn't torment him. It didn't serve any purpose Harry could see.

Voldemort's benign expression didn't change, but his grip on his prisoner's face did. He seized his jaw, holding it steady as Quick tried to jerk his head away, keeping their eyes connected. Suddenly the resistance ceased, turning instead to violent shaking. It only lasted a few seconds, and Voldemort released him, letting the man collapse onto the carpet and continue his seizure there.

“Severus, make sure he doesn't bite off his tongue,” the Dark Lord instructed, turning back to his desk. As the potion's professor knelt beside the spasming body, shoving something into his mouth and holding his head, Voldemort pulled out some paper from his desk and scribbled a couple of quick notes, sealed them magically, and handed them back to the young Sentinel. “Give these to Chief Sentinel Morgan. I have made some preliminary discoveries he will find of interest, but I want a professional interrogator here within the hour to uncover further details. From here on out, this is to be considered a Class X national security case. Go.”

The Sentinel saluted sharply, and sped out of the room. The room was tensely silent, the only sound was the choking gasps coming from the floor and Snape's grunts as he struggled with his task.

Voldemort wasn't smiling anymore, more thoughtful than anything, and at last he turned to Harry. He said nothing, and neither did Harry, though he was filled with questions and barely restrained horror. Was that what Voldemort had done to him during his second year? Harry didn't recall seizing, but he couldn't recall much of anything really. He felt his godfather's hold on him tightened protectively, pulling him back to himself. At last, the Dark Lord turned away.

"It would appear your services are still required."

"Harry's still in danger?" Sirius growled.

"Indeed, but the threat is greater than I realized. It appears as though Moody found some powerful allies."

"Quit being a dramatist and just spit it out. What did you learn?"

Crimson eyes flashed at Sirius's impertinence, causing the werewolf to flinch. Sirius recovered quickly, but the slip was enough to satisfy the Dark Lord.

"Quick neither set the explosives during the quidditch match nor poisoned Harry. In fact, his presence here is not entirely of his own free will. His mind has been tampered with. I couldn't fish out all the details I wanted without destroying him utterly, but I caught a few essentials. Moody kidnapped him out of his home and made it appear as if he'd killed the man, and has been holding him for just such a purpose as today. However, he wasn't alone. He had help from a very old friend of ours."

"Santa Claus?" Sirius suggested. Voldemort flicked his finger at the werewolf. Sirius made a panicked sound, then went very quiet. The anger in his eyes screamed his hatred loud and clear though.

"No, Fido," the Dark Lord hissed, "Dumbledore."

There was a palpable shift in the atmosphere. Even Snape, busy keeping Quick alive, turned sharply towards Voldemort in surprise.

"Impossible," Remus said. In the quiet of the office, even his whisper could be heard clearly.

"You think so? Do you really think so?"

Sirius was on his feet in an instant, and at first Harry thought he was going to attack, but instead he merely pulled Harry to his feet as well. Unable to speak, he made a sharp gesture to Remus, who rose as well. Harry found himself being shoved towards the smaller werewolf,

who caught him easily. Sirius made another gesture for them to leave. Voldemort voiced no objection, and the atmosphere was far too tense for Harry to voice any of his own. Remus offered his mate a reassuring nod, before escorting their pup out to the relative safety of the halls.

Voldemort smirked as Sirius turned his attention back to him. The werewolf's black eyes had gone yellow, dominating and delightfully feral.

"Don't tell me you're surprised, Blackbone? After twenty years of raging war upon me, do you really believe your old general is above destroying one little boy? He abandoned hundreds of his allies and their families to death, including you and the Potters, just so he could escape to continue the fight that he had already lost. Look around you. Britain is stronger than she has ever been, her people just as safe and happy and satisfied as before the war... and yet still Dumbledore sends his assassins and saboteurs. And for what? To fight against evil? Ha!"

Sirius said nothing, couldn't after Voldemort's hex shriveled his tongue into non-existence, but neither did he interrupt.

"All he does is fight against me and peace and being proven wrong after all this time. And if he is to do that, he must destroy the symbol of our nation's success. Harry is the new generation, Blackbone. He's the ideal. He's everything every generation past wished to aspire to, but were always unable. Brave, noble, talented, strong. He's the slap in the face of every ignorant fear Dumbledore and the Ministry ever planted in the minds of the people should they aspire for change, for greater things than what came before. Do you understand? The greatest threat to Dumbledore is Harry, and the greatest threat to Harry is Dumbledore?"

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Larousse and Lestrangle were half way up the stairs with a contingent of some twenty Sentinels when Sirius Blackbone, alone and unarmed came storming down to meet them with a wordless snarl and a look

that promised death. Lestrangle was the only one amongst them bold enough to issue out an answering hiss as he shoved passed her, though Larousse had a curse on the very tip of her tongue and watched the broad target of his back intently until it disappeared behind the curve of the staircase.

At the top of the stairs, the painting that led to Voldemort's office was slashed open, as if by claws. Inside was further destruction, consisting of the Dark Lord's beautiful mahogany desk laying in splinters on the wrong side of the room, having taken out an entire bookshelf in its flight. Amidst the wreckage stood Voldemort, laughing hysterically, and the only witnesses to the madness that had just transpired, Snape and the catatonic Quick safely pressed against a wall.

Larousse let out her held breath when she saw Harry was no where in sight.

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“Merlin's beard, are you telling me there are werewolves in Hogwarts? How did this slip under our noses?” McGunny shouted at the thirty or so students crowded into the Journalism office. An emergency meeting had just been called upon word of the attack during the Dueling Club. Aside from Hermione and Ron, there had been other reporters there to cover the event for the sports section of the paper, and they had rushed to inform their editor of their far more exciting story the moment they'd left the hall. A little more digging had turned up the identity of the men as werewolves who may very well have just caught Moody. Soon however came even more information and speculation until the truth was quickly becoming addled and uncertain.

Some were saying that the werewolves were part of a planned ambush. Others that they had simply attacked and gotten lucky. Still others were saying the man that was attacked was really Moody, others that it wasn't Moody but someone under Imperius by Moody. After that things got weird. Several witness said they heard Harry Potter and the werewolves greet each other by name, and some even

insisted that it was Harry who set the werewolves on the possible assassin. Others were saying they saw Ginny Weasley leave the supply closet Harry had been making preparations in a hurry and thought she had been sent by Harry to get the werewolves, but no one had been able to find the girl to confirm it. No one was brave enough to find the werewolves themselves, and Potter was proving as elusive as ever.

"This was an executive order from Voldemort himself. It had to be. He's the only one who could authorize the use of werewolves according to the Snake and Wolf Treaty. He probably kept it hushed up until the very last minute. You know, so as not to warn Moody. I bet they were released into the school sometime this morning while we were in classes, and have been hunting the castle all day," Hermione said, the only one who hadn't been saying anything without something to back it up.

"Does anyone know where Voldemort is?" McGunny asked.

There was silence all around. The Dark Lord's location was never made public knowledge, and even on those occasions he visited the castle, few could testify to his presence unless he intentionally made himself known.

"I overheard that Sentinel say they were taking the prisoner to Voldemort first, and then ordered Larousse to get the Headmistress. I figure he's somewhere in the castle. Either his office or the dungeons," Ron said.

"We can't print that unless we're certain," she pointed out.

"Whose talking about printing anything? We're just getting trying to sort it out. Jeez, lighten up."

The Gryffindor looked ready to do the exact opposite and verbally punch Weasley into the ground, but McGunny, quite used to their antics, cut her off.

"Both of you knock it off. You both were there. Is there anything you can confirm? Was the attacker Moody? Did you get the werewolves' names? What about the Sentinel?"

Granger looked hesitant. It set off warning bells in McGunny's mind. She was one of his most diligent reporters and assistants, but when ever a topic arose that involved Harry Potter she froze up like Antarctica. Fortunately, Weasley had no such compunctions.

"Yeah, I got some interesting stuff. The guy wasn't Moody. Get this, his name is Torence Quick, the guy everyone thought Moody had killed."

Oh, that was perfect, the editor thought, but still didn't explain Granger's hesitance.

"Excellent, anything else?"

"Yeah, the werewolves... they called Potter their 'pup' and the big one even hugged him. I think we might now know why we never hear about his parents now."

"Fucking hell, no!"

The silence that followed could be attributed to either Weasley's suggestion or the fact that Hermion Granger of Malfoy actually swore. She gave a polite little cough afterwards, and explained herself more eloquently.

"If you had been paying more attention, you would recall Harry called them each Sirius and Remus, not dad or anything. 'Pup' is probably just an endearment, like 'sonny' or 'kiddo', only you know... werewolf."

Good points, but no one was buying it. If anyone knew Potter's secrets it was Granger, and few doubted that she knew the boy's connection to the werewolves and possibly the secret of his origins altogether.

"Hhhmmm... Any other insights you might have, Granger? Like say, how Potter would even know werewolves to begin with?"

She looked away. Parker sent her dirty looks. She had always been jealous of Granger, over various things, but her closeness to the Black Cat of Gryffindor was at the top of the list.

“Oh, fess up. Everyone knows you know everything about everything, including the Mysterious World of Prince Potter, enigma of the universe,” she sneered.

The Gryffindor's response was typical aristocratic disdain.

“If I were ever to tell secrets, it wouldn't be to the Queen of Melodrama and Tripe, and certainly not the secrets of the person who saved my life. So you can take to your sass, swallow it, and send it back out with the rest of your crap.”

“Eloquent as always, Granger. I think we get the point. I don't suppose you could convince him to do an interview willingly?” McGunny tried. It was worth a shot. Here she had the decency to look a bit exasperated and apologetic.

“He's shy.”

Everyone looked at her as if she'd grown a second head. Ron was first to put all their thoughts into words, in his usual succinct manner.

“You're fucking joking.”

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Remus followed silently behind his enraged pack mate on their way to Sentinel Headquarters. Whatever spell Voldemort had cast to silence Sirius had since faded, but the man had yet to speak beyond asking about Harry and informing him they were leaving the castle. Their godson had been left with McGonagall, and the beta was glad the child hadn't been forced to accompany them to London. The press had already caught wind of a man taken into custody and practically stormed the castle and headquarters in a quest for further information and juicy pictures. Sirius, despite his bad mood, hadn't

torn any of them to pieces as he made his way through the throng, but nor did he slow his pace and more than a few people had been knocked over and nearly trampled as he shoved past them.

Remus followed close behind until at last they squeezed through the doors and into the reception area. The press was still limited to the outside, and though they could still hear them, both werewolves were relieved to have escaped the overwhelming scents and heat of so many bodies crowding around them.

They only had a moment to relax before a new threat made itself known. Snape and Larousse were there as well. Not really surprising, but hardly welcome. Neither professor looked particularly pleased to see them either. Ideally, they should just avoid each other, but Sirius was an alpha and in their own ways so were Snape and Larousse, and both had been caught encroaching onto territory they each considered their own. They both stepped forward to meet in the center of the lobby.

"You know there's a 'no dogs allowed' sign on the front door," the woman said.

"Then how'd a bitch like you get in?" Sirius countered, meeting her head on. Remus normally wouldn't approve of his mate's behavior towards non-werewolves, but Larousse's reputation preceded her. He would support his mate completely against her.

"Cute. Where's your handler?"

Sirius just smirked. He didn't have to answer to her.

"Oh, my Dear," Snape said, sidling in. "They don't need handler's anymore. The Dark Lord has tamed the mongrels into his well trained pets. They obey all his commands. Come, sit, fetch... attack. I dare say even Potter would be impressed. The little one that is. The big one probably would have killed himself if he weren't dead already."

Sirius' clawed hands were at Snape's neck almost simultaneously with Larousse's wand pointed at Sirius' chest, and Remus' own wand was at her breast as if it had always been there.

"All I have to do is squeeze," the alpha warned, but Snape's smirk never wavered.

"Yes, that's all you have to do. But you won't, because after all is said and done, you're one of us now. Another servant of the Dark Lord. Just like me. Just like your beloved godson."

Sirius growled, but his words were close enough to the truth that he couldn't follow through with his deepest desire. Who would protect Harry if he was executed over a puppet like Snivelus? Larousse was looking a bit confused, and he decided to take advantage of her weakness.

"Didn't you know, woman? Harry Potter is my godson. I'm his only family. He's the only reason I'm even here. You can call me Voldemort's pet or puppet or whatever you want, but in the end I'm doing this for Harry, and when he learns the truth about him and you and all your black hearted schemes I'm going to be the one he turns to. And then we'll see just how strong your master's leash really is."

Her face was perfectly blank, but Sirius could see her emotions flitting across her dark eyes and smell them coming off her like olfactory message board. Anger, hate, fear, despair... jealousy?

"You speak treason," she hissed, and he merely laughed at her.

"Greyback is my king, not Voldemort. You might know that if you ever bothered to learn about werewolves outside of how to kill them."

"Harry will never be yours."

And that, as far as Sirius was concerned, was a declaration of war.

Book III:

Chapter 10: The Serpent King and the Huntress

Voldemort lingered at Hogwarts for another day, a calculated risk given the latest security failures, but there were some issues he wished to address before he left and the day before was too chaotic. Besides, he needed the night to analyze the many facets of the lies he had told, and how he might exploit them.

And there were so many wonderful ways to exploit the situation, so many different people he could manipulate.

But there was also the danger of the truth. Not that his lie would be exposed, but the truth was as frightening to Voldemort as the lie must have been to Blackbone.

Dumbledore wanting Harry dead? No, the old bat had found a better use for the boy. Or really, he had stolen Voldemort's idea. The man was slipping in his old age.

Quick had indeed been kidnapped, but he had never so much as glimpsed Moody. Some traitorous citizens had taken advantage of the fugitive's escape to kidnap the former Death Eater, and after several weeks of meticulous applications of occlumency and potions and simple torture, Quick had broken. The man had been sent to contact, not kill, young Harry, on behalf of a 'family friend' and lure him out of the castle so that he might have been kidnapped and presumably slipped out of the country and into Europe. And there the Wizarding World would wait to hear how 'horrible' and 'evil' and 'hopeless' life in Britain had become, and how the young boy just barely managed to survive against incredible odds and finally escaped to beg their aid in overthrowing the tyrant king.

The idea, though clever and manipulative, brought on a powerful rage in the Dark Lord. Harry belonged to him, not anyone else. That anyone would attempt to steal his protege and use him against his mentor, against his own countrymen was unforgivable. After taking Britain and rebuilding her in his image, he had been content with his successes. His deepest hatred for his old nemesis had dissipated into

smug indifference. Now it rose and burned like a phoenix from the ashes once again.

A gentle chime drew him out of his internal storm, and upon checking the magical signature of his visitor, swept the mental maelstrom away. He would save his rage for the traitors once they were found, but right now his audience required a far gentler touch.

“Enter,” he said, and Harry stepped into the office. This was the second time Harry had come to him alone and of his own accord, and though he looked a bit unsure, it pleased the Dark Lord. It saved him the hassle of summoning him.

“What happened to your desk?”

The beautiful mahogany desk Sirius had destroyed required more than a simple repair spell, and was currently being pulled back together by Industrious Sprites. They are a wizard made creature vaguely resembling sprites and about the size of female termites, whose sole purpose was to repair antiquities made of wood, bone, or leather. Voldemort could easily understand why the pile of wood covered in these creepy-crawlies in the middle of the office might draw the boy's attention, but he doubted it was why he was there.

“Never mind that. You wished to speak with me?”

Harry hesitated, then fidgeted for a moment, before finally sighing.

“Yeah... I... I'd like a favor.”

Voldemort felt a peak of curiosity. Harry never asked for things.

“I don't give gifts, Harry,” he reminded, “But tell me what you want and I'll see what I can do.”

Again he hesitated. He looked around the office for a moment, and finally reclaimed a mostly intact chair from the pile on the floor, brushing off a few of the irritated little sprites before sitting down. To Voldemort's amusement that seemed to calm him, sitting in a chair

across from his desk, however little remained of it. It was comfortably familiar.

"I'd like the taboo on my parents' names removed."

It was to the point and not particularly unusual or extreme as favors go, which Voldemort liked, but the reasoning behind the timing was elusive enough that he wanted a bit more of an explanation.

"Any particular reason you want this now?"

"I've got a lot of reasons... mostly... well, you're going to have to do it eventually any way, aren't you?"

"Why do you say that?"

"Everyone wants to know who my parents are now, and I... I'm not ashamed of them. There isn't any reason why they shouldn't know, but I can't tell anyone until the taboo is lifted. Everyone is just going to keep thinking I'm your illegitimate son or grandson or Sirius's son or any number of weird ideas, unless I set the record straight."

"I'm rather fond of the 'Grandson Rumor'," Voldemort said, which was true, "It resolved several other rumors about my sexual orientation." Which wasn't true, but making Harry blush was fun.

"... are you going to do it or not?"

Darn, the boy knew when he was being teased. Should he oblige the request? It was true he was going to have to do it eventually, and with Dumbledore's latest move, perhaps now was the perfect time. After all, if the public wasn't outraged by the attempted assassination of a child, they would certainly be disgusted by the assassination of the child of one of the old coot's own supporters. Perhaps this could even be seen as a symbolic reconciliation between the past and present. Ah, there were definitely benefits, as long as he could keep his own followers' outrage at being socially usurped by the enemy's child out of the papers. If the Court officials kicked up too much of a fuss it could cause some serious setbacks in his plans for Harry, and

perhaps stir up even more enemies against his vulnerable protege than were currently plaguing him.

It was a risky move. It grew riskier every day, but that was as good of a reason to do it now as any. Harry would at least have public sympathy on his side with the attempted murders and no one could accuse him of 'fraternizing' with an enemy that wanted him dead. The situation wasn't going to get better than this.

However, Harry didn't know any of this. It was the perfect opportunity to demand compensation for this 'favor'. He let out a put upon sigh, and settled in his own chair across from the boy.

"Very well, but on one condition."

"Which is?"

"You sit through an interview with the press."

For a moment it looked as if Harry were going to retch, but he quickly composed himself.

"Why?"

"It doesn't really matter does it? That is the price you must pay."

Harry thought for a bit.

"What will they ask me? How will I know which questions I can even answer? I know there are a lot of things you don't want me talking about."

"The questions should be limited to recent events and probably inquiries about your life with your parents and how you ended up at WYRA and then Hogwarts. I will have one of my people there to safe guard against any... inappropriate questions. I'll try to keep the number of interviewers down to half a dozen."

"The Hogwarts' Herald?"

"It would be appropriate to invite them, but I won't if it bothers you."

"No... so long as it isn't Parker... or Weasley, I'm fine."

"So you agree?"

"Yeah..."

Voldemort made an annoyed sound.

"'Yeah' is such ridiculous word. It implies a lack of resolve and enthusiasm. On paper it expresses a lack of character. I recommend you refrain from using it during your interviews, along with any other vague and unclear words such as 'sure', 'whatever', and 'ya know'. Don't shrug either. It drives the interviewers crazy and makes for very boring quotes."

"Yes, my Lord," Harry said, sulky from the reprimand.

"Good. Now, have you been informed of the current circumstances?"

"You mean that a lot more people than we thought want me dead? Yeah... I mean yes, yes, Remus was very thorough in his explanations. I can't say I understand though. What did I ever do to this Dumbledore guy?"

"Nothing. Absolutely nothing. However, now that we've caught him with his hand in the cookie jar, I doubt he'll make another attempt for quite some time if ever. Even the Europeans, who despise the British, draw the line at murdering school children. He can deny any involvement once, but he'll lose all foreign support if he's caught trying again."

Harry just shook his head. Politics escaped him, especially foreign politics. That was just how Voldemort preferred it.

"Was there anything else?"

Harry considered for a moment, then smiled a bit impishly.

"Can I...er... May I have access to my family vault?"

That was a completely different subject the Dark Lord was not willing to address yet.

"Ask again after you graduate."

This didn't seem to surprise Harry, who just shrugged, then remembered he wasn't suppose to do that and replied, "Yes, sir, I'll do that."

Voldemort was far more amused than he probably should be, but he didn't question it. He wasn't a masochist or a dramatist. He liked feeling good. Which reminded him.

"How are you feeling, Harry? You appear to be handling all this stress admirably, but if you require a few days away you are welcome to join me London."

Harry shook his head ruefully.

"Just a little tired. Nothing to skip school over. Besides, I still have make up assignments and detentions from my last brush with death."

He climbed to his feet, preparing to depart without being dismissed first. Poor form, but Voldemort saw no point in scolding him a second time. He didn't want to become a nag. Harry surprised him by asking one more question.

"You... you've had to deal with this... this constant danger for years, decades even, right?"

Voldemort nodded.

"How do you... deal with it? Knowing that someone is trying to take your life? To undo everything you've made for yourself and everyone you care about?"

The Dark Lord thought for a long moment, deciding between the truth or something more appropriate for Harry's age. The truth won out, as

a fuzzy platitude might lower the boy's guard and ultimately result in his death or injury.

"I killed them first."

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Afternoon tea in the tower was unusually tense. Snape supposed it was too much to ask Vesper to remain unfazed by the last couple of days. He wasn't feeling particularly focused either. Betrayed was more accurate. Hypocritical to be sure, but the potion's master couldn't help feeling as if he'd been conned. With the announcement that Dumbledore was trying to kill Potter, still nothing more than a precocious child, his world was tilting, shifting unpredictably.

Snape wasn't a man who put much faith in the good versus evil, light versus dark as a way of the universe. He figured that was just how the naïve or the philosophically lazy defined the nature of the world simply enough for them to understand and explain to their offspring. After all this time it was humiliating to discover he was guilty of the same stereotyping.

Dumbledore was the good wizard of the light. Voldemort was the evil wizard of the dark.

But now the evil dark wizard was the only defense an innocent boy had against the good light wizard. And Potter was innocent. He was innocent, as only children and the stupidly idealistic can be.

Snape was, himself, a dark wizard, yet he never denied the importance of light wizardry either. It was a balance not a competition, but now Dumbledore had gone and thrown it all out of whack. This was more than disappointment he felt. This was uncertainty.

Now what?

"Severus..."

He looked to Vesper, twisting her napkin in an unusual display of nerves. The last couple of days had stressed her, her strange affection for Potter coming in conflict with her deep hatred for the werewolves he seemed to love. She hadn't let it interfere with her classes or responsibilities, but quiet leisure time like now demonstrated a serious lack of her usual poise.

"Yes, madam?" he said cautiously.

She was quiet for a moment, then looked him directly in the eye. Even as a skilled legilimens, Snape couldn't interpret her piercing gaze. Whatever she saw seemed to calm her a bit, and she set the napkin down.

"... What are your thoughts on marriage?"

He looked at her blankly for a long moment, then set down his tea cup.

"A noble idea, and thusly unrealistically romanticized, and generally a disappointment in the context of everyday life. Why?"

"I want to marry you, Severus."

He was suddenly very glad he put down his tea cup else he would have dropped it in his lap.

"What?"

"I think we're as perfect a match as either of us will ever come. We're close in age and maturity. We share similar interests, politics, and education levels. I find you attractive, and I believe you feel the same. I think we should get married."

He just looked at her for a long moment. She had good points, but he hadn't thought of marriage in all the time he had spent with her and wasn't sure if that meant he should think on it more or refuse her right out of hand.

"This is sudden... and rather suspicious. When did you make this decision?"

"When I read your personnel file over the summer."

She had decided she wanted to marry him before they had even met? Well, it certainly explained her aggressive courtship thus far, but it didn't explain why.

"That's very pragmatic. I trust you shopped around first?"

"Three years of 'shopping around'. You're the first one that's held my interest at all."

"I'm flattered."

And he was, strangely enough. He had never considered himself particularly attractive, physically or personally, but for a woman as charming and lovely as Vesper to imply he was after a rather extensive search was an interesting sort of compliment. Rather cold blooded, but he was a Slytherin and could appreciate that. Aside from some juvenile fantasies of marriage to Lily, he had never really entertained the idea of marrying as more than long-term business contract.

"And why do wish to marry me? Why do you wish to marry at all? I doubt it's for love."

That was perhaps a bit cruel to say, but Vesper didn't seem bothered by it.

"I think I could love you, Severus. I don't think that would be hard at all, but you're right. I have other reasons. More than being your wife, I want to be a mother again. I want children, and I don't have many more years left to make that possible."

Severus relaxed a little in to his chair. So that was it? Not so cold blooded as he first thought, after all. A tad admirable even.

"And you think I would be a suitable father? You should be well aware of my impatience with children, particularly young ones."

"You're an honorable man in your own way, Severus. Strong and honorable, if a bit bad tempered. I don't think it's necessary for our children to like you, so much as respect you. I know you would protect your family. I've seen how you are with your godson and goddaughter."

"What would I get out of this?"

"The same thing you would get out of the arranged marriage the Dark Lord will eventually demand of you, only you'd know what you were getting. Heirs from a woman with a long line of powerful witches and wizards, a rather sizable inheritance, complete fidelity, and I'm told I'm actually quite pretty."

Severus chuckled at that. He wasn't looking for a bride, but he'd known for a long time now that Voldemort was looking for him. The Dark Lord had been called hypocritical for his policies on muggle-born adoption after decades of tormenting them, but he had been just as vigorous with pure-blood restoration. The general consensus amongst pureblood families had been one male child and heir per household, a risky policy should said male child die unexpectedly or prove incapable of continuing the line. With stricter and simpler laws on inheritance, tax breaks for multiple child households, and a propaganda campaign supporting the large family as the ideal family, the birth rate had nearly tripled over the last ten years. The percentage of single adult wizards and witches was less than half of what it had been.

There were government plans to aid single wizards in finding suitable life partners, but when it came to Death Eaters, Voldemort liked to meddle personally. If he thought a particular pair was suitable, he would 'suggest' it. If he thought the pair wasn't, he'd right out forbid it. Severus had avoided the last two 'suggestions' the Dark Lord had given him thus far; one committed suicide (luckily it had nothing to do with him) and the other eloped while he was busy teaching at Hogwarts. Voldemort hadn't given up, but he was very careful with his selections, and they were not his first concern while running the

country. Severus supposed he might as well marry on his own terms before a third 'suggestion' came along.

But there was something he needed to know first.

"And where does Potter fit in all of this?"

She looked startled, and then rather nervous.

"What do you..."

"Let's not start a potential betrothal with games, my dear. You came to this school with two people on your mind. One was me, apparently, and the other was definitely Potter. What plans have you made for him, I wonder?"

She conceded with a nod. Severus was a very observant man, one of the things she respected about him, but she was going to have to learn to conceal her thoughts and motives better if they were going to marry. Until then she would have to gamble with point blank honesty.

"I want to adopt him."

Severus laughed at that, earning him a rather dour frown from his companion. After almost a minute, he managed to compose himself into reserved amusement and they continued.

"Have you any idea what you're saying? You can't adopt Potter. That's like saying you want to adopt the Dalai Lama."

"Oh, please, Severus, I'm not a fool. I know the obstacles. There's really only one. If I can convince the Dark Lord-

"Or Satan. I think you'd have better luck with Satan."

"Now you're being melodramatic. Honestly, Severus, what is the harm in asking? We're already his guardians. We're perfect choices for his parents."

"We?"

Severus shuddered. Potter as his son? He'd rather set up his potion's lab in the Hogwarts' sewer.

"As if it would be any different than things are now. You already see him regularly with classes and he spent the summer with you too. I think you feel some affection for him."

"You overstep your bounds. My concern over Potter's wellbeing is directly related to my concern over my own wellbeing. In case you forgot, the Dark Lord entrusted him to me and I will be the one punished for the child's every misstep."

She smiled knowingly.

"That's not the only reason though, is it? He is his mother's son, after all," she said.

Severus' froze, staring at her blankly, before rising to his feet and heading for the door. She panicked when she saw him escape, and quickly rose herself to stop wait.

"Wait, Severus, I'm sorry, I'm sorry. That was completely uncalled for. I won't mention her again. I promise. Just wait."

Pity was not a feeling he was prone to, but felt inclined to show some modicum of mercy, however undeserved. He stopped at the door, looking back at her, waiting for her to convince him or blow her chance once and for all.

"Alright, you don't care about Harry," she said, "but you're stuck with him, one way or another. Wouldn't it be better to reap some benefit? For yourself? For your children?"

He turned back to her and leaned against the door frame, saying nothing, but showing some vague interest. She took a breath to calm herself and continued.

"The Dark Lord has a personal investment in Harry's safety. Safety that a young family such as ours would benefit from. We've both

come from pureblood families with prominent names, but those were lost to me when I married and to you when your mother married. You managed to gain a reputation through your talents with potions and your service to the Dark Lord, but that isn't inheritable. With someone like Harry in the family, we would be guaranteed the Dark Lord's protection and our children would benefit by merely associating with him."

"Or be assassinated for associating with him. He has a rather bad track record of that. Come now, Vesper, surely you've got better arguments than this. You did very well with the marriage one."

"I wasn't expecting to defend the idea so soon," she admitted, and sigh. "I don't suppose you'd give me a week to come up with better ones?"

He considered.

"Just tell me one thing. If you had to choose between marrying me and adopting Potter, which would you choose?"

She barely even hesitated.

"I'd marry you."

"Then I accept. You still have to convince me about Potter though. I'll give you a week," he said, and then wandered out the door. He smiled in amusement at the muffled 'YES!' that drifted through the door.

Really now, what was he thinking? Marriage? To that crazy woman? Perhaps he was just disoriented from Dumbledore's latest plot, or perhaps she had put something in his tea. Whatever the case, he felt strangely happy as he descended the tower steps. Thoughts of dashing all those young boy's delusions of romance with their DA&D professor almost had him giggling.

It was definitely the tea.

The first people Harry wanted tell about the removal of the taboo were his godfathers. He thought they would appreciate exactly what he had accomplished more than his friends would, and even that they would be proud of him. So he searched for them, but he may as well have been searching London. There were so many places the werewolves could be, hunting the halls and grounds for would-be assassins, and Harry couldn't go to half of them under his current restrictions.

“Ow!”

“Hold on, Prongslet, it's just us! It's just Sirius and I!” Remus whispered quickly, and Harry immediately relaxed. He pulled out his wand and cast Lumos to see them better. Sirius was inspecting his wounded hand, but flinched away from the light.

“Bloody hell, what were you two thinking grabbing me like that? You nearly gave me a heart attack!”

“Serves you right for wandering around the castle alone. We've been following you since you left Voldemort's office. Did you know we weren't the only ones following you?”

Harry looked startled. He hadn't even thought to look, he had been so focused on his search. How could he be so stupid?

"Who else was following me?"

"Either it was one of the school reporters or the youngest pervert I have ever seen," Sirius said, "Nice bite by the way. You're lucky I'm wearing gloves or you might have spent the last month sucking down silver nitrate and wolfsbane."

Harry peeked out of their hiding place, a rickety corridor that followed the entire east wing of the fourth floor, the entrance hidden in the shadows of a support column. Sure enough, Greystoke came floating down the hallway like some sort of dementor in training, his eyes shifting about for his lost prey. Eventually, the older boy disappeared down the corridor, and Harry turned back to his godfathers.

"Sorry, I wasn't thinking clearly. I'll be more careful."

Remus patted him on the head, and lead him back out into the open halls, Sirius bringing up the rear. Sirius cuffed him upside the head.

"Damn well better be. Why were you even out here by yourself? Did Lord Creepy summon you?"

Harry rubbed the back of his head, but still managed a smirk.

"No. I went to ask him a favor."

His godfathers looked more worried than he thought was strictly necessary.

"I didn't ask him to kill anyone, geez!"

"It's not that Harry," Remus said, "It's just we don't like the idea of you making deals with that... man."

"Don't worry about it. I'm not making a habit of it, but this was important and only he could do it."

Neither of his godfathers looked pleased.

“Dare I ask?”

“I got him to take the taboo off of mom and dad's names.”

“What?!”

Harry couldn't help feeling a bit smug at their discomfiture. They both seemed to be struggling to understand what he was saying, and then whether or not they could still scold him or not. They didn't seem to making much progress, though the expressions that passed between them were pretty funny in Harry's opinion.

“How?” Sirius said at last.

“I pointed out how he would have to do it eventually anyway. He couldn't have people thinking I was his illegitimate kid forever. All I really had to do was agree to an interview, which gag me, isn't so bad. It's a small price to pay to reclaim my family's honor.”

Sirius paced the width of the hallway, running his hands through his hair in agitation. There really wasn't any way to argue with Harry on that point. When Voldemort had taken power, and the name of Potter fell into disgraced anonymity, it had pained Sirius more deeply than the end of his own family's name. The Potters had virtually adopted Sirius after he was disowned, and amongst those kind and noble people he had finally felt the pride of being part of a family that fifteen years of rhetoric hadn't instilled in him for his biological one.

Yet to have the name of Potter returned by the very man who destroyed it smacked of its own sort of dishonor. Sirius didn't doubt Harry's intentions, but his godson was still just a child, and he felt perhaps he was confusing honor with pride. It wasn't something he felt qualified to lecture Harry on. To a werewolf pride and honor were the same thing, and though the wizard in him knew the difference, he wasn't eloquent enough to explain it to a thirteen year old. Remus, a beta by standing and an omega by nature since childhood, hadn't had pride or honor for all the years Sirius had known him. Loyalty and

gentle nobility were as close as the man came, and though he loved him for it, they didn't qualify him to explain either.

"I thought you would both be happier," Harry said, disappointment clear.

Sirius sighed, and ruffled the boy's hair affectionately. Who was he to belittle what Harry had done? It was certainly more than most men would be able to achieve, and in the end the honor of the Potter name lay in Harry, not Voldemort, to dishonor or glorify. He managed a smile.

"I am. And I'm proud of you, and I know your father would be very proud too. Do you think you're ready to uphold your family name all on your own? It's a big responsibility."

"I can do it, I think. I just have to do the right thing, don't I? Like obey the law and don't sleep with other people's wives and stuff like that, right?"

That earned him genuine laugh from both werewolves. Such a simplistic answer, like saying babies came from a cabbage patch. Naïve and sweetly innocent.

"What's so funny?"

"Nothing," Sirius said, "That's close enough to the truth for now, I suppose. You'll figure the rest of it out as you go. Just concentrate on doing the right thing for now, and we'll help you out if you get stuck."

Harry was perplexed. What exactly was he expected to do? It couldn't be too hard. Draco hardly did anything at all, and still managed to make the name of Malfoy seem like some sort of demi-god all should lay down to worship.

Sirius put his arm around Harry's shoulder, and started leading him down the hall, Remus following behind with his wand drawn and one eye always checking behind them.

“Lets get something to eat from the kitchen, and you can tell us what else you've been up to aside from reclaiming your name from Lord Doom and Gloom and avoiding another brush with death. Do you have a girlfriend yet?”

Harry blushed, earning another laugh from the werewolf. He had forgotten how embarrassing Sirius could be. It was still nice though. Walking and talking about the menial and extravagant of everyday life with adults who not only cared but could be trusted.

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They spent the hour before dinner making nuisances of themselves in the kitchen, requesting dishes from the house elves that didn't exist and then daring each other to try the mystery concoctions that ended up in front of them. Harry told them about Natalie, who he liked but didn't entirely trust, and Ginny, who he trusted but hadn't really thought of romantically. He told them about Ron's trick on Hermione, and how he became the vice captain, and how this was the second time quidditch had been canceled for a season. He told them about Professor Larousse.

Then, they told him about Professor Larousse.

“She's a serial killer,” Sirius said, bluntly, “The werewolves' public enemy number one. She's killed at least a dozen that we know about, and most of those weren't in their wolf form either. We don't know how many she's done in and never gotten caught. If it weren't for the Snake and Wolf treaty, she would probably still have kept killing, but even she's not crazy enough to come into our territory without Court support. As it is, I'm having a serious problem being within sight of her. I can't swear to either of our safety if we find ourselves alone together.”

Harry was horrified. He knew Larousse didn't like werewolves, a lot of witches and wizards didn't, but hadn't realized her position was so extreme. She had seemed so nice!

“Why? Why does she hate werewolves so much?”

Here, Remus cut in before Sirius went on a tirade about her being a stupid curse-happy whore. His mate had a problem with objectivity when it came to certain things, and Larousse was one of them.

“Most of use believe it's a revenge thing, others believe it's a sort of crusade. You know her husband and son were killed by the old Ministry?”

Harry nodded.

“Well, after that the only family she had left was her brother and his wife and daughter. They were very close. Her sister-in-law contracted a severe case of lycanthrosis. No one is sure if she was raped and covered it up or she had an affair, but she must not have realized she was sick until it was too late. The full moon came around and she went crazy. Killed her husband and daughter. When she realized what she had done, she hung herself. So whether Larousse is trying to avenge her family or trying to prevent it from ever happening to anyone else, I couldn't tell you, but her views were extreme enough that she got kicked out of the Sentinels for it. I'm amazed she was allowed to teach in Hogwarts.”

A heavy silence fell over them. Harry felt ill. He liked Larousse, he even trusted her a little. She had been looking out for him all year, and though that was awkward it was also kind of nice. Now he found out she was homicidal, and her ideal target was people like his godfathers? Like Luna or Athena or any number of the men, women, and children he had spent time with over the summer?

Her story was tragic, losing not only her husband and son but what remained of her family shortly after. It had to have been unbearable, but to murder... How many husbands had she killed? How many wives, fathers, mothers, sons, daughters, brothers, sisters?

“She never said a thing... I didn't even know she didn't like werewolves until she met you. Jesus...”

“Are you alright, Prongslet? You smell kind of... off,” Remus said, rubbing his shoulder soothingly.

“I don't know... It's just...”

He didn't know what he wanted to say or how he should feel. His teacher was a mass murderer. What was the appropriate response to that?

“Come on, pup, we'll take you back to your room,” Sirius said, helping his godson to his feet. It hadn't been their intention to upset him, but there were some things they felt he had to know.

Not to trust homicidal maniacs was one of them.

Although, they might have been three years too late for that lesson.

Book III:

Chapter 11: The Phoenix King

Far away, across the Channel, an elderly wizard stared out from a run down, but quaint little shop. From this particular window he could stare out at row of muggle restaurants, cafés, and boutiques covered in snow and Christmas decorations. If he went to another window he could stare out at an almost identical row of buildings inhabited by witches and wizards with their own brands of holiday decorations. He liked this particular shop because when ever he held meetings, the men and women who gathered there could look out with him, and see for themselves how both peoples were as human and beautiful and flawed as the other.

It was an important reminder, for him as well as they, exactly what they were fighting to preserve.

Days like today made theses reminders necessary.

“You have read the papers? The English ones?”

He half turned to acknowledge Tonks, noting with some amusement that her hair was flaring red with her bad temper. Tonks was one of the youngest members of the Order of the Phoenix, but also the most zealous and proactive. She had only been a child when her family fled England, but she was old enough to know what was being lost and why, and the years she had struggled as a refugee in the elitist German school system had hardened her resolve. He had picked her up at a wizarding university, intrigued by the woman's student movement for the liberation of Britain and sympathized with her frustration at everyone's lack of interest. Were they really so naïve as to think the Dark Lord would be satisfied with only Britain?

“I have read them, Miss Tonks. Paint a rather poor picture of us, don't they?”

“It's ridiculous the lies this creature can spread about. I'm surprised he doesn't blame the German Minister and declare war!”

"We're lucky he did not," he said, stroking his beard. "Or perhaps unlucky. I fear what he will be capable of once his military is fully organized. The Germans are playing a dangerous game waiting for him to attack first. They assume their allies will come to their aid, but we thought that too, didn't we? And look what happened?"

Her expression was so clearly frustrated, but she couldn't say anything. What could she say that he didn't already know? Their silent tension was broken by the tinkling of a bell from the down stairs as someone entered and was followed by a quick "ello!"

"We're up here, Gilfred," Tonks called out. A handsome man in his mid-thirties came up the stairs, followed by a younger man with a severe countenance. The handsome man immediately greeted both, while his dour companion remained near the stairs, watching both the door and a window for signs of their companions or potential danger.

"Hello, Lovely and you too Tonks," he smiled, earning him an eye roll from his partner.

"Not now, Gil, I'm not in the mood."

"Well, that makes two of you. Johnny has been in an outright snit all morning. And considering how he normally is, it says something that I am able to even tell."

"Mein Name ist Johan, nicht Jonny, Sei Idiot!"

"See what I have to put up with?"

There was another ring of the bell, followed by a burly young man who looked as if he should be in school still and a raggedy looking woman, so dirty it was impossible to tell her age.

"Timmons and Fredric took another lap," the boy said, his English through his heavy Bulgarian accent. "Fredric thought he saw something."

"Are the pigeons after him again?" Johan asked nastily, falling into English now that his temper was in check.

"That's enough of that," Dumbledore chided. "How are you Viktor? Phoebe? I'm sorry to bring you out in this cold weather."

"It is a fine spring day in compared to my village," Viktor said. His home town was a quaint little settlement hidden between two alpine mountains, renown for the quality of its brooms and the abundance of bears.

"Speak fer yerself, sonny. I can't feel me toes," his companion huffed.

"Come and take some tea," Dumbledore offered. "It will occupy us while we wait for the others."

They all gathered around the table at the center of the room, except for Johan who remained stubbornly guarding the door, and poured themselves and each other tea. There was a pile of newspapers in several different languages at the table as well, and a few of them shifted through the stack, but most knew what they would say already.

The British paper went on a verbal rampage against Dumbledore's latest attacks on the peace of a recovering nation, going so far as to attack school children to invoke a response. Pictures of Hogwarts quidditch stadium partially demolished and some of young Harry, dressed in his Quidditch robes and a layer of dirt from the explosion and then later ones of him, bruised and battered as he stood between his werewolf bodyguards, chatting easily.

The German papers had a counter rampage of their own, accusing the British of manipulating events that were of their own making and incompetence, and blaming it on Light wizards in order to finish off the last of the Dark Lord's opponents. They had pictures too, smuggled out of Britain over the years through hijacked newspapers and illegal missives. One was of Moody's before his incarceration standing proud in his Auror robes and another of his wanted poster, looking deranged after ten years of incarceration. There were a few of Harry as well, one from the year before after the attacks at Hogwarts

and another of him talking to the Dark Lord outside of some Court building.

The French papers lamented the lack of intergovernmental cooperation, pointing out the war had been over for ten years and that it was a time for restoration not antagonism. So condescending in their righteousness.

The Spanish paper had only a brief blurb about the recent incidents in Britain on the third page, but for the most part were keeping their heads buried in the sand.

Austria, Hungary, and Bulgaria were clueless, but who knew what they'd end up printing over the next couple of days? Likewise, the Eastern European countries were tentative about putting anything in their paper, afraid of contradicting or conflicting with their neighbors, and Italy was keeping with its stance that Britain belonged to the devil and shouldn't be spoken of let alone spoken to.

It seemed things were beginning to stir again, and Dumbledore wondered if that was bad or good. On one hand, this was likely the precursor to much more serious events. On the other hand, it might also mean Europe would quit twiddling their thumbs in regards to the Voldemort issue. War had its horrors and left its wounds, but this willful complacency had a rotting affect that was just as devastating.

"They're here," Johan said, and a moment later the bell rang. Timmons, fatter than was strictly fashionable for a middle-aged man, came up first, huffing and puffing.

"I tell you, why in Merlin's name did you drag me around the block again? I could have gone with the Gil and John."

"It's JOHAN! What is with you English wizards? Must everyone use your silly names?" the dour man grumbled, but was ignored.

"Sorry, but that cat really did look suspicious. Besides, you could use the exercise," said Fredric, an elderly gentleman with a neatly trimmed mustache and beard.

"Welcome, my friends," Dumbledore greeted. "Come have some tea. We have matters to discuss."

"You mean this 'assassination' rubbish?" Fredric said. "Nasty trick the Dark Lord pulled there. Has the Minister of Magic confronted you about it?"

"Yes, but only to reprimand how badly it was botched. I already informed him of what we intended to do. I needed his approval to bring Potter in Germany after all. This is the only country that wouldn't extradite him right back. Everyone else is still afraid of instigating war."

Tonks snorted.

"Yes, if you'd brought him to France, they would have invited the Dark Lord to tea before they sent both of them on their way."

Phoebe let out a snort of her own.

"Don't get all indignant Miss Rainbow. The aristocrats might control the paper, but you better believe the proletariat knows what's what. France got all them refugees to remind them of all the tricks You-Know-Who used to tear down the Ministry."

Dumbledore nodded.

"You're both right, my dears. The general public is suspicious and fearful of Voldemort and we shall find many allies amongst them. However unlike most of the wizarding world, France is still governed by an aristocracy and, however unofficially, they have come to see the Dark Lord as a king rather than a dictator. It will be difficult to convince them to help overthrow a government that most resembles their own. We must tread cautiously there."

"So what do we do now?" Timmons asked, "Quick failed miserably and we've compromised our people in Britain. The Dark Lord is probably laughing at us right now."

A despairing silence threatened to descend, but Dumbledore was quick to rally them again.

"Mansfield is already in Spain. I pulled him out as soon as Harry failed to show at the rendezvous point. He's the only one who can connect Quick with the others, so they'll be safe for now. It's imperative that we get the boy out of Britain though. I've left orders for our people to try again as soon as they are able."

Viktor pulled out a paper from the pile, staring at the picture of the boy they were risking so much for and wondered why. This particular picture showed him talking to the Dark Lord, confidently, as if to friend or family member.

"He does not appear to need our assistance," Viktor said, scowling with disapproval. "He is the Dark Lord's protege, a dark wizard by all accounts. What do you want from this little viper?"

Dumbledore smiled a bit.

"It is true, young Harry has fallen under the influence of Voldemort, but I think it is rather unfair of you to judge him a 'little viper' from across the sea. He's just a child. Without family to look after him he is vulnerable to manipulations from others, particularly for someone as skilled at manipulating as Voldemort."

"But I have hope for him. His parents were very good people, I knew them well, and as he was sorted into Gryffindor I would say he is inclined to resist corruption where he sees it. It's a gamble, but even so that boy cannot remain in Britain. He's already being used shamelessly to gain national support for Voldemort and his cause. With a little freedom and a more rounded view of the situation, I hope Harry might have a change of heart and aid us of his own free will."

"And if he doesn't?" Viktor persisted.

"Then at least he will be removed from a position where he can aid our enemy."

The young Russian let the subject drop. The meeting moved on to other things; new political allies and hurdles in various countries, the current state of their spy network in Britain, the counter-intelligence they were running against Voldemort's spies and Sentinels, and suppositions on when it would all come to a head. There was a great deal to discuss, but their meeting was called to an abrupt end by Johan.

"Someone is coming."

Several of the group immediately went to the window, and sure enough there was an elderly woman on the wizarding side of the building. She was shabbily dressed, clearly too poor to be shopping the district, and yet she begged no money of those that passed her. It appeared she was meandering here and there at first, but it soon became apparent she was heading straight for them.

Dumbledore sighed, and nodded to the others.

"Take the muggle street exit. I will send you all coordinates for our new meeting place in a couple of days. Johan, Gilfred, would you both deal with our visitor? Nothing too violent, please. She may just be a reporter."

They all readily agreed with his plan, and went about doing as he said. While Dumbledore cleared all evidence, physical and magical, of their presence in the house, the rest left quickly through a different door than the one they had entered.

Johan and Gilfred stayed behind. They pulled from their pockets a black scarf and a tiny wizard's hat that grew to the appropriate size when they shook it. They used these to disguise themselves, the enchantment on the items distorting not only their appearance but their voices and magical signature as well.

"I'll leave the rest to you, gentleman," Dumbledore said, removing his hat and turning his robed inside out so that appeared as nothing more than a muggle trench coat, and strode out into the cold.

To Harry's amusement and dismay, his newly acquired protectors proved a bit overly efficient in their job. Not only were Sirius and Remus effective at keeping assassins at bay, they kept away just about everyone else as well. Greystoke and Parker both kept a healthy distance from the men who seemed to know their every move, regardless of how stealthy they thought they were. Unfortunately, so did most of his friends.

This was enough for Harry not to feel crowded, but also enough for his friends to feel spied upon. Draco took one look at them, and they took one rather unfriendly look back, and quickly headed in the other direction. Natalie, usually so outgoing, just... wasn't, but she still might have been waiting for a moment alone with him that didn't seem to be coming. Ginny had been avoiding him already. The Weasley twins took it as a challenge, attempting to grab Harry and run off with him as a bit of sport. They soon learned their mistake when Remus demonstrated that he could in fact use a wand and Sirius dropped them out a second story window and into a snow bank.

“Yeah, that’s a nice way to say it,” Harry said, a bit amused. She was his only friend who hadn’t fled from the werewolves or been driven off, but even she was a bit intimidated. They had done nothing to make themselves more approachable, their every move and manner laced with predatory grace and precision, and while Harry was immune to it he recognized it for what it was.

"I don't think they like me."

Harry chuckled.

"Actually, they do. They just don't like your brother."

"Oh."

For once, she didn't seem to know what to say. This wasn't the sort of situation they covered in etiquette lessons. Harry took pity on her.

"I'll talk to them later about lightening up. They're just a bit on edge with everything that's happened. They're really quite laid back once you get to know them."

Hermione didn't look convinced. In fact, she looked a bit nervous. She had respect and curiosity when it came to werewolves, and had always wished to see and learn about them. However, when she had thought about how she would go about doing that, it was usually from a safe distance or with some sort of barrier between them. Harry's almost reckless disregard for the harm they could do, however unintentional, was a bit worrisome.

They finished their breakfast in silence, despite everything Hermione wanted to say and the only opportunity for privacy they'd had since Monday. When they were done, the werewolves appeared out of nowhere and escorted them to their first class. It was History of Magic and as Toure was out and the werewolves remained outside, the rest of the students in the class quickly huddled in close to Harry.

"Bloody hell, are those guys really werewolves?" Finnegan asked, obviously the question everyone was most interested in. Harry's reply was matter-of-fact, hoping to keep the sensationalization down to a minimum.

"Yes. The dark one is Blackbone and the other is Slivermoon. They're protecting me until Moody is caught... at least I think that's how long they're staying."

It didn't work. Everyone was amazed to have the truth confirmed. A few were actually angry.

"What were they thinking? Sticking werewolves in a school? That's fucking retarded," a rather belligerent Ravenclaw boy snarled.

"What if they bite someone? I mean, have you seen them? They barely look human."

"I'm going to write to my father about this. There's no way let-"

Harry slammed his hands down on his desk, and stood abruptly.

"How can you all be such stupid bloody cowards?!" he snarled, shocking everyone into silence. "They're not animals, they're people. People I trust to protect me and you and this school. And since I'm the only one out of any of you who have actually spoken with them, eaten with them, fucking lived with them, I think you can all shut up and keep your ignorant load of tripe to yourselves. Good god, you're the future of this country?"

Harry was not a violent person. He wasn't really a very intimidating person either. There were a few instances where he was known to get snippish or grouchy, but no one had ever seen him direct his temper at the world in general. So whether everyone was suitably chastised or just stunned wasn't entirely clear.

Regardless, before anyone could even think to say or do anything in response to his outburst, Professor Toure walked in and ordered everyone to their seats. Hermione herself was glad she was sitting already, or she might have keeled over. Even in her vaguely dazed state, it didn't take long for her to notice several whispers drifting through the class, as their professor began to lecture. Harry remained stubbornly focused on what Toure was saying, but Hermione found her attention drifting to the gossip floating about.

"What's got Potter so defensive? Does he actually like werewolves? How weird is that?"

"He said he lived with them, how does that work? No one is allowed to live with werewolves unless they are one already."

"Do you think he really knows them? That's bloody awesome!"

"The Dark Lord works with the werewolves a lot, maybe he introduced Potter?"

"I bet we don't know who his parents are because they're werewolves. Why else would he care?"

"I wonder if Potter got lycanthrosis and is covering it up?"

And so it went through the entire class, until at last Toure dismissed them. Harry was up and stalking through the door, leaving Hermione rushing to catch up. By the time she spotted him again in the hall, Sirius was leaning over him, talking quietly. After a moment, Harry replied loud enough that the werewolf and everyone else in the hall could hear.

"Let them make up stories until they're blue in the face. I don't care. I'm not ashamed of you."

It sparked a flash of guilt in Hermione. She might not have been as vocal about her misgivings on Harry's relationship with his godfathers, but she had been guilty of the same prejudice. Her friend had perfect faith in these men, did she have the right to question it? He deserved her support more than anything. So, stiffening her back, setting her shoulders, and swallowing her anxiety, she marched right up to the nearest werewolf, who happened to be Remus.

She was glad it was him, for he was definitely the less intimidating of the two. He tended to guard the back rather than lead upfront, and from this she gathered that he was the submissive of the pair. Nevertheless, he was very strong in appearance with muscular arms and a bit hairier than most of the wizards she had met, emitting an animal-like vibe whenever he moved..

"Ah, excuse me, Sir."

He looked at her blankly for a moment, then around him as if suspecting a trap, then back to her again with a little trepidation.

“Yes?”

She tried to remain calm and keep herself from fidgeting or stuttering, and it took all of her Malfoy decorum to keep herself under control.

“I... Well, Harry is my best friend, so I thought it would be appropriate to introduce myself to you. I'm Hermione Granger of Malfoy. Pleased to meet you.”

She held out her hand. He stared at it curiously, then moved his gaze to study her face. He smiled, without a trace of the usual aggression, and took her hand. She noted that he wore gloves, just like his companion, despite the warmth of the castle and wondered if it wasn't a precaution to prevent accidental scratches with their claw-like finger nails. Rather than shake like she thought he would, he actually kissed her hand, sending a bolt of anxiety through her at having her bare skin so close to his teeth. She ruthlessly crushed the irrational fear.

“Charmed. I am Remus Slivermoon of the Goddess Clan.”

Now she was stuck. She hadn't thought about what to do after introducing herself.

“... We should probably catch up with Harry,” she said, and hurried along, followed closely by a very amused Remus. They caught up at the DA&D classroom, but before she could introduce herself to Sirius, the man had disappeared. When she turned to ask Remus where he had gone, she found him missing as well. Perplexed and vaguely relieved, she entered the classroom.

Harry wasn't in his usual seat near the front of the class, but the one closest to the door.

“What's up, Harry? I hope you're not trying to pass notes to your bodyguards during class,” she teased.

"Don't worry about it," he said, making an effort not to be snippish towards her. He had seen her talking with Remus, and was touched that despite her nervousness she was making an effort to get to know them. "I just... don't feel like sitting up front today. You can if you want to. I'm not going to be good company for a while."

She wasn't sure what to make of this latest bit of weirdness, but decided she'd have to wait until after classes to get any answers and not to push until then. Professor Larousse also seemed a bit disturbed by Harry's movement, but he was pointedly not looking in her direction.

Her friend's reclusive behavior lasted through the entire class. Normally eager to volunteer for demonstrations or to answer and ask questions, he remained strangely reserved, not looking up from his notes or his text books even when his name was called. It could have been the whispers from the last class following him to his next that left him so guarded, but that didn't seem quite right either.

When class was over, her chance to speak with him was denied by the professor, who told him to stay after class for a moment. In the hall, both Sirius and Remus had reappeared, disturbing the flow of the students who took great pains to avoid coming in contact with the savage looking men. The werewolves ignored them, however, in favor watching the door, perhaps even listening in the conversation occurring within. It was not a good time to introduce herself to Sirius, she decided.

Something clearly had him agitated.

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"What is the matter, Harry? You've been acting strange all class period," Larousse began, once the rest of her students had left the class. Harry stood, looking ready and even eager to leave, and still refusing to look at her.

"Professor..."

There was a moment's hesitation, in which his expression darkened considerably.

"Do you want to kill my godfathers?"

She was stunned. His question came out of nowhere. Why would he think that? Even if it was true, why would he... Oh, no. He had been speaking with the mongrels. With them so close by they must have found the opportunity to spread tales of her exploits, biased and maligned to make her appear some sort of monster. She would have to undo the damage somehow.

"I only want to protect you."

"And would you think killing my godfathers would do that?" he persisted.

Smart boy.

"... You are too careless with each other. Too rough. I doubt they wish to harm you, but it would only take one scratch, one nip, one accidentally shared cup of tea and you would be undone. Everything you are and could be destroyed by your trust in them."

Harry still wasn't looking at her, and his expression had not softened at all. If anything it had grown more resolved. His eyes suddenly met hers, such brilliant color she would have thought him a werewolf right off the bat, if she hadn't known they had always been like that.

"They are my family. They are protecting me, putting their lives on the line to do so. I will not hesitate to do the same for them, regardless of who their enemies might be."

She could only stand there, stunned by his threat and by the resolve he had shown in making it, as he stalked out of the classroom.

Now what?

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Horace McGunny, school newspaper editor, Ravenclaw, and all around hard-ass was giddy. Giddy. He hadn't felt this pleasantly excited over anything since he'd first received his invitation to Hogwarts. He had received a Court Owl at breakfast, and with it was an invitation to interview one Harold James Potter. He had forced himself to confirm this with Professor Toure before he let himself get carried away with what might be a Weasley prank. But no, it was authentic and scheduled for Friday, a mere two days away.

He called an emergency staff meeting.

The rooms they used to organize the paper was a strange mixture of business office meets factory meets medieval castle meets study hall. Their printing press, a very old but fine machine capable of printing three hundred pages of magically enhanced print and pictures an hour, looked more like a giant factory loom that spanned the entire thirty feet of the back wall. For safety reasons, they put up a cast iron gate, specially warded so that only Professor Toure or McGunny could unlock it. On the other side of the gate were several cubicles, and in each cubicle was a small wooden table with a type writer. Every member of the newspaper go their own cubicle, regardless of their job, and what they did there was represented by the state of their assigned space.

Colin Creevy's cubicle was lined with photographs, mostly his own, but a few he had collected from elsewhere. Hermione Granger's cubicle was a perfectly tidy little space, with appointment calendars, academic schedules, files for articles she had completed and ones she was working on, and various other knickknacks. Ron Weasley's work station existed only in myth, hidden in the realms of absolute chaos beneath his piles of notes, interviews, old papers, paper planes, photos, and probably homework that was months overdue.

For the meeting, McGunny decided to keep it brief, and so let everyone stand in their cubicles, while he stood in the hall where everyone could see him.

"Alright, everyone I've got an announcement," he said, keeping his expression serious, when all he felt like doing was giggling. He held up his letter. "We received an invitation this morning to attend a small press conference Friday evening in London with five of the leading newspapers in Britain."

Everyone looked surprised except for Granger, but that was hardly unexpected, and then the questions started.

"What's the conference about? Who's going to go?" Weasley shouted out first, above everyone else's confused murmuring.

"Harry Potter has finally agreed to an interview."

There was a stunned silence, followed by a hoot of joy from Parker.

"Finally!"

"We have to go all the way to London for that? What the fuck?"

"Watch your mouth, Weasley," McGunny snapped. "It's for security reasons. They won't allow the press into Hogwarts after what happened with Quick, so they're holding it in the Iron House. This is big news, after all. All of Britain wants to know about these attacks, and this isn't the first time Potter's name has ended up in the paper. This will be the first time he's answered questions directly. Considering how many things have gone unanswered since he's gotten here, I think we need to exploit this opportunity for everything we can. I want a special edition out by Sunday."

There were numerous protests.

"That's a week ahead of schedule! I don't have my articles ready!"

"I can't proofread an entire edition in four days! I only have half a paper's worth to begin with!"

"It's a Hogsmeade weekend! I've got Christmas shopping to do!"

"Why don't we just drag Potter in here and get the interview now?"

“But what about my interviews?”

“How come-”

“That isn't-”

“No way-”

“SHUT UP!”

Everyone immediately silenced under McGunny's harsh command. He glared at all of them, disgusted.

“What is wrong with you all? This isn't a crisis! The best in the business are going to handling this thing, and we've just been handed the opportunity to count ourselves among them. You should be proud. You should be excited. This is the real thing! We've got a classmate in this school making history as we speak and we don't know a damn thing about him. Our school has been attacked by an escaped convict and foreign terrorist group, and we don't know why. Every student in Hogwarts deserves to know what is going on, and it is our responsibility to inform them. So I don't want to hear anymore whining about how inconvenient it is or how hard. Lets pull together like the professionals I know you can be and get this thing done. What do you say?”

A resounding cheer, and this time even Granger and Weasley seemed enthused. Satisfied that he had rallied his troops, McGunny moved on to more practical matters.

“Good. I want all of you to write a list of questions you would like to ask Potter and submit them on my desk. I'll sort through the ones I think relevant, and bring them to the interview. Creevey, you'll be going with me as the photographer, but go easy on the flash, will you?”

“Wait a minute!” Parker interrupted, “What about me? Potter is mine!”

There was a scattering of giggles, and she turned a bit pink.

"That's not what I meant and you guys know it. The Potter articles are mine."

"You said they were mine now," Greystoke pointed out, crossing his arms and glaring at her.

McGunny shook his head.

"The gossip column belongs to you both, but this isn't going to the gossip column. This is front page material. It's also a risk. I'll be traveling with Potter to London, and the possibility of another attack is high, so I'd rather go myself than risk one of you. Creevey's already proven himself willing to come under fire, which is the only reason I'm bringing him."

He made a good point, and since the only person there brave (or just plain rude) enough to contradict him publicly was Weasley and he didn't want to go, no one argued. The truth was less selfless. He wanted to go. He wanted to sit down and talk to Potter one on one, and learn for himself what made him so special. Why had the Dark Lord picked him? What, exactly, had he picked him for?

There was an aura of purpose that surrounded Potter, as if his existence held a destiny beyond that of normal people. McGunny had heard of such people before, but the closest he had ever come to seeing one himself were brief glimpses of Britain's dictator. He had never thought he would meet for himself such a person before their significance became known to the rest of the world.

So now was his opportunity. If he was very careful, perhaps he could gain some trust from Potter. When he graduated from Hogwarts at the end of the year and took up journalism in university, he might just be able to continue a repertoire with the Gryffindor. People like Parker and Greystoke were too hungry, too aggressive in their pursuit and it didn't surprise McGunny a bit that they hadn't gotten anywhere with the boy. Yet, Granger was a trusted confidante, despite her position in the paper, and guarded his secrets savagely.

He wanted something in between. He was not expecting Potter's darkest secrets, but he wanted to be trusted with his truths. Trusted not to distort what ever Harry said into something sensational for the sake public appeal, and in turn told openly and honestly what could be said.

He wanted to write history as it happened.

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Natalie had hoped to find Harry alone, but with his two new pets following him about, that was impossible. So after dinner, she waited for him by the stairs, and when he finally arrived she pulled him aside in full view of the werewolves and put up a silencing spell so they couldn't hear.

"You've been avoiding me," she said right off the bat, and Harry looked momentarily embarrassed before shaking his head.

"No, I've just been busy and I've had a lot on my mind."

From over Harry's shoulder, she could see both of his guards watching intently and gave them a rather nasty look. The lighter one had the decency to look elsewhere, but the darker just grinned at her toothily.

"I don't suppose I was one of those things on your mind?" she said, smirking a bit. She stopped when he didn't say anything. He wasn't looking at her anymore. That was definitely not a good sign.

"Harry?"

"Natalie... you know I like you, right?"

"Sometimes I wonder."

"Don't. I do like you. I like you a lot, but... I can't... I can't be with you right now. Too much is happening and we're both so young, and I don't-

The slap cut him off effectively. Which was good, because she couldn't stand to listen to him awkwardly rambling on about how he loved her and couldn't be with her. She didn't want excuses. She left him standing stunned, and stalked past two equally stunned men as she made her way to the dungeons. Her eyes were burning and her teeth were clenched, but she would hold back her tears until she safely out of view of everyone.

She'd be damned if she started acting like Ginny.

Book III:

Chapter 12: The Prince and the Scribes

Friday afternoon, Harry left for London. Hermione had dressed him semi-formal in an outfit he hadn't seen since his stay at the Dark Lord's lodge, and wrapped in his Baluvian cloak for his journey to Hogsmeade. The journey was something of a parade, with Horace McGunny, Colin Creevey, Professor Snape, and himself placed into a carriage and surrounded by a large contingent of Sentinels on the ground and on horse back guarding them. Even more Sentinels wandered the streets of Hogsmeade, while curious onlookers peered out their windows at the person responsible for so much security.

It was all eerily quiet to Harry, peering out over the snow covered country side and village with only the sound of the carriage wheels and horses to break the silence. McGunny, a formidable boy in Harry's estimation, had said nothing more than a few polite greetings, and Harry wasn't sure if it was his own sense of professional courtesy or Snape's presence that stayed his questions. Creevey, normally a flash happy fool, seemed to be waiting for McGunny's permission to do anything and Harry was glad for it. He didn't think he could stand his picture being taken just yet.

He needed the time to think. Snape knew what he would be allowed to talk about, and they had practiced signals to help them communicate what to do if the questions were to be avoided, ignored, lied in response to, or told plainly. That still left the things Harry didn't want to talk about, and wasn't obligated to indulge. He resolved not to discuss his friends. He didn't want attention drawn to them with potential assassins wandering about. He also couldn't discuss the basilisk debacle even if he wanted to. That left a lot of other things he wasn't sure he wanted known or not.

How much was he willing to talk about the Dark Lord? About his parent's death? His relationship with his godparents? His relatives? Who knew what everyone would start asking?

It all came down to what he was willing to let complete strangers and acquaintances know about him. Strangers and acquaintances who

could be potential friends or enemies. It all made him hyper aware of his vulnerabilities.

They stopped the carriage at Madam Pudifoot's and from there took her floo to a security check point in the Iron House. Sneezing out floo powder and soot, Harry stumbled into a lobby of some sort, with high vaulted ceilings and columns engraved with iron gargoyles staring down at them accusingly.

"Step this way Mr. Potter," ordered a Sentinel, looking as intimidating as the gargoyles that surrounded them. She handed him some water to drink, while she ran her wand over him to check for unauthorized paraphernalia. The only questionable items she found were his watch and cloak, which she let him keep.

As they were being checked over, several other people arrived. Harry assumed they were the other reporters and photographers. This was confirmed when one of the wizards who just entered immediately tried to take a picture and was tackled to the ground by several Sentinels.

"Andy, you have to wait for security to clear you first!" the woman who preceded him admonished. She would have been quite pretty if her dress and make-up weren't so gaudy, and she didn't try to turn her every gesture and expression into some sort of sexual tease. At first, she looked totally ridiculous to Harry, but when she turned her attention to him he found himself terrified. He was very glad there were several Sentinels and a Snape between them.

"That would be Rita Skeeter," Snape informed him. "A remarkable specimen of newspaper media. Her natural habitat ranges from political scandals to the sexual misconduct of pop idols, where she grazes on the babble of men unprepared for her vulgar innuendo, only to regurgitate misquotations and fragmented statements later for the rest of her pack back at the Wizing Weekly. She is the finest of her species."

Harry was not comforted. Snape smirked.

"Just pay attention to what she is saying, not how she says it. And if she leans forward, for Merlin's sake, don't look down."

What did he mean by... oh. Oh. Eww.

"Potter," McGunny greeted, "Mind if we get a picture?" He gestured towards Colin waiting anxiously behind him.

Harry's first instinct was to say no, but then remember this was what he had agreed to and nodded. He didn't smile though. In wizarding pictures, you could always tell when an emotion was fake, because after a while the people would fidget in the image and give themselves away. So he stood still and serious, and hoped he would look less nervous than fake smiling would reveal.

Colin barely got a shot off, before another reporter shoved him rudely aside to get one of his own. Harry's wand immediately snapped up, muttering a hex. The camera was encased in a sphere of darkness. The photographer panicked, and dropped it. There was a very tense silence.

"I didn't give you permission," Harry said stiffly, though in truth he was most irritated by the man's callous act towards his classmate. He might not have liked Colin, but he hated adults bullying children. He helped the younger Gryffindor to his feet, and checked to make sure both boy and camera were unharmed. The photographer, a burly young man, was flustered.

"Er... s-sorry... didn't mean to..."

"You took too many liberties. Now you know better. Now you all know better," Snape growled at the room.

Harry had expected to be scolded by his professor, but the man seemed to approve. He would have to ask him about that later. The Sentinels went back to checking the people and their equipment, and the reporters just watched young Harry, re-evaluating their approach. They weren't used to dealing with children, but had assumed automatically that he would be easily intimidated. That clearly wasn't

the case. It also didn't escape their notice that Harry and Snape had both been allowed to keep their wands while the rest of them had not.

Everyone remembered to ask before taking his picture after that.

A woman, not a Sentinel though, appeared from a side door to escort them to a drawing room. The room itself reminded Harry of a cheap knock off Malfoy's drawing room with a large fire place, dark furniture, and a wet bar set just so. Harry was instructed to sit in the Master chair, a wing-backed monstrosity positioned dramatically by the fire, while the reporters took up the surrounding sofa's and love seats. A few Sentinels guarded the doors and directly behind the reporters, while Snape set himself directly across from Harry in a slightly smaller replica of his own chair. From his position, Harry could see all of Snape's little gestures and expressions that would guide him through the interview, while to everyone else he was completely hidden.

The hostess-like woman set out some tea and snacks, bid them all to keep their questions 'civilized', and left. There was a very tense silence. Harry looked around at their anxious, eager faces and wondered why no one had started. He paused at McGunny, who looked vaguely amused at the other reporters.

"May I ask you some questions, Mr. Potter?"

Harry smiled a bit. It seemed that of all the reporters there, the only one who knew how to start was the only one who knew how to be polite.

"Of course."

"Your name has appeared during several events of public interest, yet this is the first time you have agreed to a formal interview. Can you tell us why?"

There was a pause as Harry thought of his reply, then "I'm a private person. I don't like being gossiped about, but lately that's been impossible to avoid with all the time I've spent with Lord Voldemort-" there were a few little gasps "- and with people trying to kill me.

There's a lot of ridiculous ideas floating around, and I thought it was time to set things right. I still don't like being gossiped about, but the truth is better than a fantasy. At least, I think so."

Another reporter spoke up.

"Ah, Mr. Potter, if I may," he asked, and continued when he received a nod, "There's been a great deal of speculation about your origins. We know you were picked up by WYRA just shortly before you came to Hogwarts, but can you recall anything about your parentage?"

Harry took a deep breath, looked to Snape for reassurance, and nodded.

"Yes, I-" he swallowed thickly, "I was born in England. My father was James Potter and my mother is Lily Evans. Both attended Hogwarts where I go to school now, and married after they graduated. I was born a few years later, but we fled to Germany before I turned one. We lived as muggles for all the time they raised me. I didn't even know wizards existed until..."

He had to pause, and poured himself some tea. No one dared rush him, though he could read a savage hunger for his every word. Only McGunny remained respectfully reserved, encouraging him to continue with the most minute of gestures.

"Until they died when I was eight. They were killed by a burglar while I was at school. I was sent to live with my mom's muggle sister and her family in Surrey, still thinking I was just..."

He almost shrugged, but caught himself.

"... unmagical. I didn't perform any magic until I was ten, and then WYRA came and got me. Actually, it was Pro-"

Snape made a gesture for him to stop his line of explanation, looking rather alarmed.

"...probably the best thing that ever happened to me," he finished.

"Are you telling us both your parents were British-born wizards?" a bespectled man asked.

"Yes. My father was a pureblood and my mother was a muggleborn. And you didn't ask permission first. If you do that again, I'll ignore your question."

Rita Skeeter, finally took her opportunity to attack.

"Harry, if I may call you Harry?"

He didn't even look at her to see if she was leaning forward. "No, you may not."

"Oh... might I ask what your relation to the Dark Lord might be? Familial perhaps?"

"No, we aren't related. At least not closely... I don't think. I suppose we both come from Salazar Slytherin descendants, because of the parseltongue and all. My great grandfather was a parselmouth, but I don't think my dad was. Probably skipped generations in the Potter line. You all knew I was a parselmouth, right?"

Everyone nodded.

"So, no we're not related. We just... do stuff together. I'm not sure how it got started really."

"How did you two first meet?" she continued.

That was one of those questions Snape had told him to avoid explaining and Harry was more than happy to. So he ignored her and turned to one of the reporters who hadn't spoken.

"Do you have a question?"

She seemed surprised, and struggled for a moment before spitting out, "What are your thoughts on foreign wizards attempting to kill you? How do you feel about it?"

He smiled at her. "Probably the same way I'd feel if British wizards were attempting to kill me. I really wish they wouldn't. It's hard to have fun from a hospital bed and I'm way behind on my schoolwork."

There were a few chuckles, and even Snape managed to smirk.

The next couple of questions were about the last three assassination attempts, which Harry could answer honestly and openly enough. Yes, he helped rescue teachers from the collapsing stands. No, he didn't rescue Malfoy, the Dark Lord, or help keep the stands aloft. Yes, it made him very angry that so many innocent people could have been hurt. No, he wouldn't be playing Quidditch that year. The poisoning was very unpleasant, but he was very happy to have a potion's master on hand who recognized and remedied the problem. It was in his pumpkin juice. No, he doubted a classmate did it. Yes, it tasted awful. Yes, werewolves rescued him from the third attempt...(and after a dirty look from Snape)... but his professors would have done so if they weren't there. Their names were Sirius Blackbone and Remus Slivermoon. No, he wasn't afraid of them. Yes, he trusted them (despite the dirty look Snape gave him).

"They're my godfathers," Harry volunteered. The only information he'd volunteered. "My father named Sirius as my godfather when I was born. I would be living with him right now except for the whole werewolf thing."

"How did they become werewolves?" McGunny asked, and despite not waiting his turn, Harry answered anyway.

"Remus was a werewolf since he was a little kid. My dad was a good friend when they went to Hogwarts together, even after he found out. Sirius was my dad's best mate, and they were aurors together during the war. After he got captured, Remus vouched for him and Greyback turned him into a werewolf."

"Your father actively fought against the Dark Lord?"

"Yeah... I mean, yes. Yes, both my parents did."

Skeeter raised her hand, and reluctantly Harry acknowledged her.

“How do you think your parents would feel about your relationship with the Dark Lord, especially after losing the war to him?”

Harry tensed. He did not like that question, having wondered himself many times over the year. Would they be proud? Horrified? Sad? He looked to Snape, but he merely lifted a brow. Well?

“... I don't know. I loved my parents very much, and I'll always respect that they fought for what they believed in, regardless of whether they turned out to be right or not, but I never knew them as well as I thought I did. I only knew them as my muggle parents, not the wizard and witch and warriors that they were. I can't say if they'd be happy or angry about the decisions I've made. They couldn't be here to help me make them, so I have to accept that I'll never know. All I can do is make decisions I can live with and be proud of, and hope they'll understand, where ever they are.”

The reporters scurried to write down what he said (quik-quotes quills had been banned from the interview), except for McGunny who looked at Harry and gestured towards Colin waiting anxiously behind him. He nodded and Colin grabbed a quick picture of him, still caught up in the melancholy of his thoughts. It startled everyone else, a few even snapped their quills. The other photographers scrambled to get the same shot, but Harry was already distracted with fixing the damaged quills and the shot was lost.

“Do you have any plans after graduating?” McGunny asked.

“Nothing concrete. I have a lot of things I'd like to try, but they're not really plans. I'd like to travel some. Explore the Britain beyond Hogsmeade. Take art lessons. College, though I don't know what I'd study. I've got time to figure it out though.”

“Do you think you'll go into politics or a Court related job?” someone else asked.

“I hope not. That all sounds really boring.”

That earned him a few chuckles. From there, the topics were much lighter. How did he like school? What was his favorite subject? What activities did he participate in? What about his summers? What did he like best about the wizarding world? Simple and menial, there were very few questions he had to avoid (Where do you stay for the summer? Who is your best friend? Do you have a girlfriend?) and at long last an invisible clock chimed the end of the hour and the end of their questions.

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Snape managed to make it to his rooms a quarter to nine and was considering turning in early for the night, when the appearance of Larousse threw his plans to the wind. He suppose he should have expected her, but honestly he had been too relieved his responsibility for the night was over to think of other obligations. Harry had done far better than he had thought he would, and his early establishment of magical dominance was pleasantly unexpected and insured control over the reporters.

"How did it go?" she asked, as he drew near.

"It went well. The Dark Lord will be pleased, so long as Wizard Weekly remembers their place. I don't trust that Skeeter woman not to twist everything into something insipid and melodramatic. How was your evening?"

"... I've lost the werewolves."

He stiffened.

"I was keeping track of them until I had to supervise Sr. Dueling Club, and then they just disappeared. I keep getting this feeling that they've been stalking me though."

She did not seem overly concerned, and he thought her rather careless for that. The werewolves were not as logical or as afraid of the Dark Lord's wrath as a typical wizard, but relied heavily on their instinct.

And their instinct was to kill her, the wild cat to their wolf, their natural enemy.

The only thing staying their hand was probably Harry. If they learned of her intention to adopt him, then all bets were off. He would have to remind her.

“Do you wish to come in?”

“That wouldn't be appropriate,” she said, although she looked tempted.

“We are well beyond the age where chaperone's are necessary, madam. We will behave ourselves, and there is no one here to imply otherwise.”

He stepped into his private rooms and she followed. She had only been there once before, when Harry was injured under Infelix misera, and took a moment to gage her surroundings more closely while her host set about making them tea. There was a sitting room connected to a kitchenette and hallway that must have led to his bedroom, bathroom, and study. Everything was masculine and a bit messy. The walls were lined with shelves, crammed with tomes and scrolls and even then a few stray items had to be stacked on top or piled beside or between the shelves, and a display case of silver and glass and more protections spells and wards than a Gringrotts' vault stood nearby. There was a large fire place, always lit even in summer to fight the dungeon's constant drafts, and above it a collection of swords she knew him to be proficient in. There was a sitting chair for reading and a couch for napping most likely, comfortably ragged and probably having seen very little company.

“Does it meet with my lady's approval?” he asked from the kitchenette.

“It's a bit gloomy without windows, but it suits you.”

“I strike you as gloomy?”

"Of course not. You're much too aggressive a personality for that. It suits you despite being gloomy. Can you tell if the mongrels followed me down here?"

"Can't you?"

"I thought they might have, but the dungeons at night make me paranoid."

He was smirking as he brought over the tea, setting it on a small end table.

"They did not follow. They could not follow. I have the entire floor warded against them. You and your confidences are safe here, but I will escort you back to your rooms when we're done."

"That's very chivalrous of you, but I-"

"It's is the duty of a husband to look after his wife's well being. I may as well practice it now."

She smiled, and he felt strangely pleased with himself. Damn tea.

"Is there anything in particular you wished to discuss? Aside from Potter's romp down memory lane?"

"Yes. I think I figured out why you should adopt Harry."

"Oh? Does it involve free manual labor?"

"Severus, really. This is much better. I feel like a fool for not thinking of it sooner."

"Well, you managed it in the nick of time. You had less than three hours before you had to abandon this enterprise altogether. So what did you find?"

"The Potter Vault."

Snape stared at her for a moment, a bit surprised, then sighed.

“As much fun as it would be playing pirate with my old nemesis' wealth, I don't think the Dark Lord would approve of the misappropriation of young Potter's inheritance.”

“Of course not, and I don't think you'd be dishonorable enough to do such a thing. I'm not talking about galleons and gemstones, I'm talking about knowledge.”

“Knowledge?”

“Books, Severus. The Potters are a very, very old family. Their wealth is accumulated, not in money, but in books and scrolls and magical artifacts. I did some research, as much as I could on such short notice, and did you know they have the eighth largest collection of Book of Shadows in Britain? That's a lot of never before duplicated spells, Severus. Spells that haven't been seen in centuries. And best of all, you don't need to steal them. Only borrow them long enough to make copies. When Harry is legally an adult, he'll keep the originals and you'll keep the new ones.”

Snape's interest was definitely peaked. He could easily confess to being an all out bibliophile, and a great deal of his wealth had gone towards the accumulation of rare and valuable books. He had kept all of his college text books, written three of his own, collected over two hundred in different languages while traveling abroad, and raided more antique stores and auctions than he could remember, but what he did not have were Book of Shadows. The Prince family books had been sold in his youth to pay for his education, and such books were near impossible to pry from their rightful owners. Most preferred them burned rather than have them passed to someone outside the family.

“And then, of course, there is the dowry.”

“Dowry?”

“It should be quite substantial for Harry. You're entitled to a percentage as the head of the family, you know? And of course, there are those who will pay handsomely just be given permissions to try and court Harry when he comes of age.”

"It would be the Dark Lord's-"

"He trusts your judgment. He'll let you manage the matter just as he let you manage Harry's press conference and formal outings. Just think of it this way Severus. You would have all the same responsibilities that you have now, only you'd receive much greater compensation."

Snape let out a rude snort.

"That isn't true and you know it. The title of 'Father' entails a whole world of new responsibilities that 'guardian' does not. For every failure, misdeed, embarrassment, and lapse in judgment Potter commits, I will be judged in turn."

"And every success, accomplishment, and honor will bring glory to you. You will finally be acknowledged as you deserved, but never were because of your father. You will be the head of a family of purebloods, as strong and influential as Lestrangle or Broadwick or Prince. You will be the pater primo of the Snapes, the next great family of Purebloods."

"By following Potter?" he asked, bitterly.

"Or by leading him. It's up to you."

Snape remained quiet for a long time, mulling over everything she had said. Some of it sounded over idealistic, but workable. It all appealed to him on some level. It was true that no Pureblood could turn him away without turning away Potter as well, and that would be a slap in the face of the Dark Lord. Unforgivable. Life threatening. Infinitely satisfying to Snape.

Plus it would piss off Black and Lestrangle something fierce.

He sighed.

"Very well. You've convinced me."

And she kissed him. She caught him by surprise, but... it was a pleasant sort of surprise. She was very soft and warm, and tasted of the tea they had been drinking. Her breasts pressed against his chest, and he could feel them rise and fall with her quickening breath, and he was sorely tempted to stand and seize her and...

He pulled back, flush and flustered.

"Per..perhaps you needed that chaperon, after all," he managed.

She looked utterly unrepentant.

"Thank you, Severus. You've made me so happy."

"Don't thank me just yet. I said you convinced me. Now you have to convince the Dark Lord."

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Natalie walked into Tuesday dueling practices hoping to see Harry, but he was as elusive that day as he had been since Friday. Aside from a few glimpses during classes and in the halls, she hadn't seen him hardly at all, but then no one else had either. He was feeling extraordinarily shy since the interviews, and the unusually high influx of newspapers hadn't helped matters. Every where she went there were students and teachers reading or talking about him, and she would be quite annoyed if she weren't just as bad.

She had read the articles. At least a dozen of them anyway. Aside from the Hogwart's Herald, the only paper most anyone read was the Wizard Weekly, but alternative newspapers such as Newts & News, Pellington's Inquisition, and the Third Eye Tribune had been smuggled in with the morning mail, as well. Much of what was said was contradictory to the other papers.

Some portrayed Harry as a young tyrant, casting spells this way and that for the most minor of offenses, while others described him as mild-mannered and chivalrous, fixing broken cameras and helping some one up when they tripped. Still others suggested he was

uncertain of himself and snippish, others that he was unusually self assured and humorous. She didn't really care about any of the paper's opinion's regarding his personality, as she knew him better than any of them could ever boast.

What she did care about was that his parents were really wizards, his body guards were really his godfathers, he didn't want to work for the Court, and that she hadn't known any of that before. Oh, she had suspected his past was traumatic, that he held secrets, and liked his privacy, but she felt she should have been privy to at least some of it. Hermione must have known. She probably knew all of it.

God, she hated that girl.

Since she was already there, Natalie decided to work off some of her frustration in a duel. She wasn't the best duelist in the club, but she did well enough that at least the girls were afraid of her. There was one other person in the supply closet changing into their combat robes, and she couldn't help but smirk a little when she saw who it was.

"Hello, Ginerva."

The younger girl spun around, startled, and her alarm didn't waver when she recognized her company.

"It's been a while. I was beginning to think you were avoiding me," Natalie teased, step towards her and then past her to where her uniform was hanging. Ginny stiffened, but didn't reply, instead securing her leather armor. "I hope there aren't any hard feelings."

Ginny glanced at her, then back towards the exit, but didn't speed up her pace. Gryffindor pride cracked, but not broken. Natalie's smirked widened.

"We shouldn't let something as silly as a boy come between years of... history. We girls have to stick together, after all."

The younger girl finished strapping on the last of her armor, and walked out. Natalie knew it was petty and futile and stupid

considering Harry had only been hers for the briefest of moments. At least he had been hers, and if it meant reminding one silly little girl she'd had even less in order for her to be content with that, then it was all fine and dandy.

One day Harry would be ready, and she would be there to snatch him up before anyone else. Or perhaps he would come to her.

He was unpredictable like that.

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Book of Shadows- a handwritten book of spells collected and sometimes created by an individual or family/coven.

Literally, it's Latin for 'first father', and I use it as a term indicating the first of a genetic line. Like Salazar Slytherin would be a pater primo because no one knows anything (we assume) about the Slytherin line before him.

Book III:

Chapter 13: The Prince and his Honor

When the first article hit the breakfast tables on Saturday, Harry thought he would never be able to look anyone in the eye again. The interview had gone well. Snape would have mocked or scolded him otherwise, but afterwards everything was left to the discretion of the reporters.

They had none.

There was no consistency in what each article had written. Some pieces were ridiculously over dramatic while others printed bare facts that somehow misled even more thoroughly than the former. Only McGunny's article held anything resembling accuracy, but that may have been because the school would have known he was full of crap if he started rambling about Harry being a miniature Voldemort or some frightened little orphan.

That might have been giving the student body too much credit, because by Tuesday his embarrassment had dissipated into full blown irritation with all of them. After two and half years he thought everyone was pretty clear about who and what Harry was. Yet everyone was treating him like a stranger. Not necessarily rude (except for the Slytherins who all seemed to have gotten their nickers in a twist) but a nervous uncertainty, as if they did know if he was going to wave hello or cast Cruciatius on them. Some people had developed an annoying habit of adding 'mister' or 'sir' in their greetings, reminding him inexplicably of house elves.

"Sorry, Mr. Potter, I didn't see you there."

"Do you think they'll have the pitch fixed by New Year's, Mr. Potter sir?"

"Sir, you can borrow my notes."

Very aggravating, but snapping at them would only have made it worse. When he asked Hermione how long she thought it would last,

she had only given him a stricken look. He didn't find it at all reassuring.

To make matters worse, his stress was affecting Sirius and Remus. They were all very careful not to take their unease and frustration out on each other, but their bad tempers were obvious to everyone else. Sirius insisted the extra aggression was justified, swearing he had been hearing Slytherins plotting since Saturday. Remus could neither confirm nor deny this, his senses dulled due to a mild cold, but Harry wasn't going to take any chances until he could talk to Draco in private. Draco had been scarce Monday, but a note at breakfast was enough to secure some time during lunch to speak.

Unfortunately, the reality of Sirius' paranoia revealed itself between his morning classes.

He had just climbed the stairs to the third floor and was heading towards Arithmancy when he found his way blocked by a group of Slytherins. Their leader was a skeletal girl with fingers like spiders, but the rest of them were large and brutish.

Sirius was not with him, having wandered off to investigate an unusual smell, leaving Remus who wasn't half as intimidating. Hermione walked right past them, but Harry found himself cut off when he made to follow.

"Where do you think you're going, kitty cat?" the bony girl sneered.

He knew instantly that he was in trouble, but he wasn't sure of how much trouble until Remus' soft growl alerted him to the three other Slytherins coming up the stairs and blocking his retreat. Other students began to realize something was happening and the hallway and stairs began to congest heavily with gawkers. Beyond the Slytherin goons, Hermione was struggling to get back to him with little progress.

"What are you doing? Let me through!"

"Don't lose your tiara, princess. Barlow just wants to have a little talk, ya?"

It was such an obvious lie, Harry wondered why he even bothered.

“What do you want?” he asked, more to buy time than out of curiosity. The smile she gave him was Cheshire wide and complete with little fangs.

“What does any modern woman want? A diamond necklace. A cute boyfriend who adores me. A summer house on the beach. But mostly, I want my parents back.”

Her expression went blank.

“But I can't have those things anymore, because of what those bloody fucking aurors did. Hell, maybe it was your father that killed them and sent me to live with a useless aunt and uncle, and let them burn through my trust fund like they'd won the lottery. I don't know and I really don't care, but I believe I'm due a little compensation, don't you?”

Under normal circumstances, he might have been sympathetic. But these were abnormal circumstances and he was only half listening, his mind running a mile a minute, sorting through potential battle scenarios and means of escape, until he settled on a plan. It was risky, but if successful it yielded the best results. He was ready before she even finished speaking.

“You're right,” Harry said calmly, startling everyone. “And I will give you the chance to avenge your family. Remus, would you come here a moment?”

“What are you up to, Harry?”

“Trust me.”

With everyone disoriented from his supposed surrender, he took Remus' hand and removed his glove, then spun around and abruptly slapped her with it.

"You have claimed an injustice by my family and sullied its name. I challenge you to a duel. If you stand by your accusation than accept. If it is false, then concede and walk away."

He felt a little silly reciting the challenge by rote, but Snape had drilled proper form and decorum into all his duelists and it would feel even stranger deviating from it. Barlow just stood there, stunned for a long moment. She slowly reached up to touch her reddening cheek.

"Harry, no! You could be expelled for drawing your wand in a fight!" Hermione cried.

"Merlin, what have you done?"

Remus snatched back his glove and shoved it on angrily. Harry didn't acknowledge either of them, his attention fixed on Barlow. As he watched her the blankness was slowly replaced by delight.

"You're going to regret that, little kitty. I accept. Anyone who doesn't want to die, get out of our way."

"Lets move towards the stairs. Less chance of hitting anyone accidentally."

Remus growled in his ear.

"You're not doing this, Harry."

"I can fight one on one or two on ten. You do the math," he hissed back.

"Let him do it."

They both turned towards the stairs at the sound of Sirius' voice. He had two of the three Slytherins by their necks, and smiled grimly up at them.

"It's a matter of honor now. He'll have to see it through. Kill anyone who tries to interfere. I'll take care of things on this end."

“Siri-”

“That's an order!”

“Fuck.”

Remus moved to obey, herding the students like sheep towards the group of Slytherins, blocking them from making any surprise attacks while Harry was engaged. Harry and Barlow had taken up position by the stairs, not looking away from the other for even a moment.

He had challenged her formally, but this wasn't a formal duel and even if it was he doubted she knew proper form, so there was no customary stance or salute and they stood much closer than official gaming rules would allow. There was only steady gazes and twitchy fingers aching for their wands, and at their current range the person who got off the first spell couldn't miss so they'd only need one.

The crowd was silent, the tension hung heavy in the air like humidity or magic. For a few seconds they did not move, but for Barlow wetting her chapped lips. Inside his pocket, Harry could feel his watch beginning to burn.

Her arm shot up, her wand in her hand and a spell in her mouth. Harry still could have cast his first hex before her, but instead he ignored his wand all together. He jumped forward, grabbing her wrist and swinging her towards the stairs. Her curse broke off into a startled shriek as she lost her balance, certain of her fall. Her demise was cut short by Harry, who instead of letting go held firm to her wrist. She tried to pull herself up, but he moved forward and left her floundering for balance again.

“What are you doing? Pull me up!”

“Not until you yield.”

“What?!”

“We're still technically dueling. I can't help you up until you drop your wand.”

“Fuck you!”

He shifted his weight and she screamed, before he caught himself. There were gasps and snarls of warning and someone cried out for 'Sasha'. Harry merely grunted.

“For such a skinny girl, you're sure heavy. I can't keep this up for much longer. Drop the wand or I'll drop you. I win either way.”

She looked him in the eyes to see if he was bluffing, but all she could see was the strain of him keeping his hold on her. With an angry grimace, she dropped her wand. He kicked it down the stairs as a precaution before pulling her to safety.

The duel was over.

The crowd broke into a maelstrom of motion and noise. There was cheering and back slaps for Harry, until his godfather reached him and forced everyone to give him space. Hermione was in his face, shouting and calling him names that were all variations of 'you stupid idiot' and 'you're a bloody genius'. He didn't feel particularly victorious. He had been chosen for what was likely a very bad beat down for things his parents may or may not have done by a girl he'd never even met and apparently with her House's full support. Quick thinking and luck have saved him this time, but what would happen when one or the other failed? There was no way this was the end of things.

It took a while but Hermione finally noticed he hadn't said a single word.

“Harry, what is it?”

“... Nothing. We're late for class.”

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They were over fifteen minutes late for class, but so was almost everyone else. When Professor Vector asked what had kept them all,

Dean Thomas immediately spat out that someone had pranked the staircase so everyone got stuck to it if they tried to go up. No one contradicted him, though several people glanced in Harry's direction.

Harry hoped everyone would remain similarly tight lipped about his involvement, but wasn't going to be placing any bets on it. Sure enough, by the time class was dismissed the school was buzzing the latest gossip, and Harry could literally watch the spread of the tale like the gradual onslaught of plague. The symptoms involved staring, elaborate gestures, and exclamations of 'no way!' or 'did he really?'.

It was stranger still when Colin Creevey rushed up to him, barely keeping himself from fleeing from the werewolf pair that glared at him, and told him he was in danger.

"Harry I think you should go the other way! Malfoy just heard about the duel and he looks really really pissed, and.. er... he's heading this way!" the boy said, then quickly fled.

Beside him, Hermione rolled her eyes.

It hadn't occurred to Harry that Draco would be mad at him. He supposed it was possible depending on the story he'd been told and by who. In any case, he wasn't going to run every time a Slytherin decided to hold a grudge, even if he was a friend of his. Sirius spotted the young Malfoy first as well as Ron Weasley following close behind and gave them a threatening look. They both hesitated.

"It's fine, Sirius. Draco's a friend. I'm just going to sort things out with him," Harry said. They moved to follow him, but he held up a hand. "No offense, but its kind of hard to settle a misunderstanding with you threatening death over my shoulder. Just give us a little space."

"Harry..."

"We'll just be in the classroom. Unless Moody transfigured himself into desk, I'm sure I'll be perfectly safe."

Sirius, reluctantly, relented but not before sparing them another promise of painful death with only his eyes. Harry, Hermione, Draco,

and Ron quickly moved into an abandon classroom and shut the door. Ron cast a silencing charm, and Harry didn't bother mentioning that Remus probably took it down again as soon as it was up.

"Bloody hell..." Draco muttered, "They're a fright. How can you stand them?"

"I practiced with your godfather."

That almost earned him a patented Malfoy smirk, but then he seemed to remember that he was angry at Harry. He crossed his arms.

"What happened? People are saying you had a duel with Sasha Barlow and that you threw her down the stairs!"

"I did not throw her down the stairs."

Hermione butted in. "It wasn't his fault this time. She cornered him with a goon squad, and it was a duel or a mob. No one got hurt."

Ron snorted. "Well, she obviously isn't alright. She's in the hospital wing, you know."

"What? Who told you that?"

"Uncle Severus."

"Fuck," Harry muttered. "Did he seem mad?"

Draco gave him a 'well duh' look.

"She started it," he muttered.

"Doesn't matter," Ron said, looking far more irritated than Harry thought he had a right to be. "You're in Dueling Club. She's isn't. Our charter could get revoked if you're caught abusing your skills or you'll get expelled from the club, and who am I going to get to replace you before our next competition?"

"I didn't use my magic," Harry insisted. "I didn't even draw my wand. I've got fifty witnesses to can testify that she started it and that she was fine when I walked away."

"And all her cronies will testify that you did."

"Why? What is happening? Why are all the Slytherins pissed off at me? Are you pissed off at me too?"

Draco hesitated, but Ron didn't have enough tact to consider his next words.

"Of course they're pissed. We're all pissed at you. You're the Dark Lord's bloody heir and your family probably killed at least some of their parents. How unfair is that?"

"That isn't my fault!"

"That isn't the point! Lots of kids around here had parents on the other side of the war, but they're not getting news paper articles written about them or free clothes or vacations with the Dark Lord! It's a rip off. Their parents died for him, and the only one he has eyes for is the one with parents who tried to kill him."

Harry didn't have anything to say to that. It was a rip off, but it wasn't his fault. He hadn't asked for any of it, and really he would have been happier to have been left anonymous with only his friends for company... wouldn't he? Although if it weren't for Voldemort, he might never have met his godfathers or at least never been able to talk or speak with them. He could do without the fancy clothes and gifts, but what about the knowledge that had come with the Dark Lord's mentoring? He wish he could say he hadn't wanted any of it, but it rang a lie in his own head.

Merlin, this was why he hadn't wanted to tell anyone. Guilt trips were not his idea of fun.

"So what am I suppose to do? Apologize?"

Draco looked horrified at the suggestion.

“Merlin, Potter, that's the last thing you want to do. That's just handing them the sticks to beat you with.”

“Then what? What can I do?”

There was silence, and he thought it was because they didn't have a solution themselves but Hermione's strained voice revealed a hesitation born of reluctance rather than helplessness.

“You have to fight,” she said, and sighed wearily. “They're going to hate you no matter what you do. It's unreasonable. It's unfair. It's self-destructive. But that the way it is. You're going to have to keep fighting until no one dares challenge you... or at least fewer dare challenge you.”

Harry swallowed. He didn't like it. He could seriously hurt someone or be seriously hurt himself. There had to be another way. He was good at finding solutions that didn't occur to others, but he was currently at a loss. Draco tried to cheer him, but since he was still irritable it came off as mocking.

“Most of my house is just testing for weakness. You defeating Barlow is going to discourage a lot of people from trying anything themselves. No one is going to try anything that will seriously hurt you. Not with the Dark Lord backing you. It's a struggle for dominance. If they can bring you to heel, no one is going to challenge them.”

“Do you want to challenge me?” he snipped.

“Don't tempt me, Harry. I've lost some serious leverage because I'm still your friend. If some one manages to fuck you up, I'm going to lose control of even the first years.”

He felt irrationally guilty for that.

“Sorry,” he said, and changed the subject. “Are you sure Barlow is in the infirmary?”

"Either there or sulking somewhere. Are you certain you didn't hurt her?"

"I might have bruised her wrist when I stopped her from falling down the stairs, but nothing other than that. I didn't even draw my wand."

"When was the last time you used it?"

Harry gave him a funny look, which only served to further irritate the other boy.

"You haven't cast any hexes or jinxes today, have you?"

"No. I think the only spell I cast today was to un-wrinkle my shirt and that was before breakfast."

"Good. Don't cast anything unless it's in front of a teacher. If Barlow is trying to get you in trouble, then your wand is your only sure alibi."

Harry ran his hand through his hair, unhappy but at least he knew what was happening now.

"Thank you, Draco. I'll find a way to make this up to you."

"I'll consider myself well compensated if you come out of this smelling like roses. All I need is a reminder to everyone else that I'm a genius and not a sentimental sod for my acquaintance with you."

There was a knock at the door, which startled everyone who thought the Silencing Charm was still up, except for Harry who knew better. Sirius peeked in, looking annoyed.

"Come on, we've got to go."

By his tone it sounded like more bad news. However, if it related to Voldemort it might not necessarily be bad for him. This hope was quickly crushed when his godfather held up a note, folded into an origami bird and flapping crazily in the man's grasp.

"Lestranger wants to see you."

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“Don't worry, Prongslet. It's not like she can do anything. She just wants to swing her weight around. Try to look important,” Sirius said. He was looking positively chipper (when he wasn't glaring at people) since the fight. Behind them Remus was looking as skeptical as Harry.

The halls were deserted except for the occasional GG, which made the school look strange after the commotion of lunch and the confrontation by the stairs. If they had been heading to Voldemort's office, he wouldn't be as nervous. The Dark Lord would have understood the situation and perhaps even approved of how he had handled it. Lestrage, however, was like Snape. Voldemort put her in a position of trust running the school, and if she decided to punish him somehow the man would probably not ever stop to question it. Worst of all, she probably knew it.

She must have been waiting for some excuse to exact her revenge on him after the basilisk incident, having embarrassed her in front of her master. Well, fuck her. She wasn't half as scary as she thought she was.

The gargoyle on the staircase let Harry pass without a password, but when his godfathers tried to follow the entrance snapped shut and blocked their entrance. He felt a twinge of nervousness, but crushed it. He wasn't to let her intimidate him.

“Mr. Potter,” she said coolly as he stepped off the steps and into her office. It was just how he remembered it, ridiculously cluttered with books, portraits, and artifacts. The latest artifact was one he recognized very well. The Sword of Gryffindor hung upright behind a glass case near the stairs. He brushed his fingers over the case and felt the sword's magic respond, a single ringing sound like that of a bell. Lestrage seemed oblivious to it.

“Headmistress.”

"Have a seat," she said, pointing to chair in front of her desk. Harry did so, but made a point to sit in the chair next to the one she had pointed to. He didn't know what good it might do. They both hummed with magic.

"Do you know why you're here?"

Yes, because you think you can bully me when Voldemort isn't around.

"No."

She smirked.

"There's a young lady in the hospital wing claiming you pushed her down the stairs."

Harry felt a jolt of anger, but kept himself under control.

"Really? That's strange. She must have knocked her head on the way down."

"There are witnesses who say they saw the same thing," she continued. "I find this very disturbing behavior, Mr. Potter. Don't you?"

"Yes, mass hallucinations do seem like a serious problem. I don't suppose they had just gotten out of potions?"

He wasn't looking at her directly, playing at disinterest, but he did notice the little tic starting in the corner of her right eye and felt extremely satisfied with it. It didn't last. Her cool expression took on a more smug look.

"I'm certain this is all a misunderstanding. Perhaps someone else resembling you did it or maybe you accidentally bumped her without noticing. This matter could easily be resolved with your cooperation."

He was being set up for something nasty and he knew it.

"Cooperation?" he said cautiously.

"It will only take a moment."

"What would I have to do?"

"Look at me."

Her voice was commanding, and he looked at her reflexively. There was a familiar sense of pressure and he sprung up, escaping towards the stairs. He heard, rather than saw Lestrangle stand up and follow.

"Where do you think you're going?"

"Away from you. If you want to find out the truth you can legitimens Barlow or one of her cronies. No way in hell am I letting you rummage around in my brain."

"Potter, get back here! We're not done!" she snarled, seizing him by his wrist and turning him around so she could grab his shoulders. He shoved her away, but her response was a backhand that sent him to the floor. She was amazingly strong for a woman.

She climbed on top of him, holding down his upper arm with her knees and grabbing his thrashing head with her hands, forcing him to face her. He kept his eyes pinched shut and struggled, but she was heavy and he was not very strong to begin with.

"Get off! I can't breathe! Get off!"

"Just cooperate Potter and it will all be over shortly," Lestrangle crooned softly, contradicting the pain of her fingers trying to pry his eyelids open and knocking off his glasses.

"Sirius! Remus! Help me!"

"They can't hear you in here. When that door is closed this office is completely sound proof. Now be a good little boy and open your eyes."

He thrashed and struggled and screamed, but it had no affect on her, and when she finally became irritated and sat more heavily on his chest, he really couldn't breathe. His wand was in his sleeve, but without full use of his arm he couldn't cast properly. What could he do? Keep his eyes closed and hope she relented before he suffocated? He couldn't let her into his mind. Too many secrets, too many lives she could ruin with them including his own. If she learned about his godfather's plans to smuggle him out of the country their lives would be forfeit.

He couldn't let that happen! He had to protect them!

He renewed his struggling, even as his lungs burned with the need for air and he was starting to loose all his strength. He felt a pulse of magic (his own? Lestrangle's? One of the artifacts?), and there was suddenly something cool and solid and familiar in his right hand. A rush of joy and he swung from his elbow, making a stabbing motion at his attacker. It missed, but she clambered off him. He took a swing at her as he rolled over onto his knees. He ended up striking one of her chairs instead, slicing it clean down the middle as if it were paper. His glasses quickly secured back in place, he jumped up and pointed his sword at the Headmistress who had retreated behind her desk and drawn her wand. She was furious, but also uncertain and perhaps even a little afraid. He had nearly killed her and they both knew it.

"How did you get that?" she snarled.

"How dare you! How fucking dare you!"

"Potter put that thing down at once! You're lucky I don't-"

He swung his sword across her desk, destroying several trinkets and scattering papers every where. She lifted her wand, but his sword was up before she utter a single spell. If it had been a regular sword, she wouldn't be the least bit intimidated, but this was Gryffindor's sword with the ability to cut through or deflect any spell short of the Killing Curse. She would have been perfectly happy to use the spell, but even she would have a hard time explaining a dead student to the Dark Lord.

She was stuck. She'd underestimated him. It shouldn't have been this difficult. He was just a little boy and she had overcome fully trained aurors with relative ease. Of course, she could use her wand in those instances. She didn't want to use it on this little venture, in case someone grew suspicious and checked him for spells.

If it had all gone to plan, she would have had all his dirty little secrets and the clout to enforce his silence and his obedience regardless of the suffering she inflicted on him. She had been planning this all summer, patiently waiting for the right time and the right opportunity. The release of the newspaper articles made now the ideal time, when he was feeling insecure about his secrets and the world was clawing for his weaknesses. The incident with Barlow made his summons to her office unremarkable and even expected.

Now it was all shot to hell. He still had his secrets, and was now armed and dangerous not only with his sword but her illegal attempt to legitimise him. Her master wouldn't have cared who she practiced such a thing on, unless it was people who held the Dark Lord's secrets. And Harry had those secrets. She didn't know what they entailed, but she knew they were there.

Her only hope now was that he was too naïve to think to use this against her.

"Open the door."

"Potter-"

"Shut up, you psycho bitch! Open the bloody door!"

She hesitated, but he raised his sword threateningly, and she twisted a knob on the underside of her desk. The door opened, and immediately she found her office invaded by werewolves. Well, bugger, she had forgotten about them. Sirius took one look at Harry and the partially destroyed office, then turned a glare on her that threatened murder.

"You alright, Harry?" he growled, not taking his eyes off of her.

“Yeah, lets just get out of here.”

All three shuffled towards the exit, not taking their eyes off of her until they were safely out of sight. The staircase slammed shut behind them. Lestrangle collapsed in her chair, wondering how badly she had fucked things up.

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Larousse entered Bristol's military headquarters just after sunset, striding purposefully to the uniformed sentry guarding the entryway to the inner offices. She pulled out her Sentinel Level three security card and handed it to her.

“I'm Vesper Larousse. I have an appointment with Lord Voldemort.”

She tried to say the name as easily as Harry was able to, but even she found it difficult to say with any sort of confidence. It was enough, however, for the sentry. The uniformed woman looked at her clipboard for confirmation, checked Larousse for any suspicious objects (she removed seven items, including a silver brooch and the silver engagement ring Severus had given her), sequestered her wand, and then ordered another uniformed wizard to escort her.

The pathway they took was obviously intended for civilians and unauthorized personnel. It skirted the edge of the building, leaving windows to the outside on the left and long stretches of solid walls to the right. There were no windows to the interior of the building, and the few doors they passed were heavily warded. The staircase to the fifth floor was narrow, and a security spell was needed to pass each level, until at last she was led through a door and into a lounge.

The lounge was corporate but for a few tapestries and plants scattered around the room and one man from Voldemort's army of assistants stood behind a desk. He smiled politely, but she didn't miss his discreet once over as she approached. She did not smile back. She hadn't dressed up to impress him after all.

"Professor Larousse, welcome. The Dark Lord is just finishing up with a meeting and will be with you shortly," he said officiously. She nodded and wandered over to study one of the tapestries while she waited. After about ten minutes there was a chirping sound, like a finch, and the assistant said she could go in.

Voldemort's Bristol office wasn't like his Hogwart's one. For one, there was a lot more wall space, she assumed so he could put up charts and maps for better study. For another, there were a lot more security spells. She felt vaguely nervous passing the filing cabinets with their aura of malevolent magic surrounding it. The desk sat atop a complex matrix of runes and shapes, preventing anyone except the Dark Lord from touching anything on it. As always, she was very impressed with the dark wizard's efforts.

"Welcome, Madam. Would you like some tea?" the man greeted. He was reclining comfortably on a sofa on the far wall, leafing through a manuscript. His informality unnerved her a bit, but she decided that was probably intentional. This was their first meeting alone and he was probably testing her.

"No thank you, my Lord. I wish to take up as little of your time as possible."

"Mmm..."

He sat up, replacing his manuscript with a cup of tea from an end table, and pointed to the other end of the couch.

"Sit down. It's annoying having to look up at you."

Another wave of discomfort, but she did as instructed.

"So what did you wish to see me about? Your letter said it involved Harry."

"Yes, my Lord. It's the matter of his guardianship."

"Snape is his guardian."

"Practically speaking, yes, he is. Officially, however... he is still up for adoption."

There was a very tense silence as Voldemort set aside his tea and looked straight at her. She could feel his attention like a palpable thing, hot and sticky and making her palms sweat and the air uncomfortable to breathe.

"I am aware of this," he said cautiously. "He has received thirty-two offers of adoption. Twenty of which were made in the last week."

She hadn't known that. It filled her with uncertainty.

"Are... um... have you considered any of them seriously?"

"No. None of them were suitable, but I suspect I will have many more offers over the next year. He's going to become quite popular. Why?"

She could tell he knew what she wanted, and wondered if Severus hadn't forewarned him.

"I would like to place a bid for adopting Harry."

He chuckled, a low and throaty purr and she could feel her face burn. Really, this was stupid. She was a full grown woman, not a timid little virgin anymore.

"And what makes you think I would allow you to take my darling protege? You're not even married."

"Severus and I are engaged. We're going to marry this summer."

He didn't look surprised, but somehow she got the feeling he hadn't known. Apparently, Severus hadn't warned him after all.

"Is that so? He didn't mention it to me. You are certain he wasn't playing with you? His humor can be quite twisted."

"I'm certain. I left my engagement ring with the sentry downstairs."

He looked thoughtful for a moment, and gave her a not so discreet once over much like his assistant had.

"Are you barren?"

"What? No! Of course not!"

"Is he?"

"I haven't bothered asking, but I can't imagine why he would be. There are potions for that if he is."

"Then why would you feel the need to adopt if you can make progeny of your own? You do intend to bare him children, don't you?"

"Yes, I want a large family and I would like Harry to be a part of it. He deserves that. He's a very special young man."

"Yes, he is, which is why I must be careful who I entrust his wellbeing with."

"You already entrust Severus."

"You're not Severus though, and while you do appear to be a rather remarkable woman, you have a history of disobedience that he does not. I have not forgotten why you were thrown out of the Sentinels. I signed for your expulsion personally."

"I have learned my lesson, my Lord."

"Mmm... perhaps you have."

He slid across the couch as smoothly as a serpent, and she leaned back in surprise so that he was on top of her. Her eyes widened, her breath caught in her throat. His hand was on her cheek and she was certain he was about to kiss her, but instead of the pressure of his lips she felt the pressure of his magic against her mind. She jerked in alarm, but his hand on her cheek kept her immobile as he gently sifted through her mind.

It was over almost as quickly as it had begun. He removed his hand and released her from his legilimens, but remained poised over her trembling body.

“You really do love him, don't you? You silly thing,” he chuckled, and she could feel his breath on her face. “I suppose of all the offers I have thus far received, Severus and you would make the most appropriate pair to look after him. However, I do not give gifts. What is in it for me... personally?”

He leaned in closer, their noses just barely touching. Beneath him, his prey was struggling with herself, completely thrown by the onslaught of both his physical and mental presence. She tried to gather her wits, reminding herself why she was here, that Severus was waiting for her back at the school, and this was a test not an offer. Just a test, a test, a test. Oh, he has such a pretty mouth.

He closed the distance between them.

SEVERUS!

She brought up her hand, covering his mouth before it touched hers. She didn't dare shove him off completely. She wasn't that stupid. Even so, he looked rather irritated, so she had to think fast before he forced the issue and she was left with nothing.

“Moody.”

He pulled back a little, interest peaked.

"I'll find and capture Moody. I'll prove to you that I can protect Harry."

Voldemort moved off of her, grinning now.

“Oh, really?”

[illegible]

Alright, there are a few things I'd like to say before you all start bemoaning the possibility of Larousse adopting Harry. One, the reasons she gave Snape for adopting Harry, are not HER reasons for adopting Harry. She might be crazy (might not necessarily is), but she really does want to be his mother. Also, yes, Snape and Larousse would make a poor choice of parents from a moral point of view. Pragmatically speaking, they would actually be good choices, being both strong and intelligent and politically savvy. From an author's point of view, it'd make a fabulous story contribution. There is so much physical, emotional, and psychological conflict such an event would create that there would be no end to the trouble it causes and thus helps drive the story forward.

Additionally, everyone seems to think Voldemort would be too possessive. I think everyone's looking at his motivations too simplistically. Voldemort doesn't make important decisions based solely on his emotions (which are twisted and convoluted and not easily predicted to begin with). He would weigh many factors no one else would think of, like how would the adoption help or hinder Harry's public appeal? Would they encourage or distract loyalty to the Dark Lord? Would parental conflict cause Harry to resent him or turn to him for guidance? What about the werewolves? Can they truly protect Harry or would they leave him more vulnerable? These are only a few of the many, many things Voldemort would be calculating before he even considered letting Harry be adopted.

And in the end he really might not allow it, but it wouldn't be due simply to jealousy.

Book III:

Chapter 14

Having been attacked twice in one day, Harry felt he deserved the rest of the day off. So after sending a note to Hermione, via a charmed paper plane, he retired to his godfathers' chambers for some much needed comfort. Werewolves were very tactile, and while Harry normally wasn't, he was happy to receive some for at least a little while. They curled up together on a large ratty couch, Harry's head in Sirius' lap as the alpha petted his hair and crooned how proud he was of him while Remus rubbed his bare feet. It was all very soothing and he envied this part of the werewolf lifestyle. All of his friends would have bulked at this much touch.

Well, Natalie might have found it charming, but she really wasn't an option right now.

"This is insane," he muttered. "Is everyone trying to kill me?"

"No, Prongslet, just the Slytherins," Sirius assured him.

Harry groaned.

"Perhaps we should have killed her," Remus pondered out loud. "We would have been justified and no one would mess with you again."

"Killer at thirteen. That's marvelous. What great heights will I have to aspire to after that? Serial killer? Terrorist? Oh, I know, I can stage a coup and take Voldemort's job and march on Germany. It'll be blast. You can be my generals."

Remus poked him in the foot, forcing out a laugh.

"I meant us, not you. It's expected of us."

"Voldemort would have killed you."

"We could just have said we thought she was trying to kill you."

"He still would have killed you." He wasn't certain if that was true, but he didn't want to risk it.

"Or worse. He could have given us her job," Sirius chuckled. Harry smiled, despite himself.

"Let's not talk about it anymore for a while. All these attacks are depressing me. Let's talk about Christmas or something."

"No Christmas for us," the alpha said, "We don't celebrate Christmas. It's a Christian holy day. Doesn't make much sense for werewolves. It's not like we'll go to heaven."

"What do you mean?"

"We don't have human souls, Harry. We're saturated with Earth magic. When we die, we'll return to the Earth like any other animal or nature spirit. No heaven or hell for us. No salvation or damnation. Just reincarnation or disembodiment."

"How do you know that?"

"Our shamans. They've been known to summon up dead alphas for guidance during times of trial. Can't do that with human souls, at least not for ones that have faith in an afterlife. You get ghosts who don't have enough faith to move on all the time. Hogwarts is full of them, but they usually crossover after a while."

"Huh, I didn't know that."

"Metaphysics is an elective for seventh years," Remus said. "I wished they'd offered it when I was at Hogwarts. They probably thought it wasn't appropriate to teach things that contradicted or categorized popular religious dogma at the time."

Harry didn't know what metaphysics nor dogma, though he figured it had to do with ghosts and spirits and might be worth looking into. There were a lot of classes he should have been looking into. New club activities too, perhaps. Like fencing (if he was going to keep calling on Gryffindor's sword he thought it prudent he learn how to

actually use it) and riding (the flight on the hippogryph had proven he had a knack for it). So much had been happening though to distract him, and if he didn't get his act back together he wasn't going to pass his classes, let alone qualify for advanced ones.

Larousse popped into his head unexpectedly. She had warned him about thinking ahead and offered her aid. He suddenly wished badly that he could take up her offer, but he couldn't now. They were on opposite sides now. He with the werewolves and she with... just about every other ignorant fool out there. Funny how he kind of missed her.

Sirius tugged at tuft of his hair gently, garnering his attention. "What is it, Prongslet? You've gone quiet."

"Just thinking about the future and all. I don't know what's happening. Everything is changing so fast. My friendships are all in trouble. My school work. My life. I just need time for things to quiet down so I can sort through it all, but every time I turn around there's an attack or a friend is angry at me or wants to be my girlfriend or turns out to be a mass murderer or I can't play Quidditch but then I'm the vice captain of Dueling club or I become national news or the Headmistress tries to mind rape me."

He took a deep breath and let it out.

"Merlin, I'm tired."

His godfathers don't say anything, but Harry suspects they're sharing their patented 'concerned glance' he'll forever associate with them. Still, Sirius and Remus' hands on his hair and feet, rubbing softly, is very soothing and just airing his thoughts is cathartic. He thinks this is the safest he's felt in years.

"We could always leave," Sirius begins, "Right now. Go to Grimmerald for supplies and then take the tunnel into France. We could be out of the country within two hours, before anyone even knew you were missing."

Harry rolled over to look up at his godfather and shook his head.

"It wouldn't work. Dumbledore would kill me or Voldemort when he caught me... and I think he would. I've seen some of the things he can do. Besides, what would running away accomplish? I'd leave all my problems behind, but I'd leave almost everything important to me too. And what about you? You've got your pack and your home. There's nothing like that in Europe. They might just kill you too."

"I doubt Dumbledore would kill you if you ran away from the Dark Lord. He would probably protect you if you renounced him publicly," Sirius pointed out, ignoring the other points. Harry didn't look any more pleased about the notion.

"I wouldn't give that bastard the satisfaction. He tried to kill me. He already killed a Sentinel and tried to kill all of my teachers. Voldemort's no saint, but I don't see how he's any better."

Sirius looked ready to argue, but then stopped himself and sighed. Harry thought he understood. Dumbledore had been his leader a long time ago. Perhaps the ghost of trust still lingered.

"Alright, no extended vacation. Which is really too bad. There's a lot of good sight-seeing out there."

The alpha's gaze became somewhat glazed as he began thinking about something or other. Remus let out a warning growl.

"Pinch him, Harry, he's wandering into pervert territory. Ski bunnies most likely."

Harry just laughed.

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Harry felt better than he had in a long time when he emerged from the wolf den. He was relaxed, reassured, and resolved to fix those aspects of his life he could. He would study harder, practice harder, and work harder in general. He would ignore the gossip as unimportant, fight when he needed to, laugh when he wanted to, and

somehow fix his damaged friendships. If at all possible, he'd get his godfathers to lighten up a bit so he could convince everyone that they really weren't that bad. He would even try to convince Larousse.

Extremely difficult considering he knew his godfathers wanted to kill her, but he really did want them to have a peaceful understanding. Because he didn't want to hurt her. She had done awful things, but awful things had been done to her as well. There was so much about her to admire and appreciate, things he admired and appreciated in his godfathers. Strength, confidence, conviction.

He didn't know if he could make her understand, but he thought if she could resolve some of the pain from her family's death it was possible. For both their sakes, he hoped it was possible.

Lestrangle... he wasn't sure what to do about Lestrangle. His first thought was to tell Snape, but Remus had pointed out that the potion's master would use the incident to his advantage, not necessarily Harry's. His second thought was to tell Larousse, but he dismissed it without giving it voice. He could just try to get in contact with Voldemort, which was the most logical choice, but...

He couldn't help but wonder what he might get out of it.

It was a dangerous thought. Lestrangle had a lot to lose and there was no telling what extremes she might go to to keep Harry silent. At the same time, what might she give him for the same silence? Gryffindor's sword was currently in Sirius and Remus' den, and he really disliked the idea of returning it to the headmistress' office. This was the second time it had answered his call. It felt like it belonged to him.

Could he keep that sword and the assurance that she would never act against him again in exchange for him looking the other way? If he merely tattled and she survived she would be a potentially dangerous enemy for life.

Blackmail wasn't his forte, but the concept intrigued him. He couldn't ask Hermione. She wouldn't have approved, and he couldn't risk her going to her godfather. If she had been the one who was about to be

mentally violated she might have understood his lingering resentment. That left Draco and Natalie. Also risky, but not nearly as much and perhaps he could work towards earning their forgiveness by sharing a secret with them. He sent them notes, hoping they got them before their free period ended. It was his free period as well, but there was only enough time left for him to get back to his common room and get his things for his final class of the day.

Everyone looked surprised when he rushed into Astrology, bare moments before class was to begin and took his seat by Hermione. Sirius and Remus strode in easily behind him and settled themselves into the dark corners at the back of the room.

"Oh, Mr. Potter. I see you're feeling better," Professor Sinistra said, blinking curiously at him.

Harry suddenly realized he hadn't thought of an excuse for why he was absent so Hermione must have made up one for him.

"Um... yeah. I feel a lot better. It wasn't as bad as I thought."

"That's good. Alright class, today we're going to be studying Leap Year Effects. Was anybody here born on a leap year? No, what about..."

While the professor was distracted, Harry quickly scribbled a note and passed it to Hermione.

'What am I feeling better from?'

She scribbled in response: 'migraine'. He could work with that. Of course, he might appear more believable if he didn't look so damn chipper. He took notes, answered and asked questions, and generally made it a point not to think about anything more serious than what was for dinner. Even the odd looks and whispers he was getting weren't enough to throw his mood.

After class, Hermione pulled him aside, looking worried.

"Are you alright, Harry? Headmistress Lestrangle summoned you to her office and then you sent me that note. I was worried she'd punished you some how."

"I'm sorry I worried you, but I'm fine. I even managed to get one up on her. I just needed the time to sort myself out. Things are pretty good really."

She didn't look particularly convinced.

"You didn't eat or drink or touch anything in her office did you?"

He knew what she was really asking, and knew he hadn't been bespelled so he lied.

"Of course not. Well, I sat in the chair, but that's it. Sirius and Remus were with me through the entire thing. Don't worry, nothing happened."

Still skeptical, but she had nothing else to question him with.

"Okay," she said, "Then lets go to the library. You can copy my runes notes. You missed a good lecture there. Professor Keigle just started on elemental rune combinations."

"Sounds fascinating, but I want to finish my conversation with Draco. You go ahead and get started, and I'll join you as soon as I'm done. Yeah?"

"Alright, but be careful. I'd hate for another Barlow to send you to the infirmary for real."

"Secret passageways and notice-me-not charms it is. I'll see you in bit."

"Bye, Harry."

Draco was in the same room they'd met in before lunch, but Natalie was no where in sight. He supposed he should have expected that. Ron was blessedly absent.

"Now what's happened?" the young Malfoy demanded when Harry walked in. "Are you suspended?"

"Of course not. That... woman can't do anything without Voldemort's okay first, but she tried something else and now I need your advice."

Draco crossed his arms, trying to look annoyed but Harry could see he was curious. He could practically hear the gears grinding and ticking behind the Slytherin's eyes.

"... And since you've left Hermione behind I'm assuming it's the sort of advice only a Slytherin can provide? What's in it for me?"

"Perhaps you can tell me."

Harry told Draco about what had happened in the office, minus the part where he had stolen the Sword of Gryffindor, and then asked if he couldn't get something out of it. By the end Draco was looking at him with a mixture of horror and awe and amusement.

"You nearly killed my Aunt Bella?"

Of his eclectic mix of feelings, humor was ironically the tone that stood out.

"You're mad. She's going to kill you. Merlin, she's going to kill me if she finds out you told me. Why didn't you tell Snape about this?"

"What good would that do me? He'd just tell the Dark Lord, and then LeStrange would blame me for whatever happens after that. I don't think I can deal with another crazy person coming after me right now, Draco. I just want to keep her out of my hair for the rest of my stay here... and maybe have her look the other way if something questionable happens."

Draco shook his head in exasperation, but took several minutes to think it over. At last, he seemed to have an idea.

"We should tell my father."

"What? What's that going to do?"

"No, no, listen. We're both just kids. Yeah, we're pretty tough compared to most of the other pixie-brains walking around here and you did alright for yourself in Lestrangle's office, but do you really think either of us stand a chance at outmaneuvering her for long do you? She's very powerful and has a lot more experience. She's even managed to outfox Snape occasionally. The only person I know who can play the game better than either of them is my father."

"What would he care? I mean, she's his sister-in-law. Wouldn't he side with her?"

Draco made a rude noise.

"Of course not. Her name is Lestrangle, not Malfoy, and as far as he is concerned she's just another rival for the Dark Lord's attention. He'll be happy to have a little dirt on her."

"I don't know, Draco. How does this help protect me?"

"Simple, the secret only hold power if the Dark Lord doesn't know about it. So in order to keep you from telling the Dark Lord yourself, he'll have to protect you from Lestrangle."

"What's to keep him from just telling Voldemort everything the moment we tell him?"

"Nothing to gain. Snape wants to be headmaster so he's all for getting her sacked, but my father doesn't get anything other than a pat on the head if he tattles. He outranks her already."

Harry considered it. He wasn't sure he felt comfortable trusting this secret to Draco's rather sinister father, the same man who made Hermione miserable. But Draco was looking uncharacteristically eager, as if it were marvelous game he finally considered old enough to play. If nothing else, perhaps this would be his way of making amends with his friend.

“Alright, contact your father. You better be right about this.”

Draco actually laughed.

“Harry, I promise you won't regret it!”

Of course, both boys knew Slytherin promises weren't worth making.

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Natalie caught Harry just outside of the library, and ignoring his bodyguards, immediately dragged him behind column. She had wanted to ignore him altogether after learning the note she'd received was for both her and Draco, but the young Gryffindor was a treasure trove of unexpected ideas and happenings and if she didn't find out what he wanted her curiosity would be burning. Especially after learning about his supposed attack on Sasha and his summons to the headmistress' office. She really wanted a clear understanding of what really happened there.

“So what did you want?” she said impatiently.

“Natalie, why didn't you come before?” he said, disconcerted and checking the corridor for eavesdroppers (other than his godfathers).

“My life doesn't revolve around your convenience, Harry. I had other things to do. Now what do you want?”

He shook his head. “Forget it, it's already taken care of.”

That hurt. She didn't know why, but him having gotten what he wanted from someone else hurt. Hiding her pain in a veneer of irritation she made to stalk off, but he took her hand and quickly pulled her back.

“Wait, wait. I don't just want to talk to get something out of you. I do like just being with you, you know?” he said, pleadingly.

"Do you now? I wonder about that, Harry, I really do," she snapped, and he had to pull her back again.

"Please don't run off mad again. I tried to tell you last time, I'd love to be your boyfriend. I think you're smart and funny and pretty and kind of scary, but in a good way."

She smirked a little at that, but quickly hid it.

"But I don't want you to get hurt. Okay? I mean first there's Moody, which was bad enough, but now there's that Dumbledore guy and half of Slytherin wants me dead or maimed. If any of them knew you were with me, what's to keep them from hurting you instead? You don't have bodyguards or a Dark Lord watching your back. Do you see? I don't want you to get hurt because of me."

It was possibly the sweetest thing anyone had ever said to her, but she couldn't just accept it without a little more resistance.

"Oh, yeah? What about your other friends? Draco? Clyde? Hell, what about Hermione? Half the school thinks you guys are an item."

"Hermione's got her family watching her back and it's only the dumber half that thinks we're a couple. And besides, do you really think I'd have any luck at convincing her to keep her distance? She'd just lecture me for week. Clyde's always surrounded by other Gryffindors when he's not hanging around with us. Please, don't be mad at me."

Natalie rolled her eyes and sighed.

"Alright, but you're my date for the Malfoy Christmas party."

Harry looked startled and then panicked.

"What? I already told you, I don't want-"

"Well, I don't care what you want," she interrupted, walking out from the darkened corner. "I'm a big girl and I can take care of myself. If you don't want anyone to know, just act like it's a popularity thing."

You know, taking the prettiest girl in the school to the ball just to make everyone jealous. It'll be fun."

She did a dramatic hair flip and wink, and he nearly laughed but quickly got control of himself.

"Natalie..." he said, his pleading dissolving into something more authoritative, which she happily ignored as she strode between the two werewolves. They watched her intently but she ignored the feeling of vulnerability and kept her pace.

"And I want a corsage. I'm wearing white," she called over her shoulder.

"Natalie!"

She looked back and grinned, putting a finger to her mouth and warned him to be quiet. When she was out of sight, she let out a thrilled little giggle. Okay, that probably wasn't the smartest thing to do. He was right about putting her in danger, but she was no damsel. She fully expected some nasty, but intriguing things to happen.

After all, what's the fun in loving a prince who doesn't have a few dragons to slay?

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Wednesday morning had dawned with fresh snowfall in the South of Britain, covering most of England in a clean white blanket. The streets and sidewalks had been trodden into dirty slush along the busier shopping districts, but along the back alleys and side streets everything remained placid and scenic.

Larousse's boots crunched softly as she walked, the only sound the snow didn't seem to swallow as she made her way down Snigget Street. The row of narrow store fronts on either side of her were dark or boarded up, but for a handful of stubborn shops hanging lanterns and half-dead holly and evergreens from their awnings and on the dirty windows as testament to their continuation. Once upon a time

the area had been a booming shopping district, but too many battles had run through there during the war and too many people had died there for the living to ever feel comfortable.

It was the perfect sort of place for conspirators to meet.

She finally came to a shop with chipped green paint and light streaming from the window. She brushed the snow from the sign.

Madam Longbottom's Medicinal Teas and Cordials

Visitors Welcome

This was it. She stepped inside, a little bell announcing her presence as she entered. The shop was surprisingly warm and welcoming. The counter to her right had poinsettia and a rather glum looking toad in a Santa hat, and the smell of baking cookies rose above the scent of herbs and spices. Old lanterns from the ceiling illuminated open boxes of dried plants, mosses, medicinal stones, racks of mortars and pestles, bottles of oil, antique tea sets, and instructional books. It looked very much like an apothecary without animal parts.

"Hello? Madam Longbottom? Is anybody here?"

There was a sound from the back, behind a curtain of beads, followed by a deep scratchy voice.

"Jus' a moment, please." A short pause, then. "Would you like a cookie?"

"That would be delightful," she said sincerely, for the cookies really did smell wonderful. A few more shuffling sounds and a squat old woman ambled out with a tray of cookies and milk. Larousse took stock of her quickly, noting the keen look in her eye and strength in her large hands. There didn't appear to be anyone else in the store, and even if it wasn't busy she thought Augusta Longbottom must be quite active to run it by herself.

"Ah, a new customer. I don't get very many of those. How can I help you?" she said, looking intent. She wasn't very smiley, but one bite of her almond fig offering made up for it, Larousse thought.

"Well, I have a friend who mentioned this shop to me a few days ago. Said you have a good reputation."

The old woman nodded, but there was a bit of skepticism there.

"And would I know this friend?"

"Yes, though you probably don't like him much. Head Sentinel Morgan," she said, taking a sip of her milk to cover how intently she was watching the old woman's reaction. There was a definite stiffening of her shoulders and darkening of her expression, but nothing particularly suspicious.

"You're a sentinel?"

Larousse laughed. "No, no. Of course not. I'm a professor. I teach up at Hogwarts."

The old woman didn't react at first, but then slowly seemed to relax.

"Oh? How does a professor meet the head of national security?" she said conversationally.

"The same way a tea shop lady might, I suppose. Lot of nasty business up there lately. Lot of nosy questions about one's political associations, if you know what I mean. Well, we've seen each other enough that we've managed to get along. I met with him a few days ago for a news conference, got to talking about holiday shopping of all things, and he mentioned this place."

She snorted.

"I'm surprised he'd go recommended the shop of a traitor. He was quite adamant that he was going to shut me down for harboring a fugitive. I mean honestly. A little old thing like me holding a murderer in my attic? Ridiculous."

“Yes, he felt pretty silly for suggesting it afterwards. Potter actually laughed when he overheard us. Cheeky little bugger.”

Longbottom looked very curious about that.

“You mean Harry Potter? The Harry Potter? The child the paper is making all this fuss about?”

“Oh, yes. Nice boy, first in my class, but something of a troublemaker. You meet all sorts working in Hogwarts.”

“I don't doubt it, dearie. What do you teach?”

“History of Magic.”

They gossiped and chatted idly for almost an hour, and by the end of it Larousse felt the only thing she'd gotten out of the whole thing was a nice carrot flavored tea to help relieve Severus' eye strain and a tummy ache from eating too many sweets. Morgan had been right. Whatever trouble Madam Longbottom might have gotten herself into during the war had obviously left her resigned to quieter pursuits. She owned her little shop with a small but loyal following of customers to keep it afloat, kept mostly to herself, baking cookies for grandnieces and nephews for the holidays. A few discreetly cast detection charms had revealed no hidden fugitives, secret rooms, illegal contraband, or weaponry.

She was just a tea shop owner, and Larousse was running out of leads. Scrounging after the sentinel's leftover suspects was a long shot to begin with, but the chance of her succeeding in finding Moody before Morgan was a long shot to begin with. It was a stupid bargain to make with the Dark Lord, but what else did she have? She doubted her virtue held as much value as the wizard had implied, and if she had succumb there was no telling if he might not expose her indiscretion to Severus and then she'd really be lost or use it as leverage to do some other unsavory tasks. She was not rich or powerful. She had only her wits and her wand to get her what she wanted.

Now all she needed was lucky break.

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Augusta Longbottom smiled easily as the pretty young woman left the shop, feeling quite proud of herself. She was afraid she came off as a little too interested at first, but had played it off as typical gossipyness of old women. She nibbled on her cookie and thought about what she should do next. This Vesper was definitely worth looking into, but she might also be bait. A sentinel is disguise. It wouldn't be the first time they had tried that technique. Still, if they could do it...

She pulled out a piece of paper and started writing. If this woman was who she said she was, then she had a much better chance of getting a hold of Potter than Quick ever did. She needed confirmation first. The sentinels were much too alert for them to make any mistakes this far into the game. This needed to be perfect.

'Dear Ladybug...'

Book III:

Chapter 15: The Huntress and Her Prey

McGunny was sitting in his office, torn between studying for his Transfiguration quiz and skimming through the latest batch of intel Weasley had managed to dig up on Barlow and Potter. It really wasn't much of a contest. He could study during his free period tomorrow, but he had to hurry if he wanted to outrace the latest bit of gossip. As a part of the press, even a amateur press, he understood the responsibility of remaining objective, but this latest bit of scandal angered his sensibilities, especially the more he learned.

He knew for instance that Barlow had set a small mob on Potter, that she had lost a fair duel to him, and that she had been completely unharmed after. Weasley had confirmed this with several witnesses who had been there, even one very reluctant Slytherin, and despite being a utter slob he trusted the boy's ability to separate gossip from gospel. Which is what made Barlow's framing Potter, and attempting to use the press to do it, so very infuriating. The girl hadn't checked herself into the infirmary for more than half an hour before sending him a note to request an interview.

He had gone himself, and what he had been made to listen to sickened him. Not only was she a poor actor, she was a bossy one too, demanding he print her story right away. He hadn't, of course. He'd interviewed a rather disgruntled Madam Pomfrey first. The nurse was not permitted to talk about a patient's condition, but that didn't mean she couldn't dispel misinformation.

Two lies had thus been confirmed. Barlow hadn't been cursed with cruciatus and she didn't have any broken bones.

He had quickly rounded up some of his reporters to find out what had really happened and hoped to track down Potter himself, but learned from Weasley that he had already been summoned to the headmistress' office. It made McGunny nervous.

Potter had shown up again later in the day, surprisingly high spirited for having been accused of assault and battery. Perhaps the

headmistress had believed him. It's not like she would have much choice as the girl was obviously lying.

It was with some uneasiness that he left his office in search of the subject of the scandal. He tracked him down to the library, and tried to mentally prepare himself for the meeting. They hadn't spoken directly since the interview, and while he was hopeful that he would be well received he couldn't be certain.

"Potter," he said, and the boy turned from copying some notes to look at him.

"Oh, hey, McGunny," he greeted, friendly but cautious, "What is it?"

Across from them, Granger looked up from her tome nervously. Relax, Granger, I won't bite, he mentally admonished

"There have been some rumors floating around about a fight this morning involving you and a Slytherin girl. I was wondering if you'd mind giving an account of what happened? To clear up the rumors, of course."

"Of course." But he looked skeptical. He turned to Hermione but she just nods. Thank you, Granger. It's about time you helped me out a little. "But lets keep this short, I've got a lot of studying to get done before practice."

He must have meant dueling practice, which meant he hadn't heard.

"Practice was canceled. Professor Larousse took her sick days for the rest of the week. There was an announcement at lunch."

"Oh..."

"Don't worry, Potter, I still won't keep you long."

They made their way to a private table, conscious of the stares they received and whispers until McGunny put up a privacy spell.

"First off," McGunny began, "let me say that I know Sasha Barlow and her cronies are full of shit, and while I don't know how much you've heard so far you should know she's attempting a smear campaign against you."

Potter impresses him by not so much as flinching, merely leaning back in his chair a bit to take stock. McGunny wondered what he saw.

"She's tried to use my paper to spread her lies," he continued when Potter offers nothing, "And I take that as a personal offense. Some of my reporters have already investigated, and I think I have a good idea of what happened, but I'd like to hear it from you. The testimonies I received seemed a bit... excitable."

Potter nodded, but didn't say anything.

"I just want the truth."

For an instant, he looked angry and McGunny thought he made a mistake, but then his expression smoothed out and he just got this look. Green, green eyes and they're like a forest fire. Terrifying and mesmerizing at once. What did he see with eyes like that?

"Alright."

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Larousse was absent from DA&D the next day, just as McGunny had said she would be. His godfathers were quite happy about this, but Harry felt uneasy. She wasn't sick, in fact, she wasn't even in the castle anymore. What was she doing then? Everyone said she was holiday shopping, but that was ridiculous. The other teachers managed to get their shopping done without skipping classes, and they all had more family left than Larousse.

Could Lestrage have put her up to something? They did seem to get along fairly well.

Could he really afford to think about that right now?

There were more pressing matters, like end of semester exams, Christmas shopping (damn near impossible since he had no way to get out of the castle), McGunny's upcoming article, the Hogwart's Christmas Dance, and the Malfoy Christmas party in which he would be negotiating with Lucius for secrets and safety.

"Hermione, can I just skip the dance?" he asked hopefully from across the breakfast table.

She glowered at him.

"Harold James Potter don't you dare leave me alone with that boy."

"Draco will be there."

"That's not much comfort. I think he's trying to hook me up with Ron. He can be so utterly ridiculous sometimes."

Harry knew that wasn't the case, but he could hardly tell her that her brother had sold her out over a lost chess match.

"It's your fault you're in this mess in the first place. You didn't have to offer to go out with him."

His friend turned pink, and he would have laughed at her but she was already irritated with him.

"It was good manners. Besides, what would you do if you didn't go?"

"Not worry about it? I don't have a date yet, you know. Then there's the dressing up. It's just a hassle."

"Aw, come on, 'arry, id'll be fun," Clyde interrupted, not bothering to stop eating. "It's not wike dose snooty Pwurebwood pardies. No fence 'mione. It's a weal party. Jus ask Nadawie out. She'd do it in a 'artbeat."

Beside Hermione, Ginny grimaced, and he thought he knew how she felt. Clyde really needed to take etiquette lessons if he was going to eat at the big kid table.

"No, I'm going to the Malfoy party with her. The Hogwarts party just makes it kind of redundant."

After a few more protests, he manages to duck out of at least one concern. What should he work on now? The Malfoy party was on Saturday, exams started Monday, and he still didn't know how he was going to get through his Christmas list.

"Merlin's beard, they're a plague," Clyde growled, after he'd swallowed luckily. Harry looked up to see some six or seven GGs wandering into the Great Hall. They had been increasingly invasive over the last two weeks, wandering out from the mostly unused corridors and into the main halls and classrooms, quiet as can be but a definite distraction. There was talk of actually construction work sometime during break and the GGs were rushing to get their measurements and calculations done before then, at everyone else's expense.

"I don't know if I can put up with them for another four years," Clyde lamented. "Before you know it they'll start taking measurements of our dorm room while we're trying to sleep. Just wait."

Hermione said he was being silly. Harry wasn't so sure. He hadn't paid much attention to it before, but the GGs were popping up everywhere. Lately, he couldn't turn a corner without finding one hanging from the ceiling or crawling on the floor. He'd actually tripped over one Monday.

"They've started damming the moat," Ginny said softly, "I saw them doing it during Herbology. I talked to one of the engineers, and they said they're adding a basement underneath it before they start building over it. They'll have to completely re-dig the moat after this or it'll be running through the middle of the castle instead of around it. Though, that might be kind of interesting."

It had been weeks since Ginny and Harry had a decent conversation, and as part of his new 'Make My Life Less Shitty' plan, he wanted to fix things between them. Actually talking to one another seemed to be a good way to start.

“Really? Did they say when they'd start?”

“Tomorrow I think.”

“I wonder if the castle will shake?”

“Not if they're doing their jobs, it shouldn't,” Hermione said, frowning thoughtfully. “Otherwise you never know what will collapse. I guess that's why they're starting on an empty wing.”

It seemed a security risk to Harry, but there was no point in worrying about it. Either it was being taken care of or it wasn't, and nothing he said could change that.

“I hope there isn't a draft,” he said instead, earning a few giggles. And like a drop of blood attracts sharks, so too did that laugh attract the Weasley twins. They came out of no where (they had to nowadays else his godfathers toss them out a window again) and perched themselves on either side of Harry.

“Hey, Harry, you little minx. We haven't seen you around-” George began.

“Unguarded,” Fred inserted.

“-lately. Thought we'd check in on you. Make sure you haven't gotten boring on us.”

“Or that we haven't gotten boring. It's good to have an outside opinion on this.”

Harry raised a brow.

“You the ones who cursed the second corridor bathrooms to pour out slime instead of water?”

“Well, yeah,” George said.

“And transfigured the Dueling Club's rapiers to turn to rubber?”

Fred chuckled, recalling the tasteless jokes that had resulted from that particular prank.

“Pretended to be George and kissed Angelina?”

George turned to Fred, scowling. “When did you do that?”

“Er...”

“You're both fine. The only thing that happened to me was Barlow. Blah, what a spider,” he said, intentionally leaving out Lestrangle. And Larousse. And Natalie. And- “Hey, perhaps you guys can help me with something.”

He excused himself from the table and led the twins outside the Great Hall. Sirius and Remus followed discreetly, and despite their displeasure at the mischievous duo kept a respectful distance. Students and GGs were moving in and out, so they moved to a less trafficked end of corridor.

“What can we do for you, My Lord?” Fred crooned, the perfect image of corrupted innocence.

“I need advice.”

Here the twins grinned wickedly at one another. Harry thought he better be more specific before they dragged him into something truly wicked.

“I earned quite a bit of money this summer and I want to buy some Christmas gifts, but I'm not allowed out of the castle. You all seem to smuggle the weirdest things in, perhaps you have some ideas?”

If possible the two Weasley's expressions became even more wicked. Fred actually hugged him.

"You make us so happy, My Lord!" he laughed. "We're going to have so much fun!"

George just nodded, but then looked cautiously over at his two loitering bodyguards, pacing a short distance away.

"Of course, it all depends on them. Think you could get them to leave you alone for a few hours?"

Harry merely shook his head, now wondering how wise it was to come to them for advice after all. Still, their enthusiasm was contagious. It had been such a long time since he'd just joked and planned silly things with his friends. Lately, it had all been homework and plotting and political maneuvering.

"Well, what are the chances of them letting you out of the castle?" George tried again, though he looked skeptical. That stirred Harry's interest even more. Out of the castle? He hadn't even stepped onto the grounds for anything other than Herbology since November!

"I think I might convince them, so long as they can come along. They're protective, but they have a really good sense of adventure, you know. They had a lot of fun when they went to school here," Harry said, then looked over at Sirius. "What do you think?"

"Sounds like fun," Sirius called back.

The twins were startled. "They could hear us from there?"

"Of course."

"Wicked," they said, grinning. Fred continued with, "Alright, meet us Saturday in the owlry, seven A.M. sharp, and bring your money with you. We're going to Hogsmeade!"

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Friday morning, Larousse realized she was being followed. She wasn't sure how long she had been followed, perhaps it had been happening since Tuesday or perhaps that morning was the first time, but she had this sudden feeling while eating a breakfast in her hotel's cafe and when she looked up it was to see a man bolting behind a corner. At first, she thought perhaps Morgan had sent one of his men to keep track of her in case she found something or got into trouble, then realized she would have noticed such a person following her from the beginning. Sentinels were easy to spot if one knew how to look.

So she pretended not to notice, and reviewed her notes from the last couple of days. If she had to choose off the top of her head where she had picked up her stalker she would have chosen either the pub in Knockturn Alley from Tuesday or the bookstore in Nottigham from Wednesday. They had been the most suspicious or at least the easiest places to conceal someone. She had been dutifully spreading her tale of Hogwarts teacher on a shopping trip at every place she investigated, hoping Moody would some how hear and take the bait. After the attempt with Quick, she knew she made an almost irresistible temptation. She borrowed an owl from the hotel receptionist to send Morgan a note, then went hunting.

First there was the clothing store, then the gift shop, a bakery, and various other sorts of stores a person might obtain Christmas presents. She didn't see her stalker again, but she knew he was there. Now that she was aware of him, she could sense him. After dropping off some of her packages at the hotel, and confirming that Morgan hadn't sent a reply yet, she went out again.

This time, hands free, she headed towards Wisteria Wandering, a little Bohemian neighborhood with a lot of art studios and long stretches of empty buildings and dark alleys. She turned into one of these alleys, ducked into a doorway and waited. A moment later, the man from that morning appeared.

He was nondescript, modestly dressed in old but tidy cloak and bowler hat, clean shaven and dark haired. He hurried down the alley, but when he reached the end he hesitated. He must have realized he

lost her trail. While he was distracted, she wordlessly cast a tracking spell on him and retreated further into the shadows.

Her stalker waited for another hour, likely hoping she'd reappear out of one of the studios, but eventually gave up and headed back the way he'd come. Once he was out of sight, Larousse followed him. With her tracking spell activated, she didn't need to actually see him to follow, which was good because he used the floo twice. The first time was to a public floo in London, where he met up with another man, tall and lanky, and together they took the same floo to Edinburgh. They ate lunch in a pub, and while they were thus occupied, she sent an urgent missive to Morgan again, this time through the neighborhood Sentinel Station.

"If you tell us where they are, we can arrest them immediately," the Head Sentinel had said.

"No, Chief Sentinel Morgan was very clear about my instructions," she lied, "I am to follow them until they lead me to their Headquarters and only then should I contact him for specific instructions. This is a very delicate situation."

"Of course, Sentinel Larousse, I understand completely. My men and I are at your disposal."

They saluted each other, and she made a hasty retreat. The men weren't at the pub any more when she arrived, but she tracked them down to an abandoned textile mill just on the edge of a muggle district. It made her nervous, but she couldn't go back.

She was so close, she could feel it. Not only had she possibly found Moody, but his cohorts as well. If she could catch them by surprise, she could catch them all. Harry would be safe at last. Voldemort would grant her custody. Her and Severus would get married and adopt Harry, and they'd live together in Severus' beautiful little house in the country and by this time next year she'd be pregnant again. They'd be a wonderful family, proud and handsome and accomplished. Harry would get over his godfathers soon enough when he saw the life she could give him, the full sort of life he'd had

before his parents' murder. A father to guide him, a mother to love him, and little brothers and sisters to look up to him.

It would all be so perfect.

But she had to catch Moody first.

Casting a few anti-detection charms on herself, she circled the warehouse, checking for exit and entry points. There were four doors, one on each side, and she laid down traps in case anyone tried to flee. She could do nothing about the windows. They were too large and too numerous to charm without detection. She risked a few quick peeks inside as she went. There were four people now, one of them a woman, but none that she recognized all crowded around a crate they were using as a table. It was too dark inside for her to get a good look from where she was.

Cautiously, she went to the back of the building and climbed a fire escape to the second story entry, casting several silencing charms as she went. She didn't enter through the door, thinking it was probably charmed with some sort of alarm, but knocked out the glass from a window and climbed inside. It was all perfectly silent, and she hoped that no one noticed the increase of light from her position. Stealthily, she crept further into the warehouse.

It was dark on the second floor, the many windows layered with dirt or paint or boards, and it stank of animal piss and bird droppings. She kept to the spaces where the shadows weren't as thick, skirting strange silhouettes of industrial machinery, until she exited through an open doorway and onto a walkway. More silencing spells, but the danger here was still great. The walkway was metal mesh, allowing her to look down to the level below, but also for anyone to look up and see her as well. She had to risk it.

Navigating past boards and old newspapers, she found a spot near the stairs where a tarp and some overturned planks provided her some cover for her to observe from. Her view wasn't perfect, but she got a good idea of what was happening. The woman, younger than her, was arguing with the men, but they obviously weren't listening.

"We shouldn't be following this woman," the lone female insisted, "She's obviously a trap. What kind of teacher leaves the school a week and a half before holidays? I'm telling you it's a set up."

"Don't be daft. We got confirmation. She's a teacher just like she was saying. First time teaching so she's a bit irresponsible. Nothing odd about that."

"Oh, come on, does she look like a history teacher to you?"

"I wish my history teacher looked like her," one of the men snickered.

"Shut up, Blue."

"Look, Green, all she's done is shop and shop and shop," said the man Larousse recognized from the alley. "She puts my wife to shame. It's too bad I lost track of her, but it isn't strange. We'll get confirmation that she's legit in a few hours and then pick her up tonight at the hotel. If she keeps her pattern she'll leave for dinner around seven-thirty."

"I just don't like this. We screwed up with the last subject, what makes you think it will work a second time around?"

"We didn't have an insider the first time. This works a lot better. Stop worrying."

The woman wasn't satisfied, shaking her head and pacing back and forth. As Larousse's eyes adjusted she could make out the shape of a chair with chains hanging from it and a bucket underneath it. It made her shiver, realizing this must have been where they kept Quick.

"I still don't like it. If she is a teacher... Merlin, it's not like the last time. He was a Death Eater. A monster. This isn't right."

"Oh, stop being a ninny. She's one of Voldemort's bloody people, as bad as any Death Eater. How many kids you think she's convinced that Dumbledore is the Devil and Voldemort a saint? At least you could tell a Death Eater is a monster. She's something worse in my opinion."

He spat to emphasize his point. Larousse wrinkled her nose. Disgusting. As if this worm had any right to criticize her after trying to murder a child. Sick bastard.

"Whatever, Red, I still don't like it."

"Dumbledore knows what he's doing," Red said.

"Dumbledore's ass isn't on the line here."

Deciding she'd heard enough, Larousse made her move. Soundlessly, she cast a full body bind on the woman called Green. She stiffened like a board and fell over.

"Green, what is-"

"Get down stupid!" Red yelled, shoving Blue behind a stack of crates while he dived for another. The third man, the lanky fellow who'd been silent, ducked down, but he didn't know where the threat was coming from and sought shelter on the wrong side. A disarming spell sent him flying into a stack of crates. Red and Blue located her a moment later, blasting hexes and revealing charms, but they bounced off her shields and only served to temporarily unbalance her as the floor lurched beneath her feet. Blue made a run for it, but the trap she'd laid in the door way came down on him like a lightning bolt, leaving him a smoldering mess of burnt hair and flopping limbs.

Three of the four incapacitated, she gave up her stealth for the benefit of position, leaping towards the edge of the platform and screaming out curse after curse.

"Dirumpor! Excido caput! Sanguis ferventi!"

The last one must have caught him for there was an ear splitting shriek and sickening wet sound, and then all was silent. Larousse took a deep breath, feeling her heart racing and her hands shaking. She remained where she was for several moments, knowing none of the those still alive would be getting up any time soon, and tried to

compose herself. It took longer than she expected. It had been too long since she was in the field.

At last, when her hands were still, she cautiously climbed down the stairs, her wand poised in case she had missed some one. There was no one else. She checked each of her prisoners, casting revealing charms on them, but aside from the woman no one was in disguise.

None of them was Moody.

Dammit.

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Voldemort received news of Larousse's misadventure twenty minutes after she had contacted Morgan. To say he was surprised was an understatement. After the woman had left his office last week, he hadn't thought he'd hear from her again. He wasn't entirely sure he was pleased to be proven wrong.

He had been impressed with her ambition, with her drive, when she had first sought audience with him. Her familial interests weren't as attractive, but he could appreciate her vision. She had a dream, and she dreamed big, and that was always a thing to admire.

It didn't necessarily mean he'd allow her dreams to come true.

She was crazy, after all.

"Clarence, get in here," he commanded, and a moment later his secretary entered, carefully sidestepping the cursed filing cabinet. "I need to you to contact Commander Malfoy or his wife and tell them to extend an invitation to Vesper Larousse for their Christmas party. Make it clear this is not a suggestion."

"Yes, sir," his servant said dutifully, scribbling down his instructions on his note pad.

"Also, inform Headmistress Lestrage that I will be pulling Harry out of school for the Solistice. Three days at least. The werewolves will remain behind. You should probably inform my house staff as well."

"This will be your Bristol estate, correct?"

"Yes, but I want my London suite open just in case."

"Very good, sir. Anything else?"

"Press conference tomorrow morning, don't bother with a specific time, but tell them it's important. Morgan's made a break in the Moody case."

"Excellent news, sir."

Voldemort's only response was to gesture the man to leave. Alone again, he reviewed his schedule for the next couple of weeks, filling in new information and making a note to cancel some meetings and make room for others. The latest break in the Moody case was encouraging, but not necessarily the end of things. The conspirators probably didn't have a clue about Moody, but they made delicious fodder for the press. It could prove troublesome if, despite the capture of his supposed allies, the real fugitive remained free for long.

It would embarrass the Sentinels. Of course, so would the knowledge that a civilian had succeeded where the Court had failed. He would need to speak with Larousse soon.

What a mess. If had known Larousse was this capable he wouldn't have fired her all those years ago. Morgan had warned him. Ah, but what else could he do? Aside from let the werewolves kill her... come to think of it that was still an option. But no, that was no way to treat Severus' fiancée. Crazy or not, she was perfect for him.

Not so much for Harry, he thought, but then who was?

If any woman were to influence his young protege, she was as likely as anyone. Severus and his new bride adopting Harry would relieve a lot of political tension resulting from Harry's parentage. Loyal parents

meant a loyal child in the public eye, and if they weren't his real parents it was a minor detail. Harry's new parents would be the one reaping the rewards of his position, after all.

He had to speak with Harry first, not so much to ask his opinion, but to gauge his overall reaction. Snape had been reporting an increasing independence in Harry, and Voldemort was loath to cripple its development. Adoption could work in either direction, creating either reliance or rebellion.

Tomorrow's Christmas party would be essential in determining his decisions on several matters. How would the other purebloods respond to Larousse's re-emergence after years of social exile and her eventual marriage to Severus? How serious was his potion's master about marrying her anyway? Did his plans truly align with her dreams? Would Larousse attempt to push her bid for adoption after her recent exploit? How would Harry respond to Voldemort's mention of possible adoption? He wasn't going to rush into these matters until he had a clearer view of the situation, and Harry's adoption wouldn't likely be resolved before the end of the year, but he wanted a definite idea of where things stood.

The Solstice was another matter entirely. It had been months since he'd been able to spend any time with Harry, and now was an important time for his protégé. The boy was emerging into his own, magically and politically, and Voldemort wanted to be there. The Solstice was the perfect opportunity for him to teach Harry some more of the arcane magics, to discuss the nuances of politics, and just generally reconnect away from everyone else.

He was surprised to find himself looking forward to it.

He supposed that meant he should go downstairs and torture his new prisoners. It wouldn't do to be going soft now.

Book III:

Chapter 16: Royal Negotiations

Harry was up at an ungodly hour for a Saturday. It was a mortal sin for any students to be up earlier on weekend than they were on a weekday, but the young Gryffindor supposed that was the price of being a sneak. He went through his morning routine as quietly as possible. All around him his dorm mates snored and sniffled in their sleep, all warm and cozy, and it wouldn't due to wake them. Clyde in particular would wonder what he was up to.

Showered and dressed, he gathered up both his Baluvian cloak and his regular black one and crept out of the tower. Sirius and Remus were waiting for him with breakfast, eggs and sausage wrapped in a pancake, and quickly escorted him into an empty corridor.

"Are you sure about this?" Remus asked quietly. "It's risky."

Sirius didn't look nearly as worried. "Nah, it'll be like old times. Remember when we used to sneak out? We had a blast! Besides, if I don't get out of this castle soon the I'm going to be risky. I haven't run since the full moon."

"We weren't targeted for assassination."

"I don't know about that, Filch had it in for us. Snape too. We're lucky Dum... er, the headmaster liked us so much or we'd have been expelled for sure."

"Oh that's comforting," Harry said, irony hardly lost on him. "Though, I've got something on the headmistress even if I did get caught I might be able to get away with it."

Sirius chuckled. Remus did not.

"How much do you trust these Weasley boys?" the beta asked skeptically.

Harry considered.

“In what sense? They wouldn't rat me out or intentionally get me in trouble. They've been good friends, even when the rest of Gryffindor wasn't very happy with me.”

Remus sighed and gave up. He wasn't going to convince Harry of abandoning this venture, and even he doubted there was much to worry about. The chances of Moody just waiting for Harry in Hogsmeade were slim.

“Don't worry so much,” Harry said. “I promise to be very careful.”

After that, there really wasn't any turning back. They met the Weasley twins just outside the owlry. They greeted Harry warmly, admired his Baluvian cloak for a bit, then got down to business. George pulled out what appeared to be a box of candy, and tossed it on the ground and flicked his wand at it.

“Revelo.”

Immediately, the box grew into a travel chest, covered in stickers promoting tours and exotic foods and strange sights. Fred explained.

“This used to be our uncle Benjamin. He got to travel a lot during the war, but he's stuck in Ireland now so he gave it to us. We never could figure out how he afforded it, but we suspect he was doing some smuggling for some extra cash.”

The twins opened the box, which was filled with clothes. They ignored those, and started tapping on the sides of the trunk and on the strange symbols that were burned onto the bottom of it. The chest's sides fell open and collections of strange objects fell out onto the inside of the trunk. Harry could only stare curiously. He didn't recognize any of the items.

Sirius must have though, because he let out a barking laugh.

“It's an Incognito Kit. Professional quality too. You're uncle really was up to no good.”

The twins grinned.

"We could say the same of you, Mr. Blackbone, if you actually recognize what this is," Fred pointed out. Sirius just smirked.

"What's an Incognito Kit?" Harry asked.

Remus explained. "It's just what it sounds like. If you want to go out in disguise then this is what you want to have. It contains all sorts of magical objects and potions and props. Some less reputable shops will sell them under the counter, but most people assemble them themselves."

"Neat. So we're going in disguise? Who am I going as? Why don't we just use disguise charms?"

"Too easy to see through and they fade too quickly," Fred said. "And you're going as Ron."

Harry made a face, and everyone laughed at him. "Ron is best. We know he's staying at Hogwarts today, so you don't have to worry about running into him and no one is going to question him wandering around," George said.

"Especially Slytherins," Fred added.

"We can't just make up a person?"

"Too risky. There's going to be students all over the place. Someone is bound to notice a strange kid hanging out with us. No one is going to question Ron holiday shopping with his brothers."

Harry conceded, and they immediately went to work. The twins had ties and scarves and badges from all of the Houses, and quickly replaced Harry's Gryffindor colors. Potions followed next. One that tasted like sour lemons turned his hair brilliant orangey-red (though it was as ridiculously unmanageable as ever) and a coppery one gave him freckles. They wanted to use a purple potion to temporarily fix his eyes, but Harry knew from experience how unreliable such concoctions were. Instead, he showed them all a trick or two by

charming his glasses invisible and making his eyes appear brown at the same time, both spells he'd learned from Hermione's book for charming glasses she had given him during first year. Bless her academic inclinations.

In the end, he looked very Weasley-ish, and as long as no one familiar with Ron got a close look it would work out just fine.

They turned their attention to the two werewolves, and Remus very reluctantly submitted himself to being dressed up like a GG. Sirius refused.

"I've got the perfect disguise already," he said, then turning a warning glare at the twins, "If you tell anyone about this, you die."

Within seconds Sirius' barbaric countenance was replaced by a rather mangy looking dog. A big mean mangy looking dog. The twins just stood there and goggled. Harry laughed in delight, and ran his fingers through Sirius' coat. It was rough and wiry, and underneath he could feel powerful muscles ripple with every movement. He was just the sort of dog that could run with a werewolf without fear.

"That's incredible."

Sirius gave him a doggy smile and preened. Remus rolled his eyes.

"Don't inflate his ego anymore than it already is. Come on. We'll want to get to Hogsmeade and back before the big crowds arrive. That should give us until eleven."

"Aye, aye, Captain," the twins agreed.

"How are we going to get out?" Harry asked. "We'll look weird going through the front gate."

"Yeah," Fred agreed, "Plus it won't open for another hour and then a teacher will be posted to check for permission slips, which you don't have. We're going to take an alternate route."

"The moat?"

“Normally, we could just walk over it, but the Sentinels but up wards against that. Nope, it just so happens that the GGs left a nice little opening in the wall and across the moat. We tested them yesterday. There aren't any wards up there. There isn't any magic at all. I think the castle would start attacking them if it sensed its walls were being torn down.”

Remus looked horrified. “You mean they left the castle completely defenseless? Not even a sentry?”

“Well they warded both ends of the corridor, but they were careless. They didn't know about the hidden passageway behind the tapestries.”

Remus shook his head. He suppose, if nothing else, this trip would reveal some of Hogwarts security risks. They traveled down a third floor corridor and from there took several secret passages he could easily remember from his youth, crossing into open areas only when necessary, until at last they exited through a tapestry of a chimera and into the construction area.

The air was cold, without protection from the outdoors, and bare but for a few tapestries left on the walls. A series of white cloth tarps had been hung to keep out snow and birds, and rippled from the wind. Harry wrapped his Baluvian cloak tighter around himself, unprepared for the nipping cold after spending so little time outside.

Sirius, in dog form, trotted ahead, sniffing the air for potential danger. He made various doggy gestures that Remus interpreted for them as 'all clear'. They slipped through the openings and into the open air.

The sky was dark blue to the west and brilliant pink to the east with the rows of bright orange clouds, the tiniest speck of sun peeking over the horizon. Harry smiled, taking in the simple grandeur of it, until Fred urged him forward.

“Best be quick before someone spots us, yeah?”

There was only a bit of stone flooring left after exiting the flimsy barriers before the walls simply disappeared. There were no piles of rubble or broken pieces of stone, but a clean opening as if the castle had been built with it there already. Beyond that the floor fell out into what was once part of the moat, but now was little more than a rocky ditch, slick from ice. They made their way down carefully, and even more carefully climbed back out, their shoes and paws slipping dangerously as they went.

“Now what?” Harry asked, once they were safely on the other side.

“Now we take you some place special. You won't believe it,” George said. Instead of heading towards the road like Harry thought they would, they went further afield to a cluster of bare trees near the lake. He was familiar with many of the trees. He'd had picnics underneath them with his friends several times, but they had all been green and thick with blooms. Only the Everbloom tree was in flower now, its large white flowers barely visible through the layers of snow.

And out of all those trees, Harry was alarmed to see they were heading straight for the Whomping Willow.

“Don't worry, Harry,” Remus said. “I know where we're going now. The Whomping Willow hibernates this deep into winter.”

A bit uneasily, Harry followed the others. Sirius seemed to know exactly where to go, for he rushed for a spot at the base of the tree, and after a few moments of digging, disappeared.

“How did you-” the twins begin.

“This was our school long before it was yours,” Remus said, then climbed in. Harry followed cautiously, then the twins.

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Harry was flabbergasted to learn that the most haunted place in Britain was anything but. The Shrieking Shack was quiet and spooky, but the only dead things lingering there were cobwebs. By now the

twins were interrogating Remus about how much he knew about Hogwarts's many secrets and what adventures he'd had there, as both student and werewolf. It seemed Harry's godliness somehow extended to his godfathers now, and Fred and George were starry eyed as they made their way into Hogsmeade.

Harry left his trademark fur cloak at the shack, assured that it would be perfectly safe there, and traded it for his now much cleaner and drier school cloak. Sirius and Remus went on ahead so as not to arouse suspicion, and the twins immediately dragged Harry to Zonko's. The store wasn't open yet, but the clerks were puttering around the store in preparation for the holiday rush. They all seemed to recognize the twins and unlocked the door to let them in.

"Welcome, welcome! You've brought one of your brothers! Which one is this, I don't recognize him." greeted a congenial man with coke-bottle glasses and a dark green mustache.

"This is Eric," Fred said, "And he's a cousin. He's got the Weasley gift though."

"Ah, very good. Then you'll have to show him some of the new stuff. It's in the Special Clients room," the man said, and winked. The twins grinned and immediately took him towards the back. Harry looked around, amazed at the array of novelties and oddities that filled every shelf and display case and storage bin.

"There will be time for that later," Fred assured him. "The best stuff is always in back."

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And the twins were right. All of the best stuff was in back, and they seemed to have access to the back room of every shop in Hogsmeade. They charmed, flattered, impressed, and conned their way into the hearts of the owners and clerks, and none seemed immune. Harry bought several one of a kind items and even some art supplies and supplies for creating or specializing some other gifts. He spent way more than he probably should have, but managed to hand

over just a little bit more for treats at Madam Pudifoots to thank the twins.

It was a wonderful morning, and just what he needed. Blessed anonymity and time spent with friends, doing normal things without worrying about attacks or gossip. Sirius and Remus only made themselves known briefly, usually just long enough to glimpse each other, and it seemed Remus had managed some shopping as well because at one point Harry saw he had a long narrow box.

It was 11:20am when they finally returned to the castle, tired but relaxed and happy. The GGs had shown up for construction, so Harry and the twins had to sneak back into the castle from the front, slipping in when a large group was coming out, their scarves and hats pulled around their faces as if to fight off the cold. Vector was so busy checking permission slips going out, she didn't even bother checking on those students coming back in.

Remus had wandered in through the construction site, no one paying any mind to him as they toiled like ants. Sirius stayed outside for another hour, running around the grounds on the pretext of checking for Moody or any other unusual smells, but Harry and Remus both knew he was enjoying his romp. He eventually reappeared back at their private room. There was bits of fur and blood on his face and clothes. Remus identified it as rabbit.

After removing his disguise and carefully stowing his things in his trunk, they all went down to lunch. Harry was quite convinced they had managed to pull things off without a hitch, until Hermione came up behind him in the Great Hall and slapped him upside the head.

"Harold James Potter," she snarled, "Where have you been?! I looked all over the castle this morning!"

He rubbed his head, and awarded her an annoyed look.

"I was with Sirius and Remus, alright mother?"

"Where? I tried a Locating Spell and still couldn't find you!"

"Calm down. I've got an anti-locating spell on me since the poisoning. So no one can stalk me... unless they have the counter-spell of course."

She let out a frustrated sound and sat down.

"I don't suppose you've read the paper, then?"

Harry felt his good mood plummet. He hated the line 'have you read the paper?' Nothing good seemed to come from it. Seeing that he hadn't, she handed him her copy and continued.

"There's been a break in the Moody case. There was a raid yesterday morning and three people were caught and another one killed. None were Moody, but it's definitely progress."

It was good news after all. The picture on the front showed three rather battered looking individuals being hauled away in a crowd of uniforms and camera flashes.

"That's great. Where was this?"

"Edinburgh. That isn't far from here. But that isn't all."

Okay, so the news might not be all good.

"What?"

Hermione leaned in, talking low.

"I think Professor Larousse helped catch them!"

"What?! I thought she took the week off because she was sick?"

"No, she took her sick days off, but you don't need to be sick for those. Listen, she was gone since Tuesday, but just after these arrests Draco got an owl from Lucius with an invitation to our Christmas Party for her. I think she left to help catch the terrorists and what ever she did worked, and now she's in good with the Dark Lord. I think he is the one that invited her."

"I don't know, Hermione, that's kind of a stretch."

"Not really. She is an ex-Sentinel and she's been really worried about the attacks on you and the school, so I don't think it would be weird of her to find some way to help."

"Or Snape could have asked for her to be invited. You know, like as a date? They're pretty chummy," Harry pointed out.

She just shook her head. "He wouldn't have asked last minute. I've got a feeling about this. Call it journalistic instinct."

Harry wasn't so sure.

"Then she's back in the castle?"

"I don't know. Draco had to drop off her invite with Uncle Severus."

"Well, if she shows up tonight, you can always ask her. I think the paper would have mentioned it though, but I'd give you props if your theory turns out to be true."

"You want to make a wager on it?" she challenged. He smirked at her.

"I learned my lesson from your mistake, thanks."

"Harry!"

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The remainder of the day was spent getting ready for that night. He wrapped a few of his Christmas gifts, and then set to work on looking presentable. This created an opportunity to reconnect with Clyde and Ginny. They dragged out some of the formal clothes from Harry's closet, rifled through an issue of Wizarding Wardrobe that Draco had lent (thrown at) him, and got to work.

Ginny's mother had taught her how to make clothes, not so much as a profession, but out of a need to conserve funds and she admitted most of her own wardrobe was handmade. Harry, remembering the twin's smooth talking lines in Hogsmeade, tried a few of them on her, saying he desperately needed her talents and he didn't trust anyone else to help him. She'd turned red and stuttered, but agreed.

Clyde worked as a counterweight to Ginny's stylistic preferences. She enjoyed ornamentation and patterns. Clyde was quick to point out when she was turning Harry's clothes into a dress with pants. They argued and teased each other, and laughed whenever Harry had to try on their creation that didn't work. Most of them didn't. At last, after several rounds of hysterical laughter at Harry's expense, Ginny had managed to re-make the clothes Voldemort had given him. They were tighter, making Harry look taller with a white high collar that remained partially unbuttoned and over extended lapel for his black jacket embroidered with an even darker black thorns in velvet, that seemed to grow before the eyes. It gave him a roguish vampire look, sans the unattractive layer of grave dirt of course.

"You're a genius, Ginny!" Harry said, and he meant it too. He looked good. Even Clyde was looking impressed.

"Not bad. I didn't think someone as tom boyish as you would be able to pull it off!"

"Oh, shut up Clyde!"

He thanked her profusely for several more minutes, before he realized he was running out of time. He brushed his hair (useless), cleaned his teeth, trimmed his nails, polished his shoes, and charmed his glasses invisible (the twins had insisted he went 'rimless' for a night). While he was busy, Clyde opened his trunk to get his Baluvian cloak and made a rather startling discovery.

"Harry, why is your cloak all wet and dirty?"

"Er..."

Ginny looked horrified.

"You didn't go outside did you?!"

"Um... just this once. And I had Sirius and Remus with me. Honest!"

"Harry!" both his friends exclaimed. He hushed them with his finger.

"Do you want the entire school to know?" he said, "I was careful, and it was only to get some shopping done, and all those people got caught yesterday in Edinburgh. I promise it was just this once."

Ginny didn't look at all convinced, but Clyde seemed to understand.

"I get it mate. You're used to being outside and going where you want and then all this junk happens and it's like you're grounded for a fight someone else started," he said, knowingly.

"But what if Moody found you? What if a teacher found out?" Ginny said. Harry shrugged.

"Moody could never have guessed I would sneak into Hogsmeade today, and I did keep my godfathers around for protection. Besides, what would a teacher do? Ground me again?"

"Harry..."

"Don't worry guys, it really was just this once. I promise."

They relented, and just in time too, because he just had long enough to spell his cloak clean before Hermione came rushing up the stairs to get him. He bid them goodnight and escorted Hermione down to the main floor. Everyone they passed stopped to stare, and few of the more daring even let out a cat call.

Their Slytherin companions and Larousse were already waiting for them. For a woman Hermione thought had been battling terrorists the day before, she looked very good in her shimmery black evening gown, little crystal butterflies woven into her short hair. Or perhaps she just looked good when she stood next to Snape, who looked as unpleasant as ever.

"You look like a hooligan," the potion's master muttered when he saw Harry. The Gryffindor just grinned at him cheekily.

"If it walks like a duck..."

They all looked at him funny, and he sighed.

"Muggle saying. Never mind. Hi, Natalie."

He let Hermione go, and she headed towards Draco, while he made his way over to Natalie. She was dressed similarly to Larousse, only in white velvet and translucent silk wrapped around her arms and shoulders. Her smile told him she clearly didn't agree with Snape's assessment, or if she did she really liked hooligans. You could never tell with Natalie.

She held out her arm expectantly, and he grinned. It had taken him a couple of days, but he realized that her demand for a corsage hadn't been simply to make his life difficult. It had been a challenge, a game, and he could admit to being very competitive.

From his pocket, he pulled out a box, and opened it. It was the corsage. The blooms were from an Everbloom tree, large white blossoms with a hint of pink in the center, and a sprig of holly berries both easily found amongst Hogwarts's many decorations, all attached to silky white ribbon. She gave him a mock glare.

"Cheater," she said, but let him tie it to her wrist anyway.

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It took Harry exactly forty-six minutes to get into trouble. The ball had barely started, and Harry was taking advantage of the mostly empty dance floor to have Natalie teach him a few moves, while Draco and Hermione gave advice and critiques from the sidelines. They were all laughing, even Harry who was doing very badly at the fancier moves. It seemed he was better at dancing around a bonfire with werewolves.

than dancing around a ballroom surrounded by Purebloods. Funny, he thought the one would have prepared him for the other.

There was a great deal of staring and whispers at first, but Natalie was good at distracting him (i.e. demanding his attention be on her) and soon Harry didn't notice at all and the crowds seemed to lose interest. The truly dangerous people weren't around to provoke them yet, most being Death Eaters who headed straight for the parlor and the Dark Lord waiting for them there. Draco said as soon as they were done, he'd take him to see his father in private and avoid the worst of it.

Thank Merlin, Draco was his friend and not his enemy.

And then, out of nowhere, Lestrangle appeared and cut in.

"Pardon me, Miss Cypher, but I'm going to borrow your date for a moment," the Headmistress said, falsely pleasant as she practically snatched his hands out of Natalie's. Harry stumbled a bit as he was dragged further away from his friends and into the maelstrom of twirling bodies. A waltz. At least he knew that one, but that was very small comfort as she grabbed his other hand and forced him into the proper position. He was still too short to dance with her properly, his eyes level with her bosom (and she was rather chesty), but he tried very hard not to simply let her drag him all over the dance floor. He managed not to misstep for the most part, but he was hardly the picture of elegant sophistication.

"What do you want?" he said after he was confident enough in his footing to risk split concentration. Her smile was hard.

"Can't you guess?"

"Why bother when you can just dig yourself a deeper grave by threatening me?"

"Threaten you, Harry? Why would I have to threaten you?"

"Because Voldemort-"

She threw back her head and laughed, and he felt his cheeks burn as the witches and wizards turned their heads to look at them. They danced silently until everyone was ignoring them again.

"It was the Dark Lord's idea," she said.

"You're lying."

"Of course you'd say that. You think he's really your friend, after all. Isn't that so sweet? But the truth is the Dark Lord doesn't have friends. He has pawns and he has minions. I'm a minion. You're a pawn. Which of us do you think really knows what's going on? Hm?"

"You're just trying to get yourself out of trouble. You wouldn't be here trying to bluff otherwise."

"Oh, that's good. We really should have stuck you in Slytherin. Normally, this would be true, but right now we're both going to lose if you talk to him."

Harry, tired of looking at her mouth, made a quick sweep of the room. His friends were on the sidelines, wondering what was going on, but he didn't dare acknowledge them. She might think he had told them and he didn't want to get them into any trouble. Draco frowned and stalked away.

"You have until the end of this waltz to convince me or I'm stepping on your foot and making a run for it," he said sharply. He wanted to stop immediately, but she might follow him or keep him from escaping. If he had to pretend to be susceptible to her suggestion for him to get back to his friends, he'd play his part.

"Like I said, it was his idea. He wants to know your secrets, especially about Blackbone. You know they are political enemies? He wanted your secrets on him without your thinking he'd betrayed you. So he told me to do it, and then pretend it was for blackmail. You'd never have been able to tell anyone and he wouldn't be expected to punish me. But you surprised me. I failed. Now if you tell him he's going to punish me. I'll probably lose my job."

"Oh, boo hoo."

"And then he'll send someone else to Legilimens you. Probably, Snape."

Harry tensed. Could that be true? No, of course not. She was just trying to save her skin. Voldemort wouldn't... okay, he probably would, but... this was her idea. It had to be. She was desperate and clever and Slytherin, and he couldn't look in her eyes to see if was lying or not.

"So what do you propose?"

"Tell me something about Blackbone."

"No."

"It doesn't have to be true. Just something to feed to the Dark Lord so he thinks I succeeded. It could work out for the both of us. We would make much better allies than enemies. What do you say?"

"I say the waltz is over."

The music had indeed stopped, and he tried to pull away but her hand tightened around his fingers until they were being crushed together. He winced and clenched his teeth, his eyes watering from the pain.

"Step on my foot and I'll break your fingers, you little bastards!"

"Bella! There you are. Excuse me, young man."

Lucius Malfoy appeared like the second coming of Christ. Harry could have sworn he saw a halo surrounding the man as he cut in, but that was probably just the glare from his teary eyes. Quickly he made his escape off the dance floor and straight out the balcony doors. Blessedly quiet and empty, and he wiped the tears of pain from his eyes before anyone could notice. He wasn't surprised when Natalie appeared by his side a second later.

"Are you alright?" she asked, placing her hand on his arm. He smiled weakly and nodded.

"I'm okay. I really don't like that woman though."

Hermione and Draco showed up a moment later. He turned to Draco.

"Was Lucius your doing?"

The Malfoy heir smirked.

"Thanks."

"What's going on?" Hermione demanded. "Did she do something to you? You looked like you were in pain."

Harry shook his head. "She just wanted to get a little revenge for me slipping through punishment over Barlow. My fingers are a little crushed is all. Nothing broken."

He wiggled his fingers to prove it, but some of them were starting to swell and bruise already. Natalie scooped up some snow from the balcony rail and took Harry's hands into hers.

"That should help a little with the swelling. That dirty old hag. I hope Snape throws her from the tower."

That made Harry laugh, then hiss as some of the snow melted and dripped down his sleeve.

"Well, she's gone for now at least," Hermione said, "Lucius must have taken her to the parlor."

"How long do you think they'll be?"

"At least an hour, probably more. Do you still want to hang around here or do you want a tour instead? Nothing interesting is going to happen until the old fogies are done getting drunk."

"Draco!"

“Well, that's what father says! That's why they all meet in the parlor and not the conservatory. All that fine booze they filch from him.”

Harry and Natalie laughed while Hermione turned pink.

“The tour sounds like fun. Why didn't we do this last time?” Harry said as he followed the siblings back inside, Natalie's arm wrapped around his and her snow cold hands soothing in his.

“Had all those goons with me then. As if I wanted all those people knowing the layout of my house. I was convinced Weasley might show up to steal something if I did.”

“Draco, that's awful. You're both friends now.”

“Well, yes. Doesn't mean I'd trust him alone with the silverware though.”

They left the ballroom, skirting a majority of the guests and the greetings and the snide remarks veiled as something else. The hallway was mostly empty but for the occasional house elf scurrying to get things done.

“Why didn't you invite him anyway?” Harry asked, though he didn't mind the boy's absence.

“I did. He turned me down. Incurable brat. He said he had better things to do again.”

Even Harry couldn't help but admire Ron's cheek for that.

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“She's quite a remarkable woman,” Lucius said, offering Severus his preferred cognac. “Even if she is a little quirky.”

“Only you would consider ambition and pragmatism in a woman as 'quirky',” his friend replied, accepting the glass. From beside the bar

they had a clear view of the entire room, including Vesper Larousse, dressed like a lady, talking like a soldier, and sending coy little smiles at her fiancée when half the menfolk were hovering around her.

“Are you really going to marry her?”

“I intend to. You've seen her ring?”

“Yes.”

“It was my mother's.”

Lucius actually looked surprised.

“You really are serious about her. Is it love? Please don't tell me she's ruined you already.”

“If love can be convenient and enjoyable at the same time, then I suppose it is. She's going to make a wonderful mother, if she doesn't spoil the children rotten. I suppose my job will be to keep that from happening.”

“Children? You're going to have more than one?”

Snape smirked. “Primo pater, Lucius. I have to make sure my line doesn't die out before it's even started. Besides, she wants at least five.”

Lucius laughed. His friend had gone mad. It had to be love. Or the woman was drugging his tea. He hadn't heard Severus sound so enthusiastic about his future since they were both just school boys. Well, if this was what he truly wanted, Lucius wished him the best of luck. The world needed more Snapes anyway. They were good counter agents to the Weasley invasion.

“I'm going to duck out for a while,” Lucius said. “You can introduce me to your lady after the fireworks.”

Snape just nodded and went to rescue 'his lady' from her hoard of admirers. Lucius stepped up to his wife, chatting with some of the abandoned women, and kissed her cheek.

"Make sure your sister doesn't leave before I get back?" he whispered in her ear. She giggled and slapped his shoulder as if he'd whispered a flirtation in her ear, but he wasn't even out of the room yet before she managed to rope a rather distracted Bellatrix from the parlor window. Voldemort was in his customary position near the fireplace, looking almost as distracted as Bella, but Lucius doubted it was for the same reasons. The Dark Lord was facing difficult times, preparing for a war he believed inevitable and placating a public into believing they were safe at the same time. He did it with his usual grace, but Lucius suspected he would rather be somewhere else that night.

The Dark Lord noticed his retreat and nodded. He wasn't going to question Lucius' coming and goings in his own home, which he appreciated.

"Tikki," he said once he was alone and a bony little house elf popped into existence. She shrank and quivered as he loomed over her, irritating him. "Where is my son and Potter?"

"Y-young M-master and Mis- Mister P-p-potter are w-with Young M-mistress a-and Miss- mis Cy-cypher in the mu-music room," she barely managed to squeak out.

He kicked her out of the way as he stalked towards the southern end of the mansion. He hadn't expected the children to leave the ballroom, but this worked out even better than tracking them down in the ballroom. It wouldn't do for anyone to know that the commander of Wizarding Britain's military was conspiring with juveniles.

He wondered what they were doing so far from the party anyway.

The sound of the piano was his first hint. It echoed softly through the hall and the men and women in the portraits gathered close together to listen. Not bothering to knock, he stepped inside. The Cypher girl was playing the grand piano, while Potter leaned against it watching

as Draco lead Hermione in one of the more complicated dances. It was good to see the children hadn't forgotten their lessons.

His clapping startled all of them. Cypher missed a note. Draco and Hermione missed a step. And interestingly, Potter's wand was in his hand and raised for battle between one clap and the next.

"Bravo," he began, his expression cool and superior, "Very well done, but if you wanted to dance you could have stayed at the party with the guests."

There was a hint of chastisement, which left Draco and Hermione cowed but only seemed to ruffle their guest's feathers. Their postures were stiff, their green eyes sharp and cold.

"Forgive me," Potter said, nothing pleading in his tone, "I asked them to show me around your rather remarkable home. I did not realize I was pulling them away from some sort of responsibility."

Lucius didn't say anything for a long moment. So this was Potter, now? He barely recognized him from the little runt of two years ago. That child had been anxious and unremarkable, but for his ability to show up where he shouldn't. This boy was confident with a cautious edge, his green eyes looking sharper without his glasses. He thought he could work with this.

"Indeed, it is the responsibility of the host to remain with his guests to ensure everything runs smoothly, but I forgive you. I assume it's ignorance and not lack of propriety."

"Thank you," was the sharp retort.

"But I would be remiss in my duties if I did not correct the mistake. Ladies, if you wouldn't mind returning to the ballroom, I believe a lesson in party etiquette is in order."

Hermione looked worried, but Draco reassured her with a smile and sent her on her way with Natalie. Lucius was vaguely amused when he saw the Cypher girl stick out her tongue behind his back in the

reflection of a window. The closing of the door echoed loudly. Lucius' smile became more congenial.

"Well, now that that's out of the way, let's get down to business, shall we?"

Potter looked startled by the quick shift in mood, but recovered quickly.

"Yes. How much has Draco told you?"

Draco looks surprised by the question, then annoyed. Lucius wonders how much they trusted each other.

"Only that you are privy to some very delicate information regarding Headmistress Lestrangle, and if her little attack on the dance floor were any indication it is likely worth my interest."

"And my terms?"

"Do you want a contract?"

"No, I don't trust those. I'm already under one already."

"What assurance do I have that you will not betray me?"

"We both have more to gain keeping this between us. At least until Lestrangle tries something stupid."

"And if she does, and you speak? Will I be held accountable for keeping this information from the Dark Lord?"

"I never need to mention you. If you tell him yourself, then Lestrangle will know that and won't come after me. I don't want much."

"That all depends on what you're buying it with. That woman is very formidable and controls Hogwarts, not I."

"Voldemort controls Hogwarts," Harry corrected. "Which is why she'll be in trouble if he finds out what she tried to do to me... or perhaps because she failed to do it."

Lucius strode over to the piano, watching his reaction, trying to guess what she had done. Murder? Rape? Imperius? He didn't flinch or back away at all, following him like a hawk, but when they were standing right before each other, Lucius noticed those eyes weren't directed at his own. That was kind of strange. He had seen Potter look Voldemort directly in the eyes before without hesitation. Of course, that was two years ago, and he must have learned some things to fear since then.

"She tried to legilimens you, didn't she?"

The boy's shoulders stiffened, and he tried to cover it up with a shrug.

"That might be it. It might not be. You haven't agreed to my terms yet."

"And if I said Draco told me already it was legilimens?"

Potter turned sharply to the younger Malfoy who looked like a house elf caught in the laundry. They stared at each other, and then Potter sighed.

"I'd say you were a very clever liar, Mr. Malfoy."

"I could take that as an insult," Lucius warned.

"And then what? It doesn't matter. Do you agree to my terms or not?"

"Why should I when I already know your secret now?"

"Because it's a worthless secret if I tell Snape or Voldemort myself. They would never believe I told you willingly if I didn't confirm it."

Clever, clever boy. Was this the Dark Lord's influence? Severus'? Draco's? What sort of games did they play in that school of theirs?

“What makes you think the Dark Lord would even care?”

“It doesn't matter if he does or not, if Lestrage believes he does.”

“True. Very well, you have my protection from Lestrage and I have your silence. Now tell me what happened precisely.”

The tale was thankfully brief, but interesting as far as teenage exploits went. He couldn't boast ever trying to cut off Dumbledore's head when he was in school. Well, he suppose that it was his duty as his Master's servant to aid his protégé in any way he could, especially since the man was so busy lately. It would do Draco some good to observe the intricacies of blackmail without actively participating as well.

So he nodded, thanked Potter kindly for coming to him, and accompanied both boys back to the ballroom where the Dark Lord and his entourage finally joined the rest of the rabble. It was with an air of smugness that he found Lestrage, eying Harry suspiciously.

In her distraction she didn't even notice Lucius coming up behind her, until he whispering in her ear.

“My dear, you've been a very, very naughty girl.”

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“That's an interesting look,” Voldemort said, tilting Harry's head curiously from side to side. “Your eyes look less round without your glasses.”

The fireworks display had just ended and the crowds were returning inside where it was warmer, and Harry had sent his date off with his friends for a moment alone.

“They're still there, just invisible,” he taking them off and setting them on a pile of snow on the rail, which collapse under their weight. Voldemort smiled at that.

“Very clever. How are you?”

“Okay, I think. Nothing too big has happened so things are starting to get back to normal. I heard there was a break in the Moody case.”

The Dark Lord nodded, but didn't seem particularly interested in talking about that. That was fine with Harry. He'd heard enough about it the day before. With the Lestrage issue out of the way for the moment, he wanted to concentrate on nicer things.

“What about you? I haven't really heard from you in a while.”

“Busy. The usual things. Greyback wants his werewolves back for the full moon, so you might have to do without your guardians for a few days.”

Harry nodded. A few days wasn't so bad. He was starting to suspect his time with them was running out now that the conspirators had been caught, Moody probably wasn't far behind.

“I'd like you stay with me while they are away.”

“Will we celebrate the Solstice too?”

Voldemort grinned at the eagerness in his protégé's voice. He had been worried the incident with the Moon Goddess would have left him leery of trying another ritual any time soon.

“If you are willing then, yes, you many participate. I think you're ready to learn a thing or two about the rites.”

“Like the arithmancy?”

“That, among other things.”

“... Will it hurt?”

Voldemort ruffled his hair affectionately. “Just a little.”

Book III

Chapter 17: Ritual Sacrifice

After three days of final projects and end of the semester exams, Harry was exhausted, but alive. No one seemed to have enough time around the castle to go starting fights with him, and after Barlow was suspended for all her troubles no one was eager to test their luck. Hermione looked ready to keel over, and her stress level hadn't dispelled even after the tests were done.

"Perhaps I should have gone in to more detail about Dorian's Theory, I mean it did influence Lord Marcel's Theory of Infinite Dimension. And why did Madam Sprout only ask for six examples of non-native magical trees? There's like thirty of them on the grounds and that would have been easy credit right there. Do you think I should have?"

"Hermione," Harry said, his eyes threatening painful death if she didn't shut up about the bloody ridiculous tests. "It's over."

Her mouth snapped shut. Clyde mouthed a 'thank you' at Harry, and went back to enjoying his pudding. Dinner was being held an hour earlier than usual, so that everyone could get ready for the Christmas Dance by seven. Harry was glad he'd ducked out of it. He didn't know how anyone else could summon the energy to dance after all those tests. He felt mentally and magically drained.

"Are you sure you don't want to come tonight, Harry? It's supposed to be a lot of fun," Hermione insisted.

"I know, I went to the last two parties. And they were fun, but I'm tired, and I've got some last minute projects to work on."

Clyde leaned in and whispered in Harry's ear.

"You're not going to sneak out again are you?"

"No, of course not. Not that kind of project. I've got to wrap some gifts and then I want to do a little research."

That got Hermione's attention. "Research?"

"Arithmancy, I think I'm going to have to take the re-test."

Half true. It was arithmancy, but it was for the Solstice ritual, not what they were studying in class, which he thought he got at least an E in. They chatted about holiday plans and plans for next year and about what an odd semester it had been until it was time to go up to the common room to get ready. He helped Clyde look as presentable as he could in his new dark violet dress robes, thinking he looked kind of silly but not wanting to hurt his feelings, then hung out with the other guys down in the common room when Clyde left to pick up Cathy Wickett. Fred and George were dressed in ridiculously old fashioned robes in Christmas red and greens, and should have looked tacky but somehow managed to come off as merely eccentrically festive instead. He pitied their dates just the same.

And then along came Ginny. He hadn't seen her at dinner, but a lot of girls had been absent, favoring primping over food, and apparently it had paid off for the youngest Weasley. She came down the stairs with Hermione, a pixie escorting a princess. Where Hermione's was dressed in regal red velvet, Ginny was in ephemeral pinks, light silky fabric that moved like a breeze over her every curve. Hermione's hair was down, a wavy cascade of auburn down her back. Ginny's was up in a thousand tiny ringlets, held up by matching pink ribbons that should have made it look like a mess, but came off as pleasantly irregular, like a wild garden or a waterfall. Both were dressed down from what was expected at a Malfoy party, but then they wouldn't simply be waltzing tonight either.

He blinked widely.

"Wow."

Hermione smirked. Ginny turned incredible red, but it only made her look cuter.

"See what you're missing?" Hermione teased, "You'll just have to buy a picture from Colin."

"Ron was right, red does suit you," he teased right back. Soon she was just as red as Ginny. She quickly changed the subject.

"Where are Sirius and Remus? They were here this morning, but I didn't see them at dinner."

"Full moon tonight. They had to go home to celebrate with their pack. They'll be gone for a few days."

"Oh, is that why you're going with Voldemort? Because they won't be around to protect you?"

"That's why I'm leaving tomorrow, but they'll be back to guard the castle way before me. I think it's more good press or whatever. I bet I'll be running across a couple of reporters."

"That's too bad," Ginny said, "You should have fun on your break. I think you deserve it more than anyone."

"Thanks, Ginny."

They talked for a little longer before Colin showed up, and greeted them all with a face full of flash.

"Sorry, sorry! But it was a great shot!" he apologized, and escorted a rather put upon looking Ginny out of the tower. As they were leaving, Ron walked in and gave Colin an even look.

"Watch where you put your hands tonight, ya little bugger," he warned.

"Mind your own business, Ron!" Ginny snapped. He ignored his sister and stepped in. He was dressed in tasteful black with little gold fixings. He had cut his hair too, cropped into something almost military and it looked almost dark blond that close to the scalp. He didn't look a thing like his brothers dressed like that.

"That's different," Harry said, unsure if it was improvement or not. At the moment it just looked strange. Ron just smirked.

“Good evening, Hermione,” he said, perfectly gentlemanly, even bowed politely. “You look lovely.”

She turned even redder than when Harry had complimented her, and the Gryffindor felt a surge of irritation. He seriously hoped this poxy bastard wasn't actually charming her. And bloody hell, since when did he get away with calling her 'Hermione'?

They exchanged pleasantries until Harry felt his teeth had to be rotting out of his head listening to them. At last they left, Harry now almost completely alone in the tower. He went up to his room and worked on his gifts for a while, but soon grew bored and took his library book 'Applications of Arithmancy in Common Magical Rituals' down into the common room.

Natalie was there.

She was standing by the fire place, dressed in a cardigan and a black skirt. Clearly, not intending to go to the party. In fact, if her little picnic basket were any indication, she was intending to stay for a while. He smiled.

“Not in the dancing mood?”

She looked up at him and smiled back.

“Aren't you? What's wrong? Couldn't find a date?”

“I'm all danced out for the year. Besides, I've got some studying to do.”

She made a face, and he laughed. He picked up some pillows from the couches and chairs and tossed them to her. She arranged them, and sat down and he joined her.

“I hope you don't mind my interrupting. It just seemed kind of lame to spend the evening alone,” she said. He shook his head and peeked in her basket. There were cakes and candies and a couple of thermoses of no doubt highly sugared drinks like hot chocolate and eggnog. It smelled wonderful.

"I don't mind at all. I could even use your help."

"With studying? Eww... that's more Hermione's thing."

"I think you'll like this. It's very old magic. Very powerful."

That did seem to make her a little more interested, so he continued.

"I'm performing a ritual with Voldemort during the Solstice. I've done a little bit of it before, but I'm going to be more involved this year so I kinda want a better idea of what I'm doing."

Now she looked really interested.

"You're performing rituals with the Dark Lord?! I don't know whether you're mad or brilliant. What does the ritual do? Does it have a name?"

"I don't know if it has a name. I haven't found anything in the library about it, but it's really really powerful so it might be in the Restricted Section. It connects you to the magic of the Earth."

She didn't seem to understand what he meant, so he explained as best he could about what he had experienced last year when he'd done it and again his experience during the summer festival. Like a little child listening to a particularly exciting bedtime story, Natalie hung off his every word and gesture, eyes wide with fascination and awe. When he was done, she had to literally shake herself.

"That's incredible. You mean you could... I dunno, talk to gods or whatever?"

He nodded, though he doubted if he'd truly understand their reply. He'd been so overwhelmed the first time he didn't think he'd have understood if someone had told him one plus one equals two. Regardless, she was very interested after that in helping him figure out what he had done. Harry drew a diagram of what he remembered, and together they looked up what the many components meant. Some of them were very simple, the pentagram, the runes of the

elements, the power of the blood were easily understood to be amplifiers of power and sacrificial enticements to gain the Earth's attention. The other symbols were more confusing. Why were there so many geometric shapes around the pentagon? Did they attract magic rather than repel it? Why were the symbols for drowning and burning included?

The more they learned, the more questions Harry had. What did something like this do to a person? The affects on himself had seemed temporary, but hadn't his magical strength increased since then? He hadn't really noticed before or perhaps he thought it was the natural development of his own abilities, but he didn't tire as quickly when casting spells and he remembered them easier after learning and always seemed to know what he should cast during duel or fight. And then there was Gryffindor's sword, which found him so easily and repetitiously. Was that the ritual's influence? For magic to come more naturally as it did for the Dark Lord?

They finally gave up on understanding any more of it. It was clearly the work of someone with more advanced knowledge than they had. They ate their sweets and told stories, silly things from when they were young. Harry told Natalie about his parent's studio and how they let him play with the raw clay and taught him how to draw and paint. Natalie told Harry about how her mothers spoiled her rotten with riding lessons and traveling every summer. It was almost ten before anyone came up to disturb them, and of all the people to showed up they hadn't expected Draco.

He threw open the portrait door and ran right up to them, his pale face actually stuck in a look of disbelief. Harry immediately stood up, expecting something had happened to Hermione. Instead, what came out of Draco's mouth was considerably more disturbing.

"Uncle Serverus is getting married..."

"What?!" they both squawked. "To who?"

"Vesper Larousse!"

Somehow, Harry thought he should have seen that coming.

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Harry didn't sleep well after Draco told them about his godfather's announcement after the party. The excitement he was feeling over the upcoming ritual was overshadowed by anxiety. Snape and Larousse? A dangerous duo if he ever saw one. Each trying to stick their noses into his business at any given moment. He had tried to convince himself that it wasn't that bad. That they could end up distracting each other and leaving him alone, but his sleep was filled with prophetic dreams of summers spent in their company, of chores involving nasty potion ingredients, picnics by the lake, and trips into the woods to hunt his godfathers with guns and harpoons.

The morning dawned gray and cold, a new layer of snow blanketing the old. He gathered with the rest of the students in the Great Hall, then regretted it when he saw the objects of his anxiety at the teacher's table. Snape looked unusually smug, and Larousse was practically glowing. He wanted to be happy for them, but it was harder than it should have been.

The carriage ride to the station was noisy, Draco and Hermione unable to discuss anything other than their godfather's surprise and Natalie throwing in her usual quips. Draco thought Snape was nuts. Hermione thought it wonderful. Natalie thought the entire thing hilarious. He wanted to join in Natalie's amusement, but couldn't bring himself to do more than crack a smile or two.

They exchanged Christmas presents quickly, hiding them away before they left the carriage, and promised (and likely lied) that they wouldn't open them early. He saw them all off from the platform, his trunk and Elsbeth sitting patiently in her cage beside him. This year he wouldn't be able to travel to London with them as his security status still hadn't dropped enough for him to take public transportation. It was with more than a little longing that he watched as the train pulled away and faded into the distance. When the Hogwarts Express was little more than puffs of smoke on the horizon he turned back towards the platform to see Snape and Larousse waiting for him.

In Larousse's arms was Inana's basket.

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Inana slept inside his shirt on the ride to Bristol. Despite the warmth of her green house, Britain's gray winter skies had left her lethargic and she mustered only enough energy for a quick chastisement for leaving her unattended for so long before dozing off. He wished he could join her, but he was feeling even more anxious about Snape and Larousse than before.

Something about that last image of them on the platform, standing side by side, Larousse's holding out his serpent made him uneasy. It was the sort of image that reminded him of his parents, standing near the bus stop, handing him his lunch pail. Silly really, but there had been a possessiveness in the gesture he didn't like coming from them. Even Snape's usual apathy felt artificial, like he was gaging Harry's reaction.

Madam Hardwick was back in all her prudish glory to greet him by the road, shiny black car and all. She sat across from him in the car to make sure he hadn't reverted back to slouching or drooling all over himself. He'd bluffed his way through the proper courtesies then ignored her altogether. It was snowing heavily in the south, and Harry wondered if it was snowing where his godfathers were and if it bothered them at all. Would Luna be with them? A girl or a goddess now? He blushed and quickly tried to think of other people. Snape and Larousse came up quickly, but the thought of them together sent his mind scurrying in yet another direction.

What was Voldemort doing right now?

Would he be in Bristol still or had he relocated to London since last year? Or was he somewhere else altogether? He might already be at the lodge, working from his study or preparing for tomorrow's ritual. No, he said he wanted to teach it to Harry, so he wouldn't start without him there. Maybe he went to see Greyback and the werewolves, as part of obligations as a shaman? Were he and his godfathers annoying each other this very moment?

It turned out speculating on Voldemort's activities was very entertaining, for he managed to distract himself until they reached the estate. Which was good, because having driven from Hogsmeade rather than London meant the ride was almost two hours longer than it had been last year. He really didn't understand how his travels arrangements were made, because efficiency really didn't seem to be a factor.

The Sianach Lodge was exactly how he remembered it. The forest was gray and mysterious, the road long and narrow, the mansion itself majestic and sprawling. Mr. Whitby and Victoria were there to greet them upon arrival, bundled up in their matching winter coats.

"Welcome back, Young Master," Mr. Whitby said as he opened the door for him.

"Thank you, it's good to be back," he said, sincerely.

Victoria looked like she wanted to run over and hug him, but didn't dare with all the stuffy people around. He smiled at her and she smiled back, before they both pretended to be proper for everyone else's benefit.

"Master is still abroad, but should arrive later this evening," Mr. Whitby said, leading them inside where the familiar row of servants were gathered, bowing respectfully as he entered. "Would you prefer something to eat or to settle into your room, Young Master?"

"I think I'll settle in first. Will our Lord be back by dinner?"

"That is unclear."

"Would you have a light snack sent up then? If he isn't back before seven I'll take my meal in my room," he said, heading towards the stairs, Victoria following dutifully after him.

"Very good, sir."

"Thank you for escorting me, Madam Hardwick," he managed, rather reluctantly, "I hope you have a nice evening."

She didn't seem very interested, but she acknowledged his attempt at politeness with a nod. As soon as they were out of sight, Victoria really did hug him.

"Oh, Harry, it's so good to see you again!" she squealed, turning him around to good a better look at him. "You've grown! I swear you had to have grown a foot since I last saw you!"

He grinned, though he knew she was full of it. He was still shorter than most of the boys in his dorm.

"You haven't changed at all."

She slapped him on the shoulder.

"I'd have you know I am quite changed. I've got a boyfriend now."

"Really? Me too. I mean, girlfriend, girlfriend. She's definitely a girl."

Victoria laughed. They arrived at his room, exactly as he remembered it, lots of wood and amber with a magnificent view through the southern and western windows. Through the thickly falling snow he could barely see the outline of the forest beyond the gardens.

"You've definitely had a busy couple of months," his maid said lightly, but there was a sort of caution in it. "It seems every time I turn around the paper's printed how something or other happened to you. I nearly keeled over and died myself when I heard about the explosion at the school. Awful business that."

He looked to her, and found her sort of fidgeting, staring at her toes. She made a little sniffing sound, and he realized she was fighting tears.

"Vicki?"

"I've just been real worried about you, Harry. All those attacks at a place that's suppose to be the safest in all of Britain. It's just too awful. You being so young and kind and all. It'd break my heart if something happened to you."

She sniffled again. Harry just stood there, unsure what to do. He'd never comforted an adult before, except for once when one of Hagrid's beasts had died despite treatment and really Hagrid wasn't that different from a big kid. It seemed he didn't have to do anything, for between two blinks of an eye she had composed herself and managed a big grin.

"So don't be running off into the woods at night like last time or I will be quite cross with you! Well, I better go get that snack and see what's taking Danny so long with your luggage."

And with that she disappeared out the door, leaving Harry to wonder what had just happened.

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Voldemort didn't arrive at the Sianach Lodge until almost nine. He had been busy all day and most of the evening, wrapping up some loose ends before he disappeared for the next few days. His errands had taken him all over Britain, including a brief inspection of Hogwart's construction and a meeting with Lord Thurles, regional steward of Ireland, in Dublin. The weather hadn't been accommodating, having snowed or was snowing everywhere he went and even apparating didn't alleviate the annoyance of wet and cold.

He wasn't tired in the same way men where, being not entirely human, and sleep hadn't been necessary since the seventies, but he did want to rest. He wanted somewhere warm and quiet and dark, with only a book and a hibernating Nagini for company. Yet there were still a few important matters to attend. Whitby and all the servants, except for Harry's personal maid, were there to greet him at the door despite the hour, but he ignored all of them except for Whitby and the stable hand.

"You have it then?" he asked, stalking right past them and towards the back of the house. Both men scurried to keep up, and the stable hand didn't dare stop to grab his coat when they were led straight out the back door and towards the stables.

"Yes, my Lord," Whitby said, "Female, virgin, a very attractive creature."

"Mean too," the stable hand muttered, grimacing as he looked at his hand, blood spotting through the bandages.

Voldemort nodded, but didn't look back. He had to make certain she was what he needed else the ritual wouldn't work as it was supposed to. Last year, less exact requirements had been needed of the sacrifice, but then it had only been for himself and Harry's participation had merely been a happy accident. If it was going to work a second time for the both of them, he couldn't be stingy. This one had to be perfect.

The stable was charmed to be a pleasant temperature all year around, and the lights were kept on but dim at night. Aside from that, there was very little magic used there. There were sixteen stalls, two holding his six Irish wolfhounds, two milking cows, a team of four black horses for carriages, a white charger, three well-trained field hunters, and the last four were usually kept empty. It smelled of hay, manure, and dog food.

"Stay here," Voldemort instructed, leaving them by the entrance while he strode to the very back of the stable. The animals watched him warily as he passed.

She appeared to be waiting for him when he reached her. She was tied to prong in the middle of the stall so that she didn't hurt herself smashing into the walls in her attempts to escape, but she wasn't struggling now. Her large dark eyes watched him cautiously, her slender legs trembling with the desire to flee. Whitby was right. She was an attractive creature.

She would do perfectly.

Harry did not get to see Voldemort until the next morning. Victoria had informed him that the Dark Lord was 'in a right snit' on arrival and was dragging Mr. Whitby and his staff around by their nose hairs before he let them leave. He'd even snapped at her that he wanted Harry in bed early, as he was going to be up by dawn.

“Uugh... kill it, Princeling. Kill it, what ever foul creature it is,” Inana hissed sleepily from around his neck.

“Good morning, my Lord.”

“No.”

“... um... wait, I think...”

He pondered over the purpose of specific times at first, but there were too many symbolic meanings associated with that, so he considered how the sun would affect such a ritual and then possible disruption of night. He mentally sifted through the many runes involved for clues.

“... the sun determines the range of the spell?”

The Dark Lord grinned. They entered the dinning room. Harry was a bit disappointed to find they'd only been left hot porridge. Is that what they'd eaten the day of the ritual? No, Harry thought he'd had something else, but then Voldemort hadn't eaten with him that day so perhaps this too was significant. Like a mild form of fasting.

“Very good. Do you know how?”

“The sun powers the earth, and somehow it powers the spell as well. It powers the connection between us and the earth. That's what the runes for flowers are for, right?”

“Among other things yes.”

“So when the sun moves too far west the angle changes and the connection looses power?”

“Yes. Very, very good. You have been studying this?”

“Yeah, a little. But if the angle of the sun is so important, why not perform the ritual in summer instead of winter?”

“For one, the connection would become too powerful and your soul would be torn from your body.”

That was a very good reason, Harry decided.

“For another, life is much too chaotic in spring. Animals and plants are living, dying, growing, breeding, birthing, and just constantly shifting. The earth and water itself is also shifting under the heat of the sun and activities of the living. Winter is a time of stillness. Nothing births except for bears and few other odd animals, plants do not grow, water freezes. If you were to try to connect to Her during the summer, even if you were not disembodied, you'd be driven very quickly insane. Now eat your porridge.”

They were finished eating within minutes. Voldemort quizzed him on his understanding of the spell, and though he got almost as many answers wrong as he did right and three times as many he couldn't even begin to guess at, the man seemed pleased. Harry was very glad he had at least attempted to figure the ritual out the night before. When at last Voldemort felt he had found the limits of Harry's understanding, he took him back to the study and handed him a wooden box.

It was about the size of a box of chocolates, dark red wood with a crest carved onto the top. There was something familiar about the crest, something alluring though he couldn't recall where he might have seen it before.

"This is for you. For your first born son. For his first son. And so on and so forth. With every generation its power will grow."

A shiver ran down Harry's spine, the man's words felt like a spell, sending magic into motion to some unknown end. He ran his fingers over the lid, and they tingled.

"Is this the Potter crest?" His throat felt thick and uncooperative.

"Yes. Twenty generations of Potters wore that crest for over a thousand years, though the name has changed almost a dozen times itself, the bloodline remains true. Only the blood of your direct descent will open that box."

"Blood?"

"There is a catch on the box. When you press it down you will feel a sharp pinch. It's nothing more than a needle prick."

"What's inside?"

"Open it and see for yourself."

Hesitantly, he found the golden catch on the side of the box with his thumb. It was round and smooth like a button, but when he pressed it there was sharp sting that made him flinch. There was the sound of

tiny gears, like that of a watch or a music box, winding down, then a click, and the lid popped open a fraction. He sucked the droplet of blood from his finger, then opened the box completely.

Inside was a knife resting on a velvet cushion. He set the box down on Voldemort's desk and took out the knife. The sheath was undecorated wood with smooth gold fittings that matched the handle. It took a moment for Harry to realize the sheath was made of holly, the same as his wand. Carefully, pulled the blade free.

It was perfect.

It wasn't sure how he could tell, as he was no black smith or swordsmith or weapons expert, but one look at its uncorrupted mirror sheen and he knew. It was very slender with an unserrated edge. Elegant. Sharp. What was it for? Clearly not for fighting, but it had a definite purpose.

He re-sheathed it.

When he looked up, he found Voldemort's eyes half-lidded, his mouth curved upwards ever so slightly, like a well pleased cat. The thank you that was on the tip of his tongue died. Unease was quickly drowning his gratitude.

"Do you like it?" the man asked, though he seemed to already know the answer.

"It's beautiful," Harry admitted, "But... it's not a gift, is it? You don't give gifts."

That cat smile sharpened with pleasure.

"That's true. Very true. It is not a gift. It's a tool. A very important tool, that I, as your teacher, am providing for you."

He suddenly remembered where he had seen a knife like this before. Voldemort had one just like last year, when he'd cut his hand to offer his blood. This was a sacrificial knife. The Dark Lord stepped towards him, placing a hand on his shoulder.

“Also, as your teacher, I am going to show you how to use it properly. Gather your cloak, we're going outside for a while.”

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It was snowing lightly as Harry trudge towards the stable, following after Voldemort. The snow was practically to his knees, so he followed in the other man's footprints as he waded through it with his usual uncanny grace. He wrapped one of his plain black cloaks instead of his Baluvian, suspecting that what came next might stain.

The stable was warm and smelled of animals. The sound of horses shuffling and the whining of dogs dominated. Voldemort secured the door behind them.

“We must be very careful in our preparations. Carelessness is a sign of disrespect, and you don't want to disrespect Her. She has very clever and horrible ways of making you regret it. Britain is full of legends about the ways she makes the irreverent suffer. Does that frighten you?”

“Yes.”

“Good.”

“I'm afraid of God too.”

He wasn't sure why he said it. Half of everything he ended up saying to the Dark Lord seemed to be as surprising to himself as the other man. It came to him the same way spells in a duel came. Instantaneous and somehow perfect, even if the result was unexpected. Hermione said it was his subconscious becoming more dominant when the stress of a situation caused his adrenaline levels to increase and inhibit his conscious thought process. He had no idea what she was talking about, but he wondered if talking to Voldemort was close enough to dueling for the same principles to apply.

"Really? Then I suppose He still has some hold over your soul. I'm not afraid of him at all. What can He do to me? His domain is that of the soul, and He cannot touch mine. I suppose we each face different risks in whom we entrust with our soul, but I like a Master less pretentious."

"Won't She punish me? Knowing I still fear Him? Knowing I still belong to Him?"

"Only if you're dishonest about it. I think She likes you. Your gift in magic suggests She does. I believe She'd rather seduce you."

He felt his cheeks burn at the suggestion. Merlin, he'd already faced a enamored goddess-possessed Luna with disastrous results, he didn't think he could take on the affections of an entire planet. Voldemort laughed, as if reading his thoughts. The animals shifted nervously in their stalls.

"Not that kind of seduction, child! Now come, we've not much time."

Harry felt another jolt of unease, but the only thing (and the very odd thing) Voldemort did was take him into one of the cows' stalls, and demonstrated how to milk her, and then went to milk the other one.

"Milk is a traditional offering, cow or goat or really any kind. It ranks between an offering of blood and an offering of grain. It's an offering of both food and body. In ancient times, farmers would pour milk onto their fields to entice the Earth to yield a good harvest. We will use it to bring forth the more beneficent nature of the Earth, rather than the vengeful. Blood will summon her power."

Well, that was interesting and disturbing, but the cows didn't seem to care either way so Harry filed it away for later examination.

When they were done, they poured Harry's milk in with Voldemort's and set it aside. Harry hoped that was it, but then the Dark Lord lead him all the way to the back of the stable. What he saw there made him freeze.

"Pretty, isn't she?" Voldemort said. "Her blood is particularly powerful, which we will need to maintain the integrity of the ritual diagrams."

Harry could only stare, seeing his own reflection in her wide black eyes.

"We... we're going to..."

"Yes. We need a lot of blood. A dove or goat won't be nearly enough."

"But..."

"It's called sacrifice for a reason."

For a long moment, he couldn't do anything but stare and wonder if he were even capable of what Voldemort were asking. He'd killed before. Fish. Rabbits. Probably a hundred rats for Inana and Elsbeth and the other snakes and animals at the medical bestiary. Even a deer with his godfather's help. Why was this any different?

Because it wasn't fair. She was tied up. She couldn't run or defend herself. There was no hope for her beyond the clemency he granted. It was completely unfair.

"...W-will it h-hurt?"

"No. Your knife is designed to make it quick and painless. I will show you how."

Voldemort's hand on his shoulder moved him further into the stall. The sacrifice started to struggle, kicking out at them.

"Careful," the Dark Lord warned, "She might look like a helpless little deer, but she's a sianach. Her kin have been hunting men for thousands of years, and she has the canines to prove it."

He had never seen a sianach, but he would never forget one now. They were white, or was that a seasonal color? At least, this one was. There were small gray flecks on her back, reminding him of fawns,

but she was much too big. Big as a normal adult female deer, but was that as large as an adult sianach? How big were they really? If they were big enough to hunt men it was probably bigger than the average deer. She snarled like a dog, fangs bared and snapping at him.

Voldemort moved in fast, seizing her head in both his hands. She bucked and kicked, but she could neither see nor reach him. He leaned in close and whispered something and she suddenly stopped. He pulled back and moved to the other side of her, gently pushing at her hind and front quarters to reposition her. She didn't resist, her body as docile as a well trained pony. She shook her head, flicked her tail, and seemed utterly oblivious to them.

"What did you do?" Harry asked.

"An apathy spell. You could set fire to her and she wouldn't care at this point."

Harry really hoped that wouldn't be necessary.

"What do I do?"

"Get the pale and set it here."

Harry did as instructed, setting the pale in front of the sianach. He was very close to her, and he couldn't help reaching out to touch her. Her fur was both course and fluffy under his fingers, waterproof and warm he realized. She didn't react to his touch at all. From over her shoulder he watched Voldemort mimic him, admiring the creature they were about to slaughter.

"What now?"

"You have your knife?"

Harry nodded.

"Take it out."

He had attached it to his belt, and the blade came free easily. He could see his reflection in it, wide green eyes in pale, pale skin. Voldemort's hand was at the underside of the sianach's neck, feeling his way up and down. He stopped a short distance from where the neck reached the shoulder.

"Here," he said, "This is the carotid artery. The main artery that takes blood from the heart to the head. There are other places in the back legs and pelvis that bleed profusely, but this is the safest and easiest place to cut. Do you understand?"

He nodded. "How do I...?"

"Give me your hand."

He surrendered it to him, allowing the Dark Lord to readjust his hold on the knife and reposition his hand, the blade pointing directly at the carotid artery. With his hand still on Harry, he demonstrated the stabbing and cutting motion.

"Stab deep, it won't take a lot of physical strength, but you mustn't hesitate. As soon as it's in at least half way, tug sharply towards yourself and pull it out. Are you ready?"

No, he wasn't ready, but there was no stopping at this point. She was going to die, one way or another, and he had committed himself already. He had wanted to learn and to understand magic, and perhaps that was going to be painful and ugly and scary like it was in this moment, but it was also true. Nothing to hide the rawness of it, to sugar coat or spin it into something more acceptable. If he was to truly become a pagan, to even understand what that meant, he had to do this.

"Yes."

"Then go."

He hesitated.

"GO!"

The knife sunk in quick and easy, almost to the hilt and he nearly fell over when he tugged it sharply towards him and out of her. A splatter of blood caught him in the face as he removed it, running from his forehead, over his right lens of his glasses, and down his cheek. A torrent of blood followed, downwards, straight into the bucket. The sianach fidgeted, but Voldemort held her gently in place, keeping her head elevated to increase the blood flow.

It was over in less than a minute. All he had to was stand there and watch as she quickly bled out, gradually losing strength, first leaning against the Dark Lord, then falling to her knees, then her side, and then gone.

There was more blood in the bucket than there had been milk.

He ran out of the stable as fast as he could, stumbled in the snow, and vomited up breakfast. His right hand still held his knife, the flesh and metal both covered in blood. He touched his face with his left hand and found blood there too. He stumbled another few feet to a clean patch and used the snow to scrub himself clean, knife and hands and face, then dried them with his cloak. He blamed his shaking on the cold, and walked back inside before the Dark Lord decided he'd chickened out and run away.

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Voldemort was concerned when Harry ran. Surely a little blood letting hadn't scared him away? He'd killed giant snakes for Merlin's sake. But no, the boy returned a minute later, a little green but otherwise fine. His hands and face were flushed but clean of blood.

It was a natural reaction he supposed. The sort of thing farmer's children learned to overcome when slaughtering their livestock. He'd never had a problem with killing animals himself, but then he'd never had a problem with killing people either. Harry's natural revulsion might actually serve to make the sacrificial blood more meaningful. He doubted it would bother the Earth one way or another.

Ruffling Harry's hair affectionately, he dismissed the show of weakness and led him back to the house. He had wanted to explain the significance of using a young doe, how sacrificing her was like sacrificing not only the deer herself but all the offspring she would ever have had and how it so easily overshadowed the offering of a mature buck. He didn't think Harry would appreciate being told he'd simultaneously killed a potential mommy and all her potential babies.

Non-Slytherins were funny like that.

Instead, he took Harry to the kitchen, where there were many pots and bowls and herbs and instruments laid out. He lectured Harry on the purpose of each of them, had him help pour the milk and blood into their specific containers, mixed the herbs, theorized the importance of each step, and then corrected him when he was wrong or praised him when he was right. The activity seemed to calm Harry. Gradually, he became less pale and his hands stopped shaking.

At last, the materials were all prepared.

"I think we're ready to begin."

Book III:

Chapter 18: The Siege part I

"It seems such a waste," Lestrangle lamented, staring over her coffee cup at her associate, "After everything you've done, you're primed for reinstatement into the Court. Sentinel or Guardian or Judge or whatever you like. You could have any of it, and you're... settling?"

Larousse shook her head.

"'Settling down' is not the same thing as 'settling', Headmistress. I see my ambition as expanded into the familial aspect of my life, rather than diminishing in my professional one. I've got so many plans..."

Lestrangle looked anything but convinced. It was quite beyond her why a woman of Larousse' skill and drive would leave a prominent position at Hogwarts, ignore an even more prominent position at Court, and marry Snape of all people, let alone bare his spawn. If it had been up to her she never would have married Rudolfus, who proved useless in everything including siring children. She considered telling Larousse this but was afraid she'd take it the wrong way.

"Have you settled on a date, then?"

"Sometime in late June. It'll give us the summer to get our affairs in order, change my last name, combine our accounts, revise wills, and things like that. Do you think you'll be able to come? I really hope you do. I never would have met Severus if it weren't for you."

Lestrangle merely shrugged. "Of course, I will. It would-"

The screech a siren's alarm started both women, causing Lestrangle to drop her hot coffee on her lap.

"Ouch! Dammit," she cursed, producing a wand to clean up the mess and then silence the wards.

"What was that? Has the castle been breached?"

"Calm down, Professor, let me check."

The headmistress open her desk and pulled out a large piece of parchment. Flicking over its contents, she sighed and put it away again.

"Just the mongrels. They're back earlier than I expected."

"You mean the werewolves? They're back in the castle?"

"Yes, though I don't know why they bother. Potter won't be back for another couple of days. Maybe they want to steal something else."

"Steal? What did they steal?"

Lestrangle pointed at the empty display case where the Sword of Gryffindor had been. She still hadn't figured out how to get the sword back before the Dark Lord noticed its absence. Fighting over it was useless, since she couldn't touch the damn thing any way and threatening Potter or her mangy cousin might actually result in them threatening her right back. Perhaps she could use Larousse' natural animosity towards the werewolves and Harry's convenient absence to solve at least one of her problems.

"The Sword of Gryffindor. Potter found it last year, and I think they have a misguided notion that it belongs to him rather than the school. The boy even gave it up after the Dark Lord explained it's connection to the Founders, but they're such base creatures I don't think they comprehend the matter as more complicated than 'finders, keepers'."

Larousse scowled, obviously irritated by their supposed misdeed.

"Haven't you told the Dark Lord?"

Lestrangle shrugged.

"It's a minor matter. I will simply have Potter return it. They're his dogs after all He'll have to take responsibility."

"That's hardly fair. He's only a child and they're full grown... men."

"If you want to get it for me, that's fine too. I'm afraid I have more important things to deal with today."

"Of course, Headmistress. Severus and I will take care of it."

Lestrangle hid her smirk behind her cup.

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It had taken them almost three hours to prepare their materials, and it was starting to resemble a potion's detention with all the cutting and measuring and mixing. Luckily, Voldemort was no Snape, and rather than terrorize or ignore Harry, he just kept talking and explaining and quizzing. Harry thought he had learned more about magic in those three hours than he had all semester at school.

It was still snowing when Harry and Voldemort went out into the maze. The shrines to the gods and goddesses were barely visible, their offerings indistinguishable mounds of white.

"Who are they all?" Harry asked.

"Are you asking for specific names? They vary from region to region."

"Why do you honor some but not the others?"

"I honor each their due. Some are best worshiped in winter others summer and so on and so forth, and still some require attention all year around. Of course, these are only the ones I bother with. There are thousands of gods and goddesses with various levels of power and influence scattered across the world."

"Then what are they? I mean, what is a god or goddess? They're not really like... Her, but they sort of are. Luna had one inside her, how does that work?"

"Gods and goddesses are spirits granted some sort of authority by the Earth. They can be the spirits of those once living, human or

animal or plant, or even created out of magical or emotional energy collected in an object or place, like a poltergeist. Luna's goddess is parasitic, it is too weak to hold her place without being absorbed by the Earth again so it inhabits a suitable human body. There are many spirits who do this with animals. True familiars are merely spirit possessed animals."

"So if you died you might end up a god?"

"Yes. Or several gods. Or a demon spirit. Perhaps I'll be reborn into another physical body or have to possess it. There's really no telling what she intends for me after I shed this mortal coil. I have a millennium to wonder."

Harry was going to ask what he meant by that, but they had reached the center of the maze. Voldemort cast a spell to harden the snow so they wouldn't make it uneven by walking on it. From his cloak, the Dark Lord pulled out a piece of paper and on it was drawn the diagram for the ritual. He blew on it, setting it alight and tossed the smoldering paper onto the ground. It 'exploded', the diagram bursting out of the paper with all the passion of a firecracker and all the grace of a blooming flower to spread across the ground. What was left was a glowing blue outline in the snow, as large as he had remembered it though it hadn't been blue then.

"This is what arithmatists call a 'mini-mega'. It's used to carry around complicated diagrams for lectures and demonstrations on small pieces of paper. I've modified this one a bit," Voldemort explained. "Hand me the urn with the tree on it."

That was the urn with the blood. They had transferred the milk and the blood to their own urns after mixing in the different herbs and metals. Harry was carrying both, one under each arm, while the Dark Lord carried everything else. He handed the urn over to him.

With perfect control, Voldemort removed the urn's lid and tipped out its contents onto one of the glowing blue lines. The blood didn't pool like Harry expected, but flowed along the lines of the mini-mega, recreating the diagram in blood. Slowly, the blood replaced the blue, flowing all the way around the diagram and into the interior, even into

those runes and symbols that weren't touching the main lines, until at last it was complete.

A rush of magic made Harry shiver. Voldemort grinned.

"Now the other one."

He handed him the milk urn. This was less carefully dispersed. The Dark Lord merely poured it out as he walked around the symbol. It did nothing to disrupt or mix with the blood, and in the snow it was all but invisible. There was a shift in the magic, but Harry could still feel its power.

"Excellent. Now take off your shoes and your cloak, and join me in the middle."

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The world had become a dark place in his absence. Or rather the darkness had spread. Spread out from Askaban like a plague carried on the wind, infecting, tainting everyone it touched from babe to elder. After twelve years in a living hell, he had thought the world outside would be as good as heaven, but it wasn't so.

Everyone he had ever cared for or respected was dead or run away or imprisoned or a beast or as wretched as the very men and women they'd fought to keep Britain safe from. No one spoke of those brave souls who had died. Their graves were unmarked. Their families denied they ever existed. Their children pretended they didn't even exist, kept like obedient pets to their Pureblood masters.

The Monster's name remained unspeakable and feared, but the crowds followed him like sheep. Worshiped the dark lord like some sort of king, and spat at the name of Dumbledore. Ah, well, Moody spat at the name too. The coward. The hypocrite. Left everyone in the fix while he went to play hero all the way from Europe, leaving everyone else to rot. Leaving him to rot in prison.

He'd get back at them though. He'd finish what he and his had started a lifetime ago and see Voldemort and his spawn in the grave, and Dumbledore wouldn't be able to take credit for it. Not a chance. They'd tried and failed miserably that one time with Potter... though he didn't have much luck either. He hadn't tried hard enough, planned big enough.

But he was still free. Free and in Hogwarts, and no one the wiser. The Dark Lord so eager to tear apart and rearrange every reminder of the past, had left gaps in the security and now he was in. Potter and Voldemort weren't here, but eventually they would return and he'd be ready for them. Ready for them and all their miserable horde of dark wizard spawn. Ready to tear it all down around them once and for all.

God, his leg hurt.

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It was cold. The power resonating around him did nothing to alleviate that particular discomfort. His feet ached, his limbs trembled, his teeth chattered.

Voldemort appeared amused by his discomfort, his own bare feet and chest not bothering him in the least.

"Is it really that cold?"

"C-c-can't y-you t-t-tell?"

"Not really, but I'm not entirely human either. Quickly, kneel there, in the rune for 'water', just like last time. You still have your knife? Good, take it out."

Harry did as instructed, trying to ignore the cold, and the pain that was starting to seep into him and focus on the magic surrounding him. There was no awareness yet, but they hadn't made their entreaty, only created an appropriate alter. Right now there was only unharnessed energy in its raw form, tingling and caressing, the Earth purring like a cat against his magical senses. It was with some

curiosity that Harry noted the snow had stopped falling on them, but he could still see it falling over the forest in the distance.

"She listening, isn't she?"

"Oh, yes. She knows we're here."

Voldemort closed his eyes then, and started to speak. It wasn't in any language Harry knew, but the dialect was Irish, so he assumed it was Gaelic. It sounded like neither a plea nor a command, but a lullaby, gentle and affectionate with a perfect rhythm found only in verse. Was this truly a spell? It was magic for sure, the strongest he had ever known or heard of, but there was no discipline in it and the form suddenly seemed fluid and unpredictable. Like hunting, they could do everything right and there was still no guarantee of success or that they would receive exactly what they sought.

The realization that the last time was a gift coincided with a surge of magic, welling up and into him. He let out a startled scream, even as the magic receded and returned more gently, twining up his body like a vine, finding his every fissure and digging in deep. Awareness came to him, flowing into him through the vine-like magic, teaching him to sense things as never before. Where before he had felt and seen and heard, he now felt and tasted and smelled.

His new magic sense reached out timidly at first, encountering Voldemort's own magically charged body, smelled the thousand different chemicals that composed him, the flux and tumble of their million reactions a second, tasted his elation like a perfectly ripened fruit, sweet and vaguely salty. He felt their magic's touch and mix, flow back to one another in some new recipe.

Their magic expanded, reaching out to touch the world beyond themselves, lapping first at the blood of the diagram itself. Harry was aware of the blood, how the *sianach* lived in it still, transforming in that very moment into something else, a small spirit that slept in the Earth until spring where it would rise again as a white ash tree. And that tree would grow quickly and flower sooner than all the other trees, and then die within the year to become a wand, and that wand would belong to the grandson of Eric Joseph Jacobee who was currently

two hours and fourteen minutes old and two hundred and fourteen miles away from where he knelt.

He had forgotten how beautiful She could be. How loving even in her cruelty. How ironic in her affections. Was this her gift to him? To ease his guilt? To seduce his love? To educate?

There was a pull in the magic, a gentle but firm tug on his... on their awareness, pulling their senses far from the maze and Bristol and beyond into Scotland, past Edinburgh and at last surrounded by an old and familiar magic. Hogwarts stood a beacon on a hill, surrounded by a vast magical landscape of forests and lakes and ancient townships and villages. Witches and wizards and sentient beings and beasts flashed across his palate in like an entire box of Bernie Bott's Every Flavored beans all at once, there and gone before any particular taste could be identified until at last there was only one flavor.

It tasted of ashes and spoiled milk, and he gagged but the taste wouldn't vanish.

"Ugh... Merlin, what is that?" he choked, unable to communicate mentally with the Dark Lord while that 'flavor' polluted his senses. Voldemort said nothing for a moment, lingering over this latest discovery even as Harry tried to flee it. At last, he let out a small gasp.

"It's him. It's Moody."

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If there was one word to describe McGunny, it would have to be 'pragmatic'. Sure, he had his moments of ambition, of sentimentality, and occasionally even daring, but never beyond what was reasonable for the situation. Which was why he was in his office leaning over submitted articles and proposals, foregoing the usual holiday traditions with his familial relations in favor of organizing the student paper while everyone else was away, because truth be told he missed his family. He missed how Anna and Peter fought over the dumbest things and how his mother was always trying to fix his

clothes and his dad's muttered obscenities at the newspaper. He missed the fields and the woods and stonewall his forefathers had built during the occupation by the Romans. He missed his dog and his horse and even that damned rooster that couldn't tell noon from sunrise.

But he was pragmatic. Missing something didn't excuse his responsibilities to the Hogwart's Herald, and as editor it was his duty to make sure everything was taken care of, including the New Year's Edition the student body would be expecting upon their return. The paper was doing so well, and combined with his grades he was certain he could get into any university of his choosing. His parents would understand. His siblings would get over it. Summer was less than six months away.

He sighed and pushed his papers aside. The office was too quiet with the rest of the paper crew gone, and it was far too depressing to spend his entire day there. He gathered up his materials and headed for the Great Hall. There weren't a lot of people in Hogwarts during the holidays, but the Great Hall was supposed to be the unofficial common room for everyone left behind. Most of the tables had already been removed, and the empty space filled with Christmas trees and decorations to give the chamber a more intimate feel. Perhaps he could find some company there.

He wasn't half way there when he came across two very unexpected figures. Sirius Blackbone, looking decidedly droopy-eyed, and Remus Slivermoon, with a very conspicuous set of claw marks across his nose, were loping in his direction. McGunny couldn't fathom why they would be there, since they'd left two days ago and Potter wasn't even in the castle anymore. He thought about asking them. Then thought better of it. Then decided it was the only practical things to do.

"Good day, gentlemen," he greeted.

They paused to consider him, but didn't return the greeting. He swallowed.

"I hope nothing is amiss that would draw back to Hogwarts so... unexpectedly."

Blackbone gave him a particularly bored look and just walked pass him. Slivermoon lingered a bit though.

“We came to make sure the school remained safe until the rest of the students return. Moody is still a threat after all, and the construction work leaves the school particularly vulnerable. We'll be out and about making rounds later tonight.”

McGunny thought he might have seen a tired smile, but it was hard to see beneath the scratches and the facial hair, and the werewolf had turned to lope after his alpha too quickly to confirm. McGunny wondered if their reasons were honest. He doubted they were going to raid the school for victims after the full moon, but they had never shown much interest in the students aside from Potter. Perhaps Potter had asked them?

Where was Potter anyway? Was he spending the holidays with some friends or was he spending it the Dark Lord once again? Whatever he was up to, McGunny thought it had to be something interesting.

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They apparated to Hogsmeade, barefoot and cloakless, and found themselves in the middle of a very surprised crowd of holiday shoppers. Voldemort ignored them, grabbing Harry's arm and lead them over to a row of horses tied outside the pub. No one attempted to stop them or even object as they untethered and mounted the animals and turned them towards the castle.

“Shouldn't we tell the Sentinels?” Harry called out, as they rode out of the village. There was still a temporary Sentinel post in the village after all.

“This situation is delicate. If Moody is doing what I think he is, he could destroy the entire castle. I will have to deal with him quickly and quietly. The Sentinels will just be in the way.”

They hit the country road, open and traffic free, urging the horses faster. Harry had never ridden a horse, let alone a horse at full speed, but he found it came to him naturally as if... Beside him the Dark Lord rode like a professional, moving his body smoothly with his mount's every stride. Harry realized he wasn't feeling the cold either,. Was this magic? Could he do this because he was magically connected to Voldemort in this moment? Or was it Her will that he had these abilities?

"Why did she show us Moody? Did you ask for that?" he asked.

"No, this is entirely Her idea. I never even thought about using the ceremony to find Moody. Hogwarts is one of the most magically saturated locations in Britain, She doesn't want to see it destroyed. She wants us to stop him."

Harry was amazed to see the Dark Lord was actually grinning. He could taste blood and steel and ozone on his tongue, the taste of battle and magic. He said nothing more until they reached Hogwarts and dismounted at the castle keep.

"Moody should still be at the north end of the castle. I want you to find the teachers and tell them to evacuate the students and themselves to Hogsmeade. I'll try to refrain from fighting until then, but you must be quick."

"Okay," Harry said dutifully and ran off to do as he was told.

"Harry!"

He stopped and turned back. Voldemort regarded him seriously.

"Be careful."

Harry managed a weak smile. "And you, my Lord."

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McGonagall was enjoying a cup of tea in the Great Hall with Professor Flitwick when Potter arrived. And by 'arrived' she meant stormed in like a hurricane. The main doors flew open as if by a great wind, but what came through them was boy in only a shirt and trousers and soaking from ice and snow. The ten odd students scattered around the Hall all dropped what they were doing to stare dumbfounded as he stalked past them and right up to the teacher's table.

Up close McGonagal felt the tingle of magic wafting off of him like body heat. In his belt she could see a sacrificial dagger. What had he been doing with that?

"Professors," he whispered urgently. "You have to evacuate the school. Moody is in the castle, and we think he means to tear it down."

"What? What are you talking about? Heavens you must be freezing!" Flitwick said, looking him over from head to toe, but the boy wasn't even shivering.

"Professor!" Potter snapped, both of their tea cups shattering. "Get. Everyone. Out. Of. The. Castle. NOW."

McGonagal wasn't one to be ordered around by her students. In fact those foolish enough to try never tried again, but she thought she might just have met her match this once. And if Potter was telling the truth, and she had no reason to think he'd lie about something this serious, it was probably for the best that they did as he said.

"Filius, take everyone here down to Hogsmeade. I'll get everyone else lingering in their dorms and warn Severus and Larousse. We'll sort this all out once we're certain everyone is safe."

"I'll take care of Professor Snape and check the Slytherin dorms. It will save time," Potter said.

"No you won't, young man, you're going with Professor Flit-"

He ignored her and rushed out of the room. She nearly raised her wand to stop him, but thought better of it. Filius gave an indignant grunt.

“How rude!”

“We can lecture him on proper respect for his professors later. Right now we'd best do as he says.”

“But-”

“Later, Filius,” she said and hurried off towards the Hufflepuff common room where she believed a few girls were staying. As she was leaving she heard the charms professor mutter, “I see where he gets it from.”

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The dungeons tasted of wet stone and bitter herbs, and stank of sulfur. Harry staggered on the stairs, barely catching himself from a rather undignified decent into the bowels of the castle. Spitting and covering his nose and mouth did nothing block it. Perhaps he should have let McGonagal handle the dungeons, but it was too late now. He sprinted down the dark corridors, senses beyond sight guiding him around obstacles and to the potion master's rooms. The moment he arrived he knew Snape was in his rooms and he wasn't alone.

There was a portrait over the entrance and he didn't know the password.

“Professor! Professor!” he shouted.

There was a moment's hesitation, then the painting swung open. Snape looked ready to bite his head off, but took one look at him and apparently changed his mind.

“What the devil, Potter?”

“Harry?” Larousse appeared from behind Snape, and gasped. “Merlin, what happened to you? You're soaking wet.”

She touched his face and hands, looking terribly worried, but he snatched them back.

“I'm fine! We have to get out of the castle right now!”

Snape didn't look convinced, “Potter have you ingested something?”

“Moody is in the castle!”

That seemed to catch both of their attentions, and Harry started backing away, luring them away into the hall and back towards the exit. Snape grabbed him by the arm to stop his retreat but immediately let go, as if he'd been bitten.

“Where is Moody?” Larousse asked, oblivious to Snape's reaction to Harry's magic. “If he's here we can catch him and put an end to this. Tell us where he is.”

Harry shook his head.

“No, no! You can't. Voldemort has gone to get him, but he can't start until we're all out of the castle. Is there anyone else down here?”

“No, all the Slytherins are in the Great Hall,” Snape said, “But what do you mean by the Dark Lord 'can't start'?”

“Moody has been planting explosive spells all over the castle and he can set them off at any time. Voldemort is going to stop him, but if Moody knows something is happening he'll blow the place to bits. So we've got to get out of here before he'll risk it. Can we just go?!”

“Yes,” Snape said and grabbed his and Larousse's cloaks from beside the door.

“What about Harry?” she asked, even as they made their way out of the dungeons.

"He's saturated with magic. He could probably jump into the lake without it affecting him."

"He can hear you just fine, you know."

"How-"

"It was a very bloody affair," Harry snapped impatiently, "We can get into the gory details later."

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By the time they managed to get out of Hogwarts, so had the rest of the castle. Fifteen students, six professors, the headmistress, the Slews, and some thirty bewildered GGs were trudging through the snow towards Hogsmeade. They caught up to the group quickly, and the adults were quick to demand answers. Harry told them Voldemort had been teaching him ancient magic, and that during a location spell they had found Moody and soon figured out what he was doing. They had both come to stop Moody and get everyone to safety. Questions about why he seemed to have turned into a magical battery he deemed irrelevant and were summarily ignored.

After that, the adult turned to each other to figure out what they were going to do with sixteen children with only the clothes on their back and the Dark Lord and a lunatic running around the castle. Harry left them to it, satisfied that he had done his part and certain Voldemort could handle himself. Everything was working itself out for once, and he was going to be looking forward to an assassin free New Year.

"Potter."

McGunny came up beside him. Well, bother. He had hoped he would be able to avoid the press until Voldemort and he could corroborate their stories, but it seemed he had used up his luck for the day.

"Hey, McGunny. Lovely day we're having, isn't it?"

The Ravenclaw looked around at the gray sky and ever deepening snow and then at Harry in his bare feet and without so much as a jumper on.

“Yeah... who needs summer? Um... are you alright?”

“Mmhm.”

“... Can I ask you something?”

“Sure.”

“This wouldn't have anything to do with why your bodyguards showed up this morning, would it?”

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“Puddifoot's would be best for the day,” Lestrangle said, as the village came into view. “We'll inform the Sentinels in the village that we'll need emergency shelter for the night just in case.”

“We're going to be getting a lot of owls when the papers learn the school has been evacuated,” Snape said idly. Truthfully, he was distracted, wondering what exactly was happening up at the castle. Larousse and he had just been preparing to go start a fight with the werewolves one moment and then Potter showed up like freak lightning and shocked hell out of everyone.

“We'll worry about that when the Dark Lord gets back. I'm not sure how he's going to want to spin this...” the Headmistress said dismissively, then laid out a plan to keep the children safely away from the press.

Where was Potter anyway, Snape wondered, scanning the crowd. It should have been easy to spot a half naked boy running around in the snow, but he couldn't...

“Bloody heart attack...” he muttered, and turned back towards the castle.

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Voldemort knew immediately when Harry left the castle. The vibrations he had been feeling, like music heard through his fingertips, altered just so as that particular harmony moved away, changing the tune of the castle from C to B flat. The other tunes were harder to hear over the orchestra of noise that was Hogwarts, but they too were gradually disappearing until there was only the discordant G sharp mingling badly in the background.

He pressed his hands to the stones and followed the disharmony to the north end of the castle. He started from the wing under construction, felt where the wards had been tampered with and found the secret entrance behind the tapestry, and followed it. His hand brushed something paper-like and flinched away from it as the sound of nails on a chalkboard stabbed at his skin.

It was a Distemperance Spell, used to suck out the magic of a item before using that same magic to explode. A nasty spell and well chosen. The castle would not attack a spell using magic it recognized as its own. They were easily diffused luckily. He concentrated on the spell's special vibrations, and just sort of 'tweaked' it. The vibrations gave a violent shutter and disappeared.

Traversing the length of the castle he found and disarmed six more. There were definitely others, put up days before in other parts of the castle, but the newest ones were the easiest to find and following them lead him ever closer to his prey.

Book III:

Chapter 19: The Siege Part II

The Malfoy Estate was created for the amusement of its household, both young and old. There were many rooms dedicated to many different interests and hobbies and the grounds were similarly designed with these purposes in mind. The artificial river that ran through the western end of the estate accommodated fishing, boating, and various magical sports like Kimshi* and water chess* during the summer. When the water finally froze in late November, there were many other possible activities but Draco and Hermione liked ice skating the best.

Which was why when Hermione was feeling particularly stifled in the place that she had never really thought of as her home, she often found herself there despite the chill. Draco, hating to be alone, usually followed her.

"What do you think we should get Uncle Severus as a wedding present? I mean, I don't think a set of bath towels is going to cut it," she mused, gliding passed Draco who was skating backwards in the opposite direction.

"Don't even worry about it. Father will take care of it. He knows him way better than either of us."

"Mmm... I don't know, I think we're both old enough to get them gifts of our own choosing."

"You didn't get him a Christmas gift," Draco pointed out.

"He hates Christmas. I used to think he was a pagan, but really he's just anti-holiday, I think," Hermione chuckled.

"How can someone hate Christmas? You get all those presents and good food and stuff."

"Maybe he didn't when he was little. You know there are kids who really resent Christmas when they see all the neat stuff they can't afford to have. I bet that's it."

"I suppose so... but Harry's poor and he likes Christmas. At least I think he does. He might be pagan now, but he always gives you presents so I don't know," he wondered, lazily skating a figure eight. Hermione circled around him, arms spread like bird in flight.

"He got you a present too."

"This is the first time though."

"This is the first time you got him one too. And you like the puzzle box... even if you haven't figured it out yet," she said. He quickly grabbed her arm as she passed him, and spun her around in a circle as she squeaked in surprise. "Draco!"

"When I do figure it out I'm shrinking your book and hiding it in there. See how long it take you to figure it out!"

"That sounds like a perfect hiding place! You know 'Witches Over Wizards' was black listed three times in the last century? Wouldn't want Lucius to find it and have it burned. It's hard enough finding a third edition, let alone a second one," she said, slipping free of his grip when he pretended to fall asleep. She made a snow ball and chucked it at him. He fell over, landing in a snow bank, but quickly got up to retaliate, chasing her down with a snow ball of his own. He missed, but still managed to tackle her into another snow bank.

They chucked snow at each until they were both freezing cold and wet and tired. He stood and helped her climb to her feet, the both of them breathless with exertion and laughter.

"I wish our friends could be here. Especially, Harry. He's probably feeling pretty lonely about now without any family," she panted, even as Draco was charming their skates back into boots.

"Yeah, it must be pretty dull. I mean, the Dark Lord is an adult and a pagan. What kind of holiday fun can you have with that?"

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While Draco was wrong to assume things were pretty dull in the Dark Lord's company, he was right in his assumption that Harry wasn't having much fun. Aside from the wonderful tingly sensation he was getting from his magical boost, he did not enjoy running around in circles with the threat of death literally looming above him. At any moment, Moody might realize he'd been found out and bring the castle down on his and his godfather's heads. He wasn't as worried about Voldemort, who seemed like he could walk out of any situation completely unscathed.

He didn't have the enchanted gold band he would normally use with his watch to find his godfathers, so he had to take an educated guess and headed towards their private room. It was uncomfortably close to the southern end of the castle, but the increased likelihood of them running into Moody made finding them quickly even more important. Luckily, his magical senses extended far ahead of himself, and he managed to taste his way to his godfathers with just the vaguest flavor of ash reaching him.

"Padfoot! Moony!" he called softly, hoping their senses weren't too dulled after the full moon. The hall was empty, but he could taste them near by, clay and blood and something else he associated with the moon. He was almost to their door when he was grabbed from behind.

He was startled, his magic lashed out, knocking Sirius a good twelve feet.

"Sirius!"

Remus appeared from behind a column, looking more annoyed than alarmed at his mate sprawled across the floor.

"I told you sneaking up on him was a bad idea," he muttered, and helped the stunned werewolf to his feet.

"B-bloody hell, what was that?" Sirius stuttered, his hair fizzled like he had just been struck by lightening. He blinked at Harry. "What happened to you?"

Harry let out an exasperated sigh. "I'll tell you later. Right now we have to get out of the castle."

"What are you talking-"

"LATER!" he snapped, and Sirius snarled back instinctively. Harry ignored it, and started down back down the hall, hoping they would follow him. They did.

"Prongslet, what is going on? What are you even doing here? You look like you ran here in the snow," Remus asked, jogging along beside him. Sirius, alpha by nature, was already moving ahead of them.

"I did, sort of. Listen, we haven't got much time. Moody is in the castle-"

That brought Sirius up short, causing Harry to run into him, but he was grabbed by his arms before he could fall.

"Where? Where is Moody?"

"It doesn't matter! If we don't get out of here now we could be crushed! He's planted explosives all over the school!"

Sirius paled and looked to Remus. They nodded to each other. They were tired and weaker than normal so soon after the full moon, but they weren't going to let that stop them from protecting Harry. Sirius scooped up his godson and set him over his shoulder, ignoring the indignant protests, and started running for the nearest exit.

They had almost made it to the stairs that would lead them to the ground floor and hundred of windows they could climb out of, when the first explosion rocked the ground beneath them. It was so close, both werewolves were knocked off balance, forcing them to fall to

their knees. Harry grunted as Sirius' shoulder dug into his stomach. They remained on the floor for a second, stunned.

"Is that it?" Harry wondered out loud.

In response to his questions, another explosion directly in front of them took out the stairs. Despite the shaking ground, both werewolves were on their feet and running in the opposite direction. Harry watched behind them as yet another explosion collapsed a section of corridor, an avalanche of stone, mortar, and debris flowing into their space and then below as the floor gave out.

"Oh, God."

A third explosion had the roof falling down directly on top of them. Harry closed his eyes, clutched Sirius' leather shirt in his fist and prayed.

"Faster. Please, faster."

Magic poured through his hand and into Sirius, and there was a sudden jolt of speed and a moment of weightlessness. He opened his eyes to watch the floor falling away beneath him, and he thought for certain they were falling, but Sirius' feet landed heavily on solid ground, digging a shoulder into his already bruised stomach with his landing.

He had jumped to safety.

"Where's Remus?" he cried, terrified that they might have left him behind.

"I'm here, pup," came a call from ahead. It seemed he was faster than even a magically enhanced Sirius when he wasn't carrying ninety pounds extra weight. "But we're running out of hallway!"

Another explosion, and they managed to outrun it more easily this time, but Remus was right. They were out of the space to run. The end of the corridor led to a spiral of narrow steps leading up to a turret and down to the first floor. A cloud of dust coming up from

below meant the first floor was as collapsed as the second, and left them with only the possibility of going up. Sirius took the stairs in three-step leaps, but still wasn't fast enough to reach even the third floor.

A final explosion rocked the tower, shaking free parts of the walls and stairs, convincing them that they were all going to die. Sirius pulled Harry underneath him and pulled Remus close, huddling them all together tightly as the world came apart around them in a deafening roar. Crushed between them, Harry closed his eyes tight and whispered over and over again, "Protect us, protect us, protect us..."

It felt like eternity, but could only have lasted a few seconds, and as the world stopped shaking and thundering around them they were still alive. Cautiously, Harry opened his eyes. The air was thick with dust, but beneath him, he could see their section of the stairs was still intact. He looked over Remus' shoulder to see the stairs going upward were gone, as was the top of the turret, revealing a gray sky above them. He looked over Sirius' shoulder to see the stairs beneath them were likewise gone, and the entire corridor had collapsed. He looked around to see that the rest of the school looked completely intact except for a section of wall in the most southern corner of the castle. They had managed to climb half way up to the third level of turret, which left them looking down on most of the castle's roofs and much too high to jump or climb down themselves.

Well, at least they were alive.

"Sirius? Remus?"

"We're alive," Remus whispered, shifting as he looked around.
"How?"

Sirius loosened his death grip on them, and looked around himself. He tested the edge of their narrow perch with his foot, making sure it wouldn't collapse. As both men moved away, Harry felt the bitter cold of the air and shivered. His magic! It was gone! In his moment of desperation he must have used all the extra magic the Earth had granted him and then some protecting them all. It was the only

explanation for why the stairs and wall that supported them hadn't collapsed and the falling debris hadn't crushed them.

Unfortunately, that left Harry wet, barefoot, and exposed to the elements with no way to reach shelter. His shivers became more violent.

"Harry?"

"C-c-cold."

"Shit," Sirius cursed, wrapping him up in his arms again to conserve heat. "Remus, do you have your wand?"

"Yes, I have it. Just a moment."

They had very little room on their ledge, but he managed to lean back enough to cast a warming spell on Harry and then sent up a signal flare so that someone might come and get them. Remus didn't trust himself to levitate them down after that. He was just as physically and emotionally exhausted as Harry, and he didn't dare use up what little remained of his magical reserves before they were certain of their safety.

"I-is it-t o-over?" Harry stuttered out through chattering teeth. The warming spell had taken away most of the chill, but it didn't work as well on someone who was wet, and he was relying heavily on his godfathers' body heat to keep him warm. Sirius' large hand ruffled his hair.

"Yeah, it's-" There was a moment's hesitation, and Harry could feel both werewolves' bodies tense. "Remus..."

"I see him."

Harry peeked out from the shelter of their limbs to look in the same direction as them. There was movement, a mere displacement of rubble at first, and then someone appeared, climbing over it all stiffly. Even covered in dust, Harry could make out the bright green of a GG helmet.

“Oh, no...”

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He had done it! By the grace of God he'd killed the Devil.

It had been close though. He hadn't expected the Dark Lord himself to appear out of nowhere, nor that the dog would have expected the traps he had laid. The wards he had set up were torn down like they were nothing more than cobwebs with a mere wave of the hand. Only one of the Distemperance curses he'd set that morning had gone off, and it had been closer to killing him than the Dark Lord. The creature had the audacity to laugh.

He hadn't laughed when he set off the rest of the Distemperance spells though. The bastard must not have expected it. Must not have realized that Moody had been coming and going through the school for months, so heavily disguised in polyjuice and stolen limbs and class one Senseless spells, that all the reveling charms in the world plus a werewolf's nose wouldn't be able to pick him out from the man he had killed and dismembered to gain authorized access to the school.

Yes, he managed to surprise the thrice-damned snake with that moved. Distracted him just long enough to hit him with the Killing Curse. The result wasn't what he was used to. Most men just fell over dead, without an ounce of fuss. The Dark Lord had just staggered though, startled, then collapsed to his knees slowly. In the final throws of death the body had begun to melt. There was the distinct feel of magic being released, then he'd fallen apart, forming into a bloody puddle, seeping into the surrounding stones, and then disappearing. It gave him the shivers, but it was over now.

The Dark Lord was as dead as dead could be.

Now all he needed to do was kill his spawn and the curse that had fallen over Britain and corrupted its people would be lifted. It shouldn't

be hard. With the Dark Lord dead, who would bother rising up to defend the wicked child?

He had to get out of the castle quick though so he could apparate away to hunt the little devil down later. The explosions he'd set off would make a convenient point of exit, so he headed in that direction. And surely, it was serendipity that his very route of escape should lead him straight to his next target.

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"I'm afraid so, Prongslet," Remus said, "Don't worry. I can shield us until help arrives."

Harry shook his head. He knew that wasn't true. He could taste both of their exhaustion from the full moon before the explosion, and they had lost even more in their escape and then the warming and signal spells. Harry didn't have his wand on him either, and even if he did he was magically exhausted. He probably didn't even have enough to summon Gryffindor's Sword.

If Moody decided to cast the Killing Curse, it wouldn't matter any way.

They could only watch as Moody stumbled over the debris, disappearing and reappearing amidst the clouds of dust. They stayed perfectly still, hoping he would pass with out seeing them. It seemed as if it would work for a moment, the man was so preoccupied with keeping his footing, but then he stopped a moment to look around.

"He's spotted us," Sirius said.

Harry closed his eyes tight, and continued his prayer, hoping that they had survived the first attack for some purpose that would carry them through a second time.

"Protego!"

The force of the attack striking Remus' shield charm made Harry grit his teeth and shudder. He could feel Remus trembling from his efforts

to protect them, yet not sooner was it over than he was forced to raise a second shield.

“Protego!”

“Why doesn't he just use the Killing Curse?” Harry whispered, careful not to distract Remus. Sirius shook his head.

“He doesn't have enough magic left himself. Even if he cast it, there's no way to guarantee he'd hit who he intended and that curse can't be repeated in quick succession. Come on, Moony, you can do it. He can't be in much better shape than us.”

“Protego!” he bit out, blocking yet another curse, his whole body trembling. “I'm almost done for. I can cast one more and then that's it. I haven't got anything left.”

Below them Moody was shaking too, but he didn't look anywhere near ready to give up. In fact, he only looked more and more excited, licking his lips and shifting about. Harry buried his face into Sirius' shoulder.

“I'm so sorry. This is all my fault. You shouldn't have to die here. I'm sorry. I'm sorry.”

“Hush, Prongslet,” Sirius said. “We've no regrets.”

“Gracious, Harry,” Remus joined, “We're not dead yet. We've still-Protego!”

Harry and Sirius barely managed to catch and hold onto him as his final spell stole the remainder of his strength, causing him tip backwards off their perch. They pulled him back until he was collapsed on top of Harry. Even as they regained their balance, Harry watched from the corner of his eye as Moody lifted his wand for yet another blow.

Yet before he could cast anything, he leaped behind a pile of rubble.

“Sectumsemptra!”

Harry's heart swelled with new hope at the familiar voice.

"It's Professor Snape!"

"Yeah," Sirius muttered unhappily. "Oh, look. He's brought his wench too."

Sure enough, there was Professor Larousse, flying straight for them on a broomstick. Behind them, Snape was keeping Moody pinned down, casting curse after curse with every intent to kill. Larousse came to hover beside them and held out her hand.

"Give Harry to me," she commanded. "I'll fly him to safety."

"What about them?" Harry asked, afraid she would abandon his godfathers, but the werewolves were already pushing him towards her, even Remus who barely had strength enough to keep from falling. "No! Wait! What about you?! I'm not leaving you here!"

"It's you he wants dead, pup," Sirius said, forcing Harry the rest of the way onto the broom. Larousse's arm came around his middle, and he found himself instinctively gripping the broomstick and adjusting his weight to maintain their balance. Sirius shoved the broom away to keep Harry from trying to get back to them, and let out one last snarl at the woman. "Keep him safe or I'll kill you myself!"

"Sirius! Remus! No, don't!"

"Sshhh, Harry, they'll be fine," Larousse said, tightening her hold on him. "I'll send the broom back for them. I promise, but I have to get you out of here first."

He nodded, rearranging himself for easier flight. They were rising higher, awkwardly, the school broom too small for both of them. "Okay, just hurry."

"Alright, hang-

There was a cracking sound, and the broom lurched, tipping straight down. On his own, Harry would have been able to hold on, but Larousse was wrapped around him, and their combined weight tore them both free from the broom and sent them falling.

Harry crashed onto the slanted roof of the castle, the snow cushioning his fall. Larousse landed beside him with a cry of pain. For a moment, all they could do was stare stunned at one another, amazed that they'd fallen and even more amazed that they were still alive. Then Larousse cringed, and carefully reached behind to touch her back. Her hand came away bloody.

"Are you al-" he started and then realized it was a pretty stupid thing to ask. "How badly are you hurt?"

"Don't worry. I've survived worse. Are you alright?"

Harry took inventory of himself. "Nothing broken. Just kind of cold. What happened?"

"I think one of Severus' curses got deflected right at us. It took out the end of our broom and rather ruined my cloak," she said, smiling shakily. He smiled back, just as shakily. He looked around, and was surprised to see his godfathers were now above him, the tower looking directly down at them. Could they perhaps jump to safety without him weighing them down? Remus was probably too weak, but Sirius... No, he wouldn't abandon Remus, and they didn't seem too concerned that Moody would start firing on them.

He gave them a thumbs up to let them know he was alright, then looked for some means off the roof. At the far end the roof connected to the wall of a even larger section of the castle were two large windows staring out at them.

"Do you think you can crawl over there?"

There was no response.

"Professor?"

She was unconscious, her eyes closed and her breath shallow. Harry cursed. She was dying and without his magic there wasn't much he could do for her or himself. By himself, the quiet of winter came over him, and in the distance he could hear more spells being cast beneath them and knew Snape wasn't going to be able to help either. He took a deep breath, let it out, and then started crawling over to Larousse. He grabbed the collar of her robes and started dragging her towards the window.

It was ridiculously slow. She was heavy, the snow that had cushioned their fall also made moving difficult, the warming charm was starting to wear off, and the roof was too slanted to stand on. In fact, he wasn't even sure what he was walking on, be it wood, copper, or very fragile glass, and whether it might suddenly shatter beneath them. Yet slowly, inch by inch, he made his way towards the window.

He made it about half way before another explosion rocked the castle. There was no time to wonder reason or origin, as the snow and the thick sheet of ice beneath that was shaken loose and they both began to slide down the roof with it. Harry scrambled for a hold with his free hand, but found only smooth, slick metal. They were speeding towards the edge, and Harry thought the only hope they had was Snape noticing in time to cast a levitation spell on them, but even that seemed ridiculously optimistic.

Movement out of the corner of his eye, and he could see a Padfoot, speeding towards him on four legs, his clawed feet finding traction where Harry's blunt fingernails couldn't, and so very, very fast. He closed the distance between them in a flash, and at the last leap he was once again a man, snatching up Harry's arm in one hand. With his free hand, he smashed his clawed fingers into the copper panels, puncturing them into four perfect grips. Their descent was brought to a abrupt stop, but Larousse was already half way over the edge.

Harry cried out as he felt his arm nearly pulled out of his socket. He just barely keep his hold on Larousse.

"Harry!"

"Padfoot," he whimpered. "Help me. She's too heavy."

"I can't pull you both up! You have to let go of her!"

"No! She'll fall!"

There was a silent pause.

"Prongslet... she's already gone."

Harry looked down at her. She was very still, but that was because she was unconscious, right? He tried shaking her a bit, but she didn't respond. He shook her again.

"Harry!"

"She isn't dead, she's just... hurt. She's unconscious!"

"No... she's not. Let her go."

"Please..."

A second explosion shook the castle, and in his surprise, he lose his grip. Larousse slid over the edge, and as she fell Harry could see her face for just an instant.

She looked peaceful.

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Voldemort emerged from the wreckage of Hogwarts one severely pissed off dark wizard. While it was pretty neat to learn that he had, in fact, survived a direct hit by the Killing Curse, it was not at all pleasant to spend the next twenty minutes completely rearranging his physical matter back into a usable form. Nor was it particularly fun learning that most of the magic he'd gained through the Solstice ritual had been used up in the process.

At least he still had enough of his own magical reserves to cause a little havoc of his own. Finding Moody had been easy. All he had to do was follow the shouting.

Exploding a wall that happened to be in his way probably wasn't necessary, but he was feeling extravagantly violent at the moment and considering all the damage already inflicted on the castle it hardly made a difference. He stepped out onto the destruction the mad man had wrought, and waded through the cloud of dust until he found himself standing directly behind him. Through the haze he could make out Severus taking cover behind a tree. They locked gazes for an instant, but there was no time to communicate via legilimency before another curse by Moody forced the potion's master to duck behind his cover.

Voldemort slapped Moody upside the head for interrupting them. The escaped prisoner spun around, and then just gaped. Voldemort slapped him again for being rude. Up close, the man's disturbed mind became readily more apparent. With all the skill of a watch maker, he disassembled the man's appearance, tools, and magic to determine his composition. Certainly, Moody didn't look like he had. He had two legs for one, and two eyes as well. Both of them belonged to another wizard, likely the same one he was pretending to be. There was a definite madness there, but it looked almost funny coming out of a skinny little man he was pretending to be, his hair nearly all fallen out and eyebrows too bushy. The flask in his engineer's robe had to contain polyjuice and the amulet around his neck held the charms to avoid suspicion and were also clever tools in his arsenal, and no doubt there were half a dozen more. In his prime and in his insanity, Moody could never be accused of being anything less than thorough.

"How-"

The Dark Lord wasn't in the mood to gloat. His wand still safely back at the lodge, he performed his last bit of wandless magic for the day. He smashed his hands together in a parody of a clap, and the stones beneath them rose and crushed the impostor. Even over the sound of smashing rocks, he could hear the crunch of bone and the squish of organs.

Voldemort smirked. He hoped the castle got as much enjoyment out of it as he did. It had certainly relieved the worst of his bad mood.

Then the body of Severus' fiancée nearly landing on top of him sort of ruined it all over again.

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Natalie thought being the only daughter of two witches was the best sort of life any girl could hope for. There were no huffy father droning on about how a girl ought to behave (as if any adult man really knew anything about little girls) or stinking up the house with cigars or calling her silly for caring more about the latest album by the Wicked Sisters than the latest Quidditch championship (unless it was school quidditch and Harry won, that is).

No, having two mothers was way better than having a mother and a father. Especially when they were very different. Constantina and Lenora were as different as the sun and the moon, but you would never find a more loving pair in Britain. Constantina was a driven, ambitious woman who was always planning something and never tolerating even the smallest slight. Lenora on the other hand was as flighty as a butterfly, always curious to try new things and just as quickly to abandon them, with nary a thought to other people's opinions of her.

Sometimes the only thing Natalie thought they had in common was how much they loved to spoil her.

“How does this taste?” Lenora asked, handing her a cookie shaped like a stocking. Her mothers and she were gathered around the kitchen table, Constantina perusing the paper for advertisements on auctions and rummage sales and foreclosures (she was an antique dealer and very good at snatching up the most peculiar and hard to find items), dressed head to toe in black except for the fuzzy white and red slippers Natalie had gotten her when she was eight. Lenora, golden hair tied up in a bandanna and her face powdered with flour, was experimenting with cookie recipes in hopes of really surprising the other witches in her book club.

Natalie dutifully nibbled the offered experiment and chuckled.

"Like pumpkin."

"Damn! It's suppose to taste like coffee!"

"Coffee-flavored cookies?" Constantina asked skeptically, looking up from her newspaper. "Blah. The pumpkin flavored cookies sound better."

"But they're completely inappropriate for the season!" she lamented. "Whose going to buy these at the bake sale?"

"Zonko's Joke Shop," the other witch offered, then turned back to her newspaper.

"I'll take them! I bet Harry would like them," Natalie said, thinking of all the times she seen him trying to sneak extra pieces of pumpkin pie during the fall. It didn't take her long to realize her mistake, for both her mothers were now sharing amused looks. "What?"

"Nothing," said Lenora, her smile not shrinking a millimeter. "Just wondering what else this Harry boy must like. You've been very secretive about him lately. It used to be you'd send us letters all about how 'Harry talks to snakes' or 'Harry won the Quidditch cup' or 'Harry cured Blue Pox'."

"Harry had Blue Pox, not cured it. That's just silly."

"Yes, of course. But lately, I haven't heard a peep. You're obviously still friends. Might you be a little bit... more now?"

Natalie took great pride in not blushing.

"Maybe."

"Well, since you're not sure, do you mind if I take a crack at him? I've seen his picture in the papers. Very cute!"

"Mom!

"Don't tease, Lenora. I might get jealous."

"Mother!"

"Well, I can't risk Constantina's wrath. At least not until after Christmas. It seems you'll have no competition from me."

"Hmph! You're not his type, anyway!" Natalie sniffed. "He's much too sophisticated."

Lenora feigned a heart broken look, and started on a new mixture of cookie doe, this time with avocado. "So what is your maybe-more-than-friend doing for the holiday?"

"Communing with the planet. He's a pagan, you know. And not one of those 'don't eat meat or use potions because they're made with kitten livers' pagans either. I mean a real pagan. Run around naked in the moonlight and talk to trees and summon up elementals sort of pagan. You-Know-Who is giving him personal instruction. I've seen the spell their going to try during the Solstice. It's wicked powerful."

Constantina chuckled. "A sophisticated naturalist? Sounds like fun, but if he offers you mushrooms or homemade droughts, I expect you to say 'no' am I understood?"

Natalie rolled her eyes. She knew her mothers didn't believe half of what she told them about Harry, even though he had shown up in the papers and everything. It was probably for the best anyway. They'd flip their lids if they really knew what was going on.

"It may be too late," Lenora butted in. "I saw your Christmas present on your dresser when I was taking care of your laundry. You'll have to show us what he got you when you open it."

"Hmph. Then you'll be waiting a long time. I'm going to open it with Harry or not at all."

"Well, aren't you a romantic?" Constantina said, knowing it was rather ironic. Natalie was to romantic what hawks were to bunnies. The Slytherin smirked.

"I just don't like the idea of him going off and having fun without me."

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Vesper Larousse was cremated two days before Christmas. Harry, who had never been to an actual wizarding funeral, was not in any state to appreciate the grandeur of it. It was performed 'old style', at the very top of a hill where a large circular platform of stone had been laid out for everyone to stand on and at the center a pyre. Larousse's body was wrapped in white linen with her face exposed, the injuries of her death unseen, and her expression peaceful as it had been the moment she'd died. Those gathered, and for a woman with no family there were great many mourners, laid bundles of dried flowers over her body until she was completely buried beneath them. Snape was the one to set it all alight.

Harry watched him from the other end of the platform, searching for some sort of clue about what he was feeling and if he believed Harry had killed his fiancée. She had died trying to save him from a situation he had gotten himself into, after all. He was under no illusions that she would have lived if he hadn't gone back to the castle. Whether he still would have done so, knowing that if he didn't his godfathers would both have died, was something he had yet to resolve with himself. Yet Snape did not look at him nor had he acknowledged him in any way since Larousse's death. There was no anger and no tears. Whatever the man felt about his loss or Harry's role in it, he buried deep under layers of solemn responsibility.

Harry rather thought he must look exactly the same.

His tears had come and gone, leaving him feeling hollow. Hermione was standing beside him, gripping his hand comfortingly, but he couldn't muster the energy to squeeze it back. She had tried so hard to get him to talk to her, but what could he say? The woman she had admired was dead because of him. The only ones who knew the truth

were the ones who had been there, and of them the two he thought might understand how he felt had been sent back to the werewolf territories.

With the death of Moody and the subsequent execution of his co-conspirators the next day, the terrorist threat was over and the werewolves called back by their Head Alpha. Harry hadn't even been allowed a proper goodbye, for no sooner than Sirius pulled Harry off the roof and to safety, Sentinels had shown up and dragged him off to St. Mungo's. They were safe at least. Voldemort had spared just enough time to inform him of that before disappearing to play his political games. Victoria had been the one to take him back to the Sianach Lodge, and she was the only person he could stand to see for the two days it took for the funeral to be organized.

The wake was an elaborate affair, with a lot of pomp and circumstance and speeches about heroism by men and women in uniforms. Harry could only grit his teeth through it all. He hadn't known the woman long, but what he did know was that she hadn't wanted to be a heroine. She had wanted to be a wife and mother. She had been denied twice, first by the death of her family and then by her own.

Would she see her loved ones in heaven?

For the part he had played in her demise and his dalliance into ancient magics, would he ever be able to see his own?

The pyre's blaze grew in power and violence, lashing out with burning hands at the cold wind whipping against it. In the smoke and shimmering haze, Harry lost sight of Snape and everyone else on the other side of the platform. He dimly heard the recitation of the priest, recognizing snatches of Latin and bowed his head with everyone else when the prayer was said.

He hadn't realized when it was over, his thoughts lost at some point in the drone of the priest's voice and the roar of the fire. A hand on his shoulder drew his attention upwards, Victoria looking down at him with a kind, sad smile.

"It's time to go now, Harry."

He nodded, and turned to Hermione who was still holding his hand. She was looking at him worriedly, and behind her Draco was wearing the Slytherin equivalent (which looked rather similar to his 'I wonder if it will explode if I touch it' expression). Hermione pulled him into a fierce hug, and he felt something rise up in him.

It could have been her. If she had been at the castle, she would have gone after me. She could have died.

He pulled back sharply, suddenly unable to breath.

"Harry-"

"Stop," he gasped. "I can't... You can't... just leave me alone... for now."

Hermione expression was pained and painful to look at, but Draco quickly dragged her away.

"Leave him be. He's not ready for an inquisition right now," he said sternly, then turned to Harry. "Just fire call or send an owl or whatever if you want to talk or just hang out. We'll be there when you're ready."

He just nodded without looking at them, feeling rather than watching as they walked away. Victoria's hand squeezed his shoulder lightly.

"It's cold out, Young Master. Lets get you inside."

The platform was almost empty as she escorted him down the steps on to the gravel path that would take them the church and behind that their car. Around them the landscape stretched out before them like black and white photograph; vast white hills, gray skies, black skeleton trees. The mourner is their white cloaks and robes were barely visible. He paused for just a moment to look back, and just out of reach of the crumbling remains of the pyre he could see the Dark Lord speaking softly to Snape.

Another chuckle escaped him, a touch hysterical, but he reigned it in fast. Voldemort admired it. The potion's master was a strong willed

man, mysterious in his motivations and emotions, and even now he was exerting impressive self-control and rationality.

"You know," he continued. "when she died, I thought I was in shock. I barely felt anything other than surprised disbelief. She was so beautiful and so very alive, and then she was just beautiful. It should have worn off by now though. I should... feel something. At least, I should feel something like what Potter is. Sad, I suppose. But I don't. I feel regret that the plans we made won't come to fruition, and I miss her company, but I don't... I'm not sad."

Voldemort didn't really understand. He had never felt sad for a person before, not even himself, yet he knew it was customary for someone who wasn't a complete sociopath to feel some sort of grief over someone they loved passing away. Unless...

"You did not love her?" he tried, and Snape stiffened. "I'm actually surprised. She seemed to make you happy."

"She did make me happy."

He stepped away from Voldemort, moving to another side of the pyre. He withdrew his wand and started shifting through the ashes and debris.

"I think there must be something missing," he said, "I think I fell in love with her dreams, with her ability to still dream. It hadn't occurred to me that I could have the sort of happiness she described. The kind of happiness that can be shared with others, instead of coveted, that grows the more it is given away. Those dreams should have died with her, but... they haven't. The dream isn't dead. She gave me the dream... but I don't need her to carry it out."

Voldemort just tilted his head curiously, wondering if his servant intended to run off with one of his fiancée's bones. Human bones, even burnt ones, were powerful ingredients for potions after all. After a few minutes of quietly sifting through the ash, Snape seemed to find what he was looking for and caught it at the end of his wand.

It was a ring, glowing red from the heat of the fire.

"It's ironic," Snape mused, staring down at the ring with something akin to affection. "She died trying to destroy that same sort of happiness Potter was searching for with his godfathers, and Potter still probably feels more grief over her than I do. He didn't even know she wanted to give him the real thing."

He cast a cooling charm on the ring, placed it in his pocket, and stood up. The two wizards stared at one another for a long moment, and still Voldemort couldn't quite read the other. He wondered if this was true rationality or if the man hadn't gone a bit insane.

"What will you do now?" Voldemort asked, hoping for some clue into his state of mind.

"I'll try again. I doubt there is another Vesper out there for me, but I'm sure I can find a suitable wife and bearer of my children. I'll wait a year before I start courting anyone. That should be a reasonable amount of time for 'grieving'. No point in insulting the dead."

Voldemort nodded in agreement.

"When you are ready, I'll be more than happy to assist if you require it. Despite the previous failures, I am usually quite adept at selecting compatible pairs."

"Thank you, my Lord."

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Kimshi is an magical sport from the orient, rather like polo only you ride some sort of magical animal in the water instead of a horse on land and it's only played between two people. Water chess is a team sport with positions, and is played on top of water and is rather too complicated to explain here, but if you're not careful you can drown playing it. :P

IMPORTANT ANNOUNCEMENT!!!! TRANSLATORS NEEDED!

Book III is coming to an end in a few weeks, and I am already starting on book IV of the series. There is quite a bit of German and some French in it, and since I'm able to speak either, I am looking for some help. Several people have offered to help and actively helped already, and I am hoping for continued assistance. Before anyone agrees to anything, they should be aware that I will require a lot more translation than I did in the previous chapters and must be able to commit their time and effort to it and be able to respond promptly when I submit text, since I can not progress in writing without certain parts translated first. If you are fluent in German or French (or both would be nice too) and English, and can translate quickly and consistently, creative in your translation (I know what sounds natural in English doesn't always sound natural in another language, and vice versa, so some tweaking is to be expected and appreciated) and are willing to help me I would be so grateful! In return, you will receive updated chapters as they are written rather than once a week and earn my eternal gratitude!

Book III:

Chapter 20: The Prince and his Sorrow

Victoria made a considerably more pleasant companion than Madam Hardwick. The benefits of her presence were easily recognized. She was friendly, considerate, and kind. Harry wished he could work up the energy to give her the smile he could tell she so desperately wanted, but he didn't know if he'd ever be able to find one again.

Hermione's hug was the instigator of a cycle of thoughts that he seemed incapable of breaking away from. His parents were dead. Larousse was dead. Hermione had nearly died. Sirius and Remus had nearly died. So too had Snape. All of his friends had put their lives at risk just associating with him. Even Tom, and he cursed himself for not being a true friend and sending that letter to check on him, had gotten sick again after they'd made up. Now, it wasn't all his fault. Some of it probably wasn't his fault at all, but how much of it was? Who else was going to get hurt or die just by being around him?

"What are you thinking, Young Master, that's got you looking so blue? Best stop now. It doesn't do anyone a wit of good making yourself heartsick," Victoria said, setting a bowl of hot soup in front of him. "Eat up. Mum always used to say chicken noodle soup was good for body and the soul."

"Thanks, Vicki."

He wasn't the least bit hungry, but if he couldn't smile for her, he could at least eat for her. It wasn't like there was anything else to do. They were stuck in a London hotel for the night, pending an inquiry at the Iron House the next morning. They held adjoining rooms, but she hadn't left his side for more than ten minutes at a time, stepping out only to get food, tea, and a letter of instruction from the hotel front desk. The hotel wasn't particularly fancy, but it was nice enough for someone who was about to be interrogated. Victoria said they just wanted to take his statement. Harry wondered why they even bothered since Voldemort had been there to tell his version of events and that was the only version that mattered.

"What's going to happen after the holidays are over?" he asked, trying to distract himself from his gloomy thoughts.

"Oh, they've started repairs to the school already. It helps that the school will fix itself once the proper wards are activated or de-activated as the case might be. There wasn't a lot of activity on that side of the school anyway, so classes should begin as usual."

"And the Dark Arts and Defense class?"

"... a substitute will take over."

"Mm."

There was an awkward silence as they struggled to find things to say. Victoria changed subjects.

"Is there anywhere you'd like to go while we're in London? Diagon Alley is really something during the holidays. And of course there are plays and the Snow Market and such. Lots to do before you have to go back to the castle."

"I'm not going back to the lodge?" he asked, unduly surprised by that. He didn't think the castle would be ready for residents so soon, but more importantly he didn't think he was ready to return. Too much had happened, and as hard as it was to be alone, it would be even harder to return to the rough and tumble existence that defined his education.

"No, I'm afraid Master is staying in London and will be very busy. He thought you'd prefer staying at Hogwarts than alone at the lodge. Your security status has been lowered so you have all the liberties of the other students. You can go outside and play quidditch and visit Hogsmeade like everyone else. Do you think you might want to go out before then?"

He shook his head and ate another spoonful of soup. She sighed, and let him be for the rest of the evening. As empty as he felt during the day, his head was too full at night, and he barely slept, haunted by images of THAT day and those that followed all the way up until

the funeral. In the brief snatches of sleep he obtained, those memories were overlaid with even more horrible images. Sirius and Remus buried beneath the collapsing castle. Hermione falling from the roof. The funeral pyre replaced with a stake, himself tied to it and the mourners all round watching as Snape set it ablaze.

He woke violently, covered in sweat and freezing cold, yet it wasn't the dreams that had woken him. It was a steady knock on the door. He sat up and blearily put on his glasses. Through his window he could see dark gray skies and a heavy rain.

"Enter."

Victoria came in carrying a breakfast tray. She hesitated when she saw him, then quickly set down the tray on the writing desk so she could check his temperature.

"Are you alright? You're freezing. Did you just leap in through the window?"

Amazingly, the suggestion sparked a faint smile, but it died quickly.

"No, just didn't sleep well. Is that for me?" he asked, gesturing towards the tray. She nodded.

"Yep, a nice big breakfast... well, I suppose it's lunch now. You have that appointment at the Iron House at one and then we'll be traveling most of the day and the weather is lousy, so you'll need your strength. Why don't you go take a hot shower first? Housekeeping spelled the food to stay warm."

"Okay."

"Would you like anything else?"

"Coffee?"

She grinned. "An excellent idea. I'll call them- oh, forget it, it's faster to get it myself. Take your shower, and I be back by the time you're done."

“Okay.”

Alone again, he went through his travel case for a change of clothes, intent on taking them into the bathroom with him so Victoria wouldn't end up walking in on him while he was wrapped up in only a towel. As he headed towards the bathroom, a rolled up newspaper squeezed between his plate of macaroni and his glass of milk caught his attention. He felt a tug of curiosity, wondering what had been written about the attack at Hogwarts.

He unrolled it, and to his surprise the front page featured a picture of Larousse's funeral. The image was grainy and out of focused, likely taken from a distance. Another picture of Snape, Larousse, and himself talking together on the field of the destroyed quidditch pitch featured beside it.

The head line advertised 'Family-To-Be Mourns Heroine's Passing'.

Harry swallowed thickly and started to read.

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When Victoria returned to the hotel room, she knew instantly that something was wrong. Her wards were still intact, which meant no one had gotten inside in her absence, but there was definitely an aura of 'wrongness'. Her wand remained tucked up her sleeve, but she kept her wrist loose so a simple flick of the wrist would put it in her hands.

She went to Harry's room and put her ear to the door. She heard nothing, not even the distant sound of his shower running. She knocked.

“Harry, you there?”

Nothing. She flung open the door, peeked inside, jumped back in case anyone was waiting for her, then entered. She repeated this

with the bathroom door. A quick check of the room found Harry's cloak and shoes missing and a newspaper scattered across the floor.

Harry was gone.

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After a month of consistent and heavy snow, Harry found it unpleasantly ironic that the weather would choose Christmas Eve to rain. At least it gave him an excuse to keep his hood up and his head down. The streets were full of holiday traffic, despite the freezing downpour, and he had this irrational fear that at any moment someone was going to grab hold of him and say 'I know you!'.

But no one grabbed him except an old beggar on the street, and there was nothing akin to recognition in those milky eyes.

He wandered around for over three hours, not knowing what to do with himself, ducking into shops for brief snatches of time to warm himself up and cast a few more charms to dry out his clothes. He eventually found himself in a large square a few blocks from the Wizengamot and the Iron House, a giant fountain covered in beasts, magical and magic-related, set in the middle and spitting out snow instead of water from its founts. The square appeared to be a junction between several places of interest, and it conveniently provided an information kiosk with a map and directory of the entirety of wizarding London and even those few muggle places it overlapped.

It took him fifteen minutes to find Grimmuald Place on the map.

It took another hour to actually get there.

Another seven minutes of walking back and forth between house twelve and fourteen before he could actually see it. Half a second to get through the door and out of the rain.

“Who are YOU?!”

Harry let out a squawk of surprise and nearly ran right back outside. He found himself looking up at the portrait of a rather unpleasant woman, who stared down at him like he were some sort of bug. He pulled back his hood. Her eyes widened, and she looked even less pleased to see him.

“James Potter! What do you want? Isn't it bad enough you got my Sirius thrown into Askaban? Come to steal the silverware, as well? Kreicher! Kreicher come out at once!”

He blinked at her stupidly. There was a loud pop and an elderly house elf appeared beside him. He looked as unhappy as the woman at his appearance. He actually hissed at him.

Then the elf blinked, squinted, frowned.

“Tisn't Potter, my Lady. Too young.”

The woman squinted as well. “He looks just like him though... same stupid hair. Who are you boy? Talk quick or I'll have you locked in the basement.”

Good grief, was he in the right place? Surely, Sirius would have thought to warn him about a crazy portrait and her nasty little helper.

“Um... Harry, I mean... Harold, Harold Rook of the Rook Family,” he said, and bowed politely.

“Rook, you say? I think I've heard of them... Scottish stock?”

“I... yes.”

“Bah. Are you one of my sons' friends? They never did have any taste.”

He felt a rush of annoyance. The look he gave her seemed to make her hesitate, but she just sneered.

“What do you want then? No one is here, but if you think to steal something-”

"Madam, I assure you, you own nothing I want," he said stiffly. Beside him, Kreicher hissed. He was very tempted to hiss right back. "I was left something in the kitchen freezer. Once I have it, I'll leave your..." he ran his eyes over the decaying structure, "... home and be on my way."

She seemed to consider. Apparently, nastiness was like politeness to her, because her smile turned strangely congenial.

"Kreicher, take this young gentleman to the kitchen."

"Yes, Mistress," he said, bobbing his head. He glared at Harry. "Come on, then..." he said, and then started muttering. The house was... nasty. There were cobwebs everywhere, an inch of dust covering everything, and disturbing surprises around every turn. The row of elf head wall mounts was just plain disgusting.

"Here you are, sir," the elf said, gesturing about what was either a kitchen or potion's laboratory. Some searching and a few cleaning charms revealed an ancient refrigerator, and when he opened the freezer, was startled to find it still ran cold. There was a shoe box inside. Well, a shoes box and a couple of frozen mice. He took out the box and set it on the table, opening it. There wasn't much inside. Two thousand pounds in muggle money, half that amount in sickles, a map of muggle London, a little blue note book filled with names and information about them, and a matching red book with a series of instructions and tips on escaping to Europe and what to do when he go there.

He sat at the table (after clearing it of cobwebs and spiders, and skimmed through the contents of the books. Halfway through, the red book proved useless. The blue book was completely useless from the start. It was outdated advice and instructions, made before he'd been targeted for assassination. Getting out of Britain would be fairly easy... getting around Europe wouldn't. Everyone Sirius had listed as people who might help or look after Harry were linked to Dumbledore. He'd be dead almost as soon as he stepped onto the continent.

"Shit," he muttered, and shrunk it all down and put it in his pocket. He'd known he couldn't leave before, what did he think had changed? Aside from the fact that he seemed destined to destroy anything resembling a family?

Merlin, Larousse...

She wanted to be his mother. She was going to adopt him with Snape. And as scary as that sounded, the fact that one was now dead and the other probably despised him was far worse. All she had wanted to do was be his mother, and he... she died because she thought of him as her son.

A sob threatened to choke the life out of him, so he swallowed it repeatedly until it settled in his stomach like a rock. He couldn't do this again. Couldn't fall apart and let the rest of the world handle it again, because he knew now the world was unsympathetic. The Dursley's had made his life miserable, torn apart any hope of belonging. He'd started patching things together again after WYRA, but the stitches weren't strong enough and were all coming undone. The friendships and lives and family were all so vulnerable now.

Sirius and Remus were gone, and he might not see them again until after graduation (or never if something happened). Snape would never forgive him, and what would that mean for Draco and Hermione? Would they be forced to stay away from him? Was that for the best considering the violence that seemed to surround him? Voldemort was rarely around, and how would he react when Harry voiced his reluctance to continue his education in paganism? And Natalie...

He wasn't in love with her, he realized. He liked her. He thought she was pretty and smart and daring, but he had barely thought about her at all since they'd parted ways at the train station. He had just thought about leaving the country and hadn't thought of her once. He really was a selfish bastard. He was letting her risk her life and reputation for him, and he didn't have anything to offer her except his friendship.

What was he going to do? He couldn't leave the country. He wasn't suicidal and at the same time he had fallen in love with Britain and the wizarding world.

Perhaps he could leave Hogwarts?

Yes, that's it. He could withdraw and go somewhere else, careful not to let anyone else get too close. Maybe he could even home school... assuming he could find a home. He wouldn't have to face Snape's hatred and his friends would be safely out of his vicinity. If he could just convince the Dark Lord... or do something to get himself expelled, he could find a way to make it work. He'd miss the school and everyone there, but they'd be safe.

The weight in his stomach eased and his head felt clear. Now that he had a plan, something he could actually take charge of and do, things didn't seem so hopeless. He was going to do the responsible thing by protecting his loved ones, still remain loyal to his country, and complete his education.

Now he just had to find his way back to Victoria and explain why he ran off in the first place.

Ugh. He was going to be in so much trouble when Voldemortnd out about this. Worse, Victoria might be in trouble too. Just another example of how his selfishness got his friends in trouble.

He shrunk down his shoe box and placed it in his pocket, then made his way out of the house. Kreicher followed him out, eyes glued to his every move. He bowed to the woman in the portrait on his way out.

"Thank you. I bid you a pleasant evening," he said, though he wouldn't have cared if she spontaneously caught fire. She sneered at him.

"Oh, yes. Looking at the door every second of every day is what I love most."

He shut the door before hearing the end of her rant. He was instantly soaked. With a heavy sigh, he made his way back in the direction he'd come from.

And immediately realized he was lost. Bother.

He tried casting a locating charm on Victoria, but he didn't know her last name, and it failed. Voldemort, likewise, couldn't be located, but Harry assumed that was because of anti-detection spells. He didn't know the necessary incantation for actual places (sort of silly that he'd know one type and not the other, now that he thought about it), and he didn't think he knew anyone else in London. He couldn't keep wandering the streets though. It was growing dark and the air was growing cold enough to turn the rain to sleet, and if he was out and about after the shops closed he'd be in real trouble.

He thought long and hard on it, first trying to remember how to get back to the square with the kiosk, but only got more lost. He wandered past a couple of banks and law firms, and it suddenly came to him.

Robert Reicher. The lawyer he'd met at his first adoption party, along with his partner Kyle. He still had their card, and it showed they worked out of London, somewhere on Taperty Street. He hoped that street was nearby. He cast a location spell for 'Robert Reicher' and let out a sigh of relief when his wand let out a strand of light, pointing him in the right direction.

He actually passed Taperty Street after two blocks, but it was Christmas Eve so he was likely at home. Another four blocks and the shops gave way to townhouses and apartments, and Harry found himself in front of a three story brick house, squashed between two similar houses and a tiny yard with a rather lopsided snowman waving his stick hand at passersby.

The light on the porch was lit.

He felt suddenly shy. What exactly was he interrupting? It was Christmas Eve after all, so they were probably celebrating. They might even have family over. And here he comes just barging in and

mucking up their plans. He should just go and see if he can find someone on the street to-

The door opened in front of him.

"Hello, can I help you?" Robert Reicher asked, looking a bit dubious from the doorway.

"Ah..." Well, he might as well just ask him for directions and then leave him be. "I... I'm sorry to disturb you, but I'm afraid I've gotten lost. You wouldn't happen to know where Walburton Square is?"

Robert blinked, then nodded. "Yes, I know where that is. Come inside, it's freezing out there."

"Oh, thank you."

The inside of the house was much larger than the outside and blessedly warm. There was a staircase leading upstairs in front of him, and a hallway leading towards the kitchen beside that. To his left was a dining room, and to his right a family room with a large Christmas tree and a fire. Kyle Reicher came out of the kitchen, a little girl with curly blond hair on his hip and another slightly older one following behind.

"Who is it Robert?" he said, a bit cautiously. "You don't have to go to the office, do you?"

"Nothing like that. Just a lost traveler."

Work avoided, Kyle looked considerably more pleased to have company.

"Welcome to our home then. I'm Kyle, that's my husband Robert, and these are our daughters Alyssa and Morgana."

Harry bowed to the little girls. "My Ladies."

Morgana, the one actually walking, giggled.

"Come to the kitchen and have some tea with us while Robert draws you a map," Kyle offered.

"Thank you, but I wouldn't want to impose-"

"Don't worry about it," Robert said, wandering off towards the family room. "It's Christmas. Good will to all men. Even those really mysterious young men, who hide under their hoods."

"Oh... sorry about that."

With a bit of unease, he pulled back his hood. Robert was already out of the room by the time he did it, but Kyle took one look at him and recognized him immediately. In fact, so did little Morgana. They both gapped at him, eyes wide. Morgana recovered first and let out a squeal of delight.

"You're the prince! Daddy, it's Prince Harold! He's really here!"

Despite the lingering chill, Harry felt his cheeks burn. Kyle, likewise, looked embarrassed. Robert returned to the hall in an instant. Thankfully, he didn't gape.

"Harold?"

Harry smiled weakly. "Merry Christmas?"

"Papa, you really do know a real prince? You didn't just make it up?" Morgana asked, tugging on Robert's hand to gain his attention. Robert hesitated, looking uncertainly at his guest. Harry decided a little goodwill on his part would be appropriate. He knelt down on one knee so he was closer to her eye level, hoping he looked princely enough.

"Of course, Lady Morgana. I met your fathers when I was not much older than you. They kindly offered their aid to me if I should ever require it," he said. She grinned.

"Does that mean my daddies are knights?"

The males present all gave each other a questioning glance.

“Yes, they are my knights,” Harry said, “But they are 'secret' knights, so you must never tell anyone or my enemies would try to come after them. Can you keep their secret, my Lady?”

She nodded vehemently.

“I will, I promise! Lyssa does too! Won't you, Lyssa?”

The little girl nodded with remarkable solemnity for a five year old.

“I thank you both. I am quite in your debt.”

He climbed to his feet again, looking to the adults to make sure he hadn't bungled anything, but they seemed more amused than anything. They all went to the kitchen for coffee and cocoa. When they were done, Kyle took the girls upstairs so that they could have a 'secret knightly meeting'. Harry felt decidedly awkward. He hadn't wanted to drag them into his problem, and thinking back on their last meeting and his rude behavior, he had no right to expect it. It didn't help that Robert was just studying him, not saying a word.

“They're very cute,” Harry said, staring down at his mug. “I thought you were looking for boys though?”

Robert's intent stare softened a bit.

“I was. Kyle didn't care whether it was a boy or girl though... He had it right. It was six months after we met you that we found them. They were standing together, just holding hands as tightly as they could and not talking to anyone, as if they expected someone to just snatch them away from each other. It broke my heart, because I knew that's exactly what would happen. Nobody adopts two girls together. They'll take two boys or a boy and a girl, but never two girls, even if they're sisters. I think that was the first time I really felt for any of the children I met. You were right to say I wasn't suited to adopt anyone. I'd been thinking about it all wrong until that moment. I was just thinking of how a child could benefit me, socially and in business, but then it became all about how I could help them. So we adopted them both.

Put us in debt for the next five years, but it was worth it. They are worth it. They've changed everything.”

Harry smiled a bit, though it brought a swelling of sadness in his heart, thinking of his own family and the family that almost was.

“But enough about me. What about you? How on earth did you end up at our front door? Aren't you suppose to be surrounded by a squad of Guardians at all times?”

He shook his head. “No, not now anyway. Moody and the other terrorists are dead, so I'm safe for the time being. I was at a funeral yesterday, and I was suppose to go back to Hogwarts today, but I went out for a walk and got lost.”

“And you got here purely by chance?”

“You're the only name I know in London. I don't know how to locate places, just people.”

“Ah, that explains it. I'm surprised you even remember us.”

“Kyle gave me your business card...”

An irritated look crossed Robert's face. “I bet he did. He hands them out like candy.”

Kyle chose that moment to wander in. “It's called networking, Robby. That's what a marketer does. The girls are in the bath, so we have about fifteen minutes. So what brings you to our neck of the woods, Harold?”

He repeated the explanation he'd given Robert.

“Oh, yes, I read about the funeral in the paper. I'm sorry. It must have been awful to lose ... her.” Harry could hear 'your mother again' in the awkward pause. He shook his head.

"I didn't even know she was going to adopt me until this morning. It was bad enough before I knew. She always tried to be kind to me, but I still ended up having fights with her."

Kyle put a comforting hand on his shoulder.

"I think we'd better let someone know where you are. I'm sure your guardians are worried by now," Robert said, standing up from his chair. "I'll fire call WYRA. They should be able to sort this all out and send someone to get you back where you need to be."

He left Harry alone with Kyle, far more the sympathetic type despite how two little girls may have softened him. There was an awkward moment of silence, as Harry tried to grope for something to say that didn't involve his latest catastrophe.

"So... Knight Kyle..."

The man grinned.

"Do you know it so much easier to get little girls to read when it's interesting for them? And it's interesting to read about princes, especially when you might actually meet them. Morgana is the only child in her school who actually reads the newspaper."

Harry sighed. "Is that a good thing? I have to say I've never been impressed with it."

"It seems to be impressed with you. You've been popping up in it fairly often. I was right, by the way. Robert really did regret not snatching you up."

"I think you both made out well with your daughters. I'd only have brought you stress... and assassins... and werewolves... and the Dark Lord, which isn't nearly fun as it sounds."

"You seem to have done well with yourself, though. Hogwarts is a very prestigious school."

“... I'm going to transfer.”

“Why? Did something... oh, your... teacher died there.”

“That's not why I'm leaving. Well, not the only reason. There's a lot of people I care about who are there. Some of them were nearly killed because I was there. I've become a target, and a lot of the people coming after me don't have very good aim. I'm not going to let anyone get hurt just because they're near me when the next attack or accident or political plot comes along. I've been selfishly risking their lives for too long already.”

Kyle stared at him, seemingly startled by what was being said. He'd never seen or heard a boy Harry's age talk like this. In fact, he's never seen anyone talk like this except in books and plays and radio dramas. It was difficult for him to come up with a response to that.

“That's really... conceited.”

Harry looked startled. “What? How is that conceited?!”

Slowly, Kyle's thoughts came together into something he hoped proved both true and helpful. “I get where you're coming from. You don't want other people caught up in your battles. I can understand that. Deciding what battles are yours, that's up to you, but deciding other people's battles for them is most definitely not. You talk about not wanting others to get hurt, but what about you? There are others who don't want you to get hurt. They don't want you fighting your battles alone. Do you have any right to tell them what they can and cannot risk? If you think you're a danger to your friends, then tell them so. Let them know the risks so they can decide for themselves what to do.”

Harry's expression tightened. “Even if it kills them? Like it did... her.”

“... As hard as this might for you to hear... yes. They have a right to decide if your battle is their battle as well and you're not doing anyone any favors by pushing them away. I can't help but think a lot of people would be sad if you left them behind.”

A lot of people? No, not... well.

Hermione would. His godfathers too, but they might be separated already. Ginny. Clyde might, but he had lots of friends to fall back on. The twins, perhaps. Natalie, definitely. Draco. Yeah. Colin Creevey would be destitute without his favorite subject. Ron would hunt him down for leaving him to take care of the rookies. Tom might already be missing him, if he hadn't forgotten about him already. There were a couple of other people, not real friends but friendly acquaintances, who he thought might want him to stay for various reasons.

"I think you know what I'm talking about," Kyle said, smiling a bit. "So before you go do anything drastic, talk to them."

Harry nodded, not entirely convinced. Was he being conceited? He just wanted to protect his friends. Protect his school. But perhaps Kyle was right about letting them make their own decisions. He should at least give them the opportunity to walk away on their own. No hard feelings.

He didn't have long to think about it, because two little girls in matching bathrobes and unicorn slippers came scuttling through the door, followed by Robert.

"They're sending over someone now," Robert said. "It should only take a half an hour or so."

"Will you tell us a story, please?" Morgana asked, eagerly. "A true story?"

"A true story?" Harry asked.

"Yeah, an adventure story. Something that you did. Princes have lots of adventures, don't they?"

Harry thought for a moment, and found a several adventure stories he could use... with a little tweaking.

"Yes, that's very true. Princes have many adventures. Alright, I think I know a story you might like."

"Lets go into the family room, then," Robert said, "The chairs are much more comfortable."

So they all moved into the family room. The sky was dark and dreary outside, but the family room was filled with warm light from the fire and the Christmas tree. Harry took a seat in the middle of the couch, the girls taking point on either side of him, while Robert and Kyle settled themselves into their own chairs.

"Hhhmm, how shall I begin? 'Once upon a time, which was really just a over a year ago, there stood... still stands... a great castle. The largest and most beautiful castle in all the land, and all the people who saw it, noble and peasant alike, wished to go and live there, but only a very few were allowed."

"Is it Hogwarts?" Morgana asked.

"Yes, it is. I've gone there for two and half years and still haven't seen all there is to it. But there was a dangerous secret. Deep beneath the castle, below the dungeons, below the moat, below the very lake, there slept a dragon..."

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"... and with the aide of the Black Knight, they returned the fair maiden to her family and peace settled over the castle once again. The End."

The little girls were both looking at him as if he'd sprouted another head.

"What? It really did happen," Harry insisted.

"No way!" Alyssa exclaimed, the only thing she'd said all evening. "Did you really?!"

"I did, really... more or less."

"That is so cool! Do you still have the magic sword?"

"Yes, but it's back at the castle." And now that he thought about it, under a lot of rubble. Would the GGs find it? Wonder how Lestrangle was going to explain that.

"What about the maiden? Are you going to marry her?"

"Nope, we're just good friends."

"Is the Black Knight your 'secret' knight too?"

"Well, technically he's the King's 'secret' knight... which means you can't tell anyone about him, just like your fathers. Promise?"

"Promise!" they said in unison. Morgana turned to her two very amused fathers. "And you have to promise too!"

"Of course, we promise," Robert said, Kyle nodding in agreement. There was a knock at the door, and Robert stood to answer it.

"It must be Wyra. You girls better say your goodbyes." There was a collective whine, but it was easily ignored.

"Will you come back again? Please, please, please!" Morgana begged, tightening her hold on his arm, as if threatening not to let go if he didn't answer correctly.

"Yeah!" Alyssa agreed, "Please, please, please?!" Harry thought he'd like to agree, but couldn't see it happening any time soon. He tried to placate them anyway.

"Of course. How could I turn away from my brave knights and beautiful ladies?"

The girls wrapped their soft little arms around him, squeezing as tightly as they could. He hugged them back, a painful pressure building inside him again.

'I could have had this,' he thought. 'If Larousse had lived and had children, I could have had a brother or sister like this.' And as if the universe was playing a cosmic joke on him, Snape walked into the family room behind Robert. Harry could only stare, the potion's master standing like the grim specter of Christmas future.

"Potter," he greeted without inflection.

"...Professor," Harry greeted dubiously back. One look at Snape, and the girls had quickly run over to Kyle, as if sensing their prince might not be enough against this new threat. Harry stood, and bowed to the Reichers. "Thank you for your hospitality. You've been very kind."

"We were all glad to have you. You have a Merry Christmas," Kyle said. "And good luck."

"Thank you."

Snape stalked out of the house, and Harry hurried to keep up, scurrying to put on his cloak as Robert handed it to him at the door. Dread fell over him like the heavy rain, weighing him down and stealing his strength. He couldn't face Snape yet. He was almost as afraid of what the man would do as what he would say. The moment they stepped out of the Reicher's front yard and onto the walk, Snape tossed something at him and he caught it on instinct. There was a violent sucking sensation, but almost as soon as it had started it reversed itself, and Harry found himself pitched into a pile of slush.

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Snape checked the street for observers, then touched the empty can he had converted into a portkey. An unpleasant sensation later and he landed a bit awkwardly on the road outside Hogsmeade. In the distance he could see Hogwarts's lights shining up the road. Potter had fallen and was still trying to orient himself, so the he jerked the boy up onto his feet.

"It's too cold for you to be playing in the snow, Potter," he muttered, dragging him towards a Hogwarts' carriage and pushed him inside.

The boy clawed his way inside and into a seat. He pressed himself against the far corner as if he was expecting some sort of attack. Instead, Snape the carriage door shut and knocked on the roof. The carriage lurched forward. "Would you care to explain yourself before I decide on a suitable punishment?"

The boy's wide eyes quickly found the floor. "I got lost."

"... Don't play stupid, Potter, however naturally it may come to you. You didn't get lost from your hotel room. You ran away. You've ruined several people's day off trying to look for you, including my own. What were you hoping this stunt would accomplish?"

The Gryffindor was curling in on himself with every irritated barb, and rather than satisfy Snape it only served to irritate him. He had a very bad day, wandering London in search of Harry, who still happened to be under the effects of an anti-locator charm, in the rain and sleet with far too many last-minute shoppers congesting the streets. The truly sad part was that he was grateful. His alternative was to listen to all of Vesper's friends and colleagues get all weepy and tell the same overly sentimental stories at his hotel. That didn't mean he wasn't going to let the inconsiderate little brat have it.

"Nothing to say? Well, I hope you're satisfied with the attention you've earned, because when we get back to the castle you'll be spending it in my potion's lab cleaning cauldrons. Merlin, I have half a mind to give you your thirty strokes. The extra ten for running back to the castle and then another ten for running around London unsupervised and missing your appointment at the Iron House."

At this point, Potter was practically curled up into a ball.

"Bloody hell," Snape muttered, running a hand through his hair in frustration. He really didn't want to deal with this. He wanted to find a pub somewhere and get drunk. Or go to his room and get drunk, which had less risk of his falling unconscious in a ditch.

The carriage pulled up to the castle, and he dragged Potter inside and down into the dungeons. With the arm in his hand, he could feel

the series of fine tremors running through the boy's body. Was it cold or fear? Either would be suitable given the situation.

They entered his private rooms, and he shoved his charge into the bathroom. "Shower," he snapped, then shut the door. Potter's belongings were gathered at the entry way of his rooms, per his instructions, and he shuffled through his trunk shamelessly, until he found a suitable change of clothes. Setting them by the door, he could hear the shower running. "Your clothes are by the door."

He went to his kitchen, rummaged through the cupboards and found some bread and sausage. That, at least, he could make edible. He took two plates and cut pieces of bread and meat for himself and Potter, then made some tea. By the time he was done with that, Potter had emerged from his shower and stood just outside the kitchen with his dirty clothes under his arm and waiting for instructions.

"Leave it all in the bathroom. The house elves will get it. Then come eat."

Potter did so, then sat across from him. Tentatively, he started to eat, peeking at him often as if he expected him to take it away. Snape ignored him in favor of finishing his own meal. It wasn't impressive and certainly the house elves would have gladly given him something more satisfying, but he didn't want to deal with their mothering him or Potter, which they would if they saw either of them in their current state. When they were finished, he ordered Potter to wash the dishes and put them away, which he did with the same annoying compliance. Merlin, a cowed Gryffindor was a fine thing, but the Dark Lord's protégé should have a little more spine.

Perhaps he really thought he was going to give him thirty strikes? Technically, he'd earned them. He'd gone off and risked himself twice in the last week and he wasn't one to shirk his responsibilities as a disciplinarian, but...

He'd seen Potter cry already, heavy, quiet tears as the medi-wizards carried Vesper's body away. He didn't think he could stand seeing them again so soon, not even if the pain was only physical. Besides,

he didn't want to deal with a sulky Gryffindor for another week. He still needed to know why he'd run away though.

"You're staying down here for the rest of the holidays," he said. The boy paused, the plate in his hand dripping into the sink. Then he just nodded, and mumbled 'yes, sir'. Ugh. He wasn't going to deal with a sulky Gryffindor. Whatever had him acting like a thoroughly beaten puppy, Snape was quite determined he get over it very quickly. Even if he had to go to drastic measures to achieve that.

He went to his liquor cabinet and pulled out a bottle of brandy, and then to another cupboard and took two glasses. His guest watched him cautiously.

"Sit down, Potter."

He poured them both a drink, and took the first sip himself. His underage friend didn't look as eager to begin.

"Try it."

Reluctantly, the boy did and, predictably, grimaced. Snape didn't hide his smirk.

"You get used to it. Sip it slowly. Hopefully, it will get you relaxed enough that you might avoid shrinking into nonexistence when I ask you again why you ran away."

"I-"

"Finish your drink first, and consider yourself lucky I don't just use verisaterum."

Snape simply watched intently as Potter took another sip, avoiding eye contact. By the third sip he had stopped grimacing. He had almost drank it all when he finally had enough to break the silence.

"I don't know why you didn't just give me a calming draught..." the boy finally said. Snape smirked.

"A calming drought would make you calm. It would also make it easier for you to lie with a clear head. Brandy has the benefit of keeping you calm, and hopefully too stupid to lie. Judging by your sudden ability criticize, I'd say it was working. One more glass, I think."

He took Potter's almost empty glass and refilled it half way. It was received with little enthusiasm, but he took another mouthful. Snape wasn't the least bit surprised when the already partially drunk child started talking some more.

"Is it true?"

Snape lifted a brow. "Yes, you really do dress like a hooligan. Unless you're referring to some other completely random subject?"

Potter actually had enough liquid courage to scowl at him, which was actually pretty damn funny. If only McGonagal could see her little golden boy now.

"Was she going to adopt me?"

Oh-ho. So he'd seen that article in the paper. Who ever had leaked it was likely roasting over a spit somewhere... or receiving a rather hefty sum from the Dark Lord's 'Dubious Activities Fund' which was made up of fifteen percent of Britain's tax revenue. It didn't include the 'Take Over the World Fund' which constituted twenty-five percent of the publicly extorted national wealth all on its own.

... And he should probably hold off the second glass himself or he'd end up rambling about random subjects in his head, prompted by Potter's completely ambiguous statements.

"She was going to try. The Dark Lord didn't tell you that she'd asked?"

"No... would she have succeeded?"

"Would you have let her?"

That earned him another funny scowl. Or was it a grimace?

“Would you?”

Touché. Answering that question would lead to other questions he wasn't going to answer without at least another two glasses.

“So you ran away because you learned she was going to adopt you? So what? It's not like she could do it now.”

Potter looked at him then, looking perplexed, which wasn't quite as funny as the glare but still pretty close.

“I got your wife killed. Aren't you mad at me?”

Snape let out a rather annoyed snort. Was that what all this was about? He supposed he could be flattered that his opinion meant so much to someone that they ran away rather than face his verbal persecution. Or maybe physical persecution since he did still have that cane. Either way, it was an appropriately juvenile response. I'm scared, so I'll run away.

If only the other Gryffindors were half as smart.

“No. It doesn't really matter. It was a battle. She was a casualty. Victim of friendly fire. Died in the line of a duty she had accepted without enlistment. If I felt the need to take revenge for every mistake on the battlefield, I'd have had to kill half the Death Eaters I know, including my godchildren's father.”

Now that he thought about it, Lucius still owed him twenty galleons for that time he'd knocked him off his broom in the middle of a fight with some aurors and sent him to St. Mungo's.

“This is the price of war. And we are at war, you know?”

“We are?”

So naive.

“Yes. This sort of thing happens all the time. The war never really ended. It just got quieter. Now rather than open warfare we get these random attacks by disgruntled soldiers and widows and orphans. It doesn't have anything to do with you. It's just the times we live in.”

There was a long silence, both lost in thought of his revelation. Snape hadn't really thought about it before, but what he said was true. All these attacks were carried over from a war that was supposedly over more than ten years ago. Hardly a month went by without the newspaper listing some conspirator trying to kill a former Death Eater, handing out anti-government propaganda, blowing up some building, or instigating a riot. Even the Death Eaters and Purebloods caused their own political strife, acting like spoiled children when the Dark Lord didn't hand over the country like some shiny toy they'd whined for. It would probably continue to be that way until everyone who remembered Voldemort's rise to power was dead and buried.

“Will it ever stop?” Potter asked, his green eyes shiny with liquor. Or were those tears? Don't you dare cry. If you cry I won't have any reason not to beat you.

“Maybe you'll live to see the end of it. I doubt I ever will.”

“... Do you think I'm dangerous?”

Snape couldn't hold back the bark of laughter at that. Technically, Harry had proven to be quite dangerous when pushed, but right now he was just a boozy thirteen-year-old with bad eye-sight. The scowl he got just made him laugh harder.

“I don't mean me!” the boy protested. “I mean because Dumbledore wants to kill me... and maybe the headmistress. Is everyone I know gonna end up a casualty, like Professor Larousse?”

Alright, that was a bit more sobering. Especially given his godchildren were close to him, and his concern was legitimate. Hell, in terms of physical proximity he was close to him.

“You're safe from Dumbledore. The Dark Lord is right. He won't try to kill you again any time soon. And if you're worried about the

headmistress you're more than welcome to join my plot to overthrow her. Anyone else who shows up will be dealt with. Don't concern yourself with things you can't control."

"I can leave."

"No you can't."

"Why can't I?"

"Bad press."

"Shit."

Snape smirked at that. "Liar. You don't want to leave. You like it here."

"I don't want anyone to get hurt because of me."

"Maybe you'll luck out from now on. Of course, you'll have to quit Dueling Club with that particular philosophy. It's counter productive in that sort of sport."

The conversation was about as productive as it was going to get, so Snape decided to end it before they started repeating themselves or getting pointlessly sentimental. He set the small glasses in the sink and got Harry a tall glass of water.

"Drink this or you'll get a hangover, and I'd rather you didn't vomit in the cauldrons you will be cleaning this evening. Or did you think your teen angst got you out of trouble?"

For someone who was about to be punished in the most tedious of manners, Potter looked surprisingly grateful as he accepted the water. Snape dismissed it as thankfulness that he had gotten off easy, and made a mental list of chores he'd have the foolish boy complete to thoroughly erase the notion from his empty head.

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Book III:

Chapter 21: The Prince's Penance

Harry still managed to get a hangover, but in the scheme of things it was a small price to pay for Snape's forgiveness. He didn't think he could survive, regardless of what Kyle had told him, if Snape suddenly developed a vendetta against him. The potion master had unknowingly offered the absolution Harry desperately needed in order to cope with what had happened to Larousse. So, despite the positively abysmal week of scrubbing, polishing, dusting, organizing, inventorying, moving, writing, reviewing, and correcting in the darkest, chilliest, most depressing part of the castle and sleeping on the couch of a man who went to bed late and got up ridiculously early, Harry felt considerably better going out than he had going in.

Those few students he'd encountered on his trek back up to his dorm room were stunned to realize he had actually been in the castle the entire time. When some of them had offered their condolences over Larousse, he felt the urge to run back and spend another week down the dungeons alone. He didn't have time for that though. The rest of the students would be arriving back at Hogwarts that evening, and even though he had finished his homework, Snape hadn't spared him enough free time to do anything else except eat, sleep, and perform basic hygiene.

Unpacking was at the bottom of his things to do. The first thing he wanted was to write letters. Taking several pieces of parchment and some quills he found himself a quiet, sunny place in the library, and started to write. The first was a short thank you letter to the Reichers with a few extra lines hoping they had a good holiday and a happy New Year. The second one was to Victoria, apologizing for running away and leaving her in a fix. The third to Voldemort, requesting an explanation of what the hell happened with the ritual, because last year hadn't been anything like that. They hadn't even made their personal blood offerings and yet they still came out saturated with magic (albeit not enough to sink the country else the Dark Lord could have popped Moody like a pimple without having to move), but had quickly used it all up. The fourth was to his godfathers telling them he

was well, and hoping to hear how things were going with them soon. The fifth took considerably more thought.

Harry didn't like apologizing on paper. He would much rather apologize in person, as he felt too awkward putting it in writing. To make it even more awkward, not only was he apologizing, he was also inquiring on Tom's health and life outside Hogwarts and wishing him the best of luck in his recovery. He ended up writing three different versions and then rewriting the last one into something barely recognizable to the original, and still wasn't satisfied. It was the best he could probably do without Hermione's help, and frankly it felt too personal for outside revision.

Then he realized he was going to have to send all the letters via Snape except the one to the Reicher's and that just brought a whole new level of embarrassment to what he was doing. Oh well, it was the right thing to do. He'd been extremely selfish lately and impinged on the kindness of others while neglecting a friend who needed support. It was time that he stopped acting like a martyr and took responsibility for himself.

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McGunny ran into Potter on the way back from the owlry. He had been sending off thank you notes for gifts he'd received, needing a distraction from the moral conundrum he was facing in regards to what had happened over the last few weeks. Part of the school had been blown up and a professor and her killer were both dead. Somehow, Potter had known about the attack and attempted to get everyone to safety. Then McGunny had to go and fuck things up by mentioning the werewolves being left behind. He didn't doubt for a second that what he had told Potter had sent him running back to the castle and Professors Snape and Larousse running after him, which in turn resulted in the confrontation with Moody.

He wasn't sure how he should feel about his involvement. It had been Potter's decision to go back, but it was based on what he had told him. Did that mean he was somehow responsible for Larousse's death?

It didn't really feel like it. He had liked her as a teacher and certainly she hadn't deserved to die, but he couldn't bring himself to see what had happen as his fault. Or even Potter's fault. Potter had been trying to save his family, however socially outcast that family might be. Then everything got complicated when the professor died and then it was learned she was going to adopt Potter. Which led to his moral conundrum.

What should he tell the school?

It was his obligation to explain things as thoroughly and objectively as he could, both the good and the bad, but he couldn't see the fact that Potter had risked a very popular teacher's life for a couple of werewolves going over well with the student body. And despite his own sense of objectivity, he sympathized with Potter. Life had been difficult for him lately and no one seemed to be making any effort to ease the strain. Something like this could have him relegated back to the 'Black Cat of Gryffindor' status from his first year. Potter was strong and he'd survive it, but McGunny didn't want to be the one responsible for it. He had until the rest of the newspaper staff showed up that evening to figure out what he was going to do.

So it was a rather remarkable coincidence that the subject of his uncertainty should meet him half way up the stairs. They blinked at each other, mutually surprised by the other's appearance. The young Gryffindor was paler than usual, with dark circles under his eyes, that made him look sickly and skeletal. His smile was tired and cautious.

"Oh, hey, McGunny," Potter greeted.

"Hello, Potter," he replied, then realized he had a rare opportunity to talk to the other boy alone. "Did you just get back? I didn't think the train was suppose to arrive until four."

"Oh, no, I've been back all week. Just..." he trailed off. McGunny nodded.

"Didn't want to deal with anyone else yet?"

“Ah, yeah. I know they mean well but I can only stand to hear 'I'm sorry for your loss' so many times.”

“I'll try to refrain, then... I don't suppose I could get an interview while we're standing here?”

“Um... no?”

With that his chance was lost, because Potter bolted up the stairs like he expected to be chased. Despite the rudeness of the departure, McGunny was rather amused. Let it never be said that Potter was a glory hound. In fact, he seemed positively terrified of media attention. Or perhaps he was beating himself up over what happened. He sighed.

Could he really print a story, of which he had very little information himself, knowing it only served to stir up ill feelings against the boy and disrupt the tentative trust that had developed between them?

He could.

But he wouldn't.

That would be impractical as well as morally questionable. If he was very careful, and a little bit clever, he wouldn't even have to lie. Merely twist the words into a different perspective.

Heroism and villainy was all about perspective anyway.

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“I'm sure he's fine. He'd have sent us an owl if he wasn't,” Draco insisted for the hundredth time as Hermione chewed her fingernails. Beside her, Natalie looked out the carriage window at the setting sun and said nothing. She had been strangely reserved since they met up at the train station, her usual mockery absent. Draco wanted to prod her for answers, but he had his hands full with his sister.

"No, he wouldn't. He's got too much pride. He thinks he has to face all his problems on his own. I really don't understand his reasoning sometimes."

"He's fine. It's not like he's really alone. Uncle Severus is there and Professor McGonagal and some other random people not important enough to remember."

"Uncle Severus isn't in any state to look after anyone," she insisted, convinced that the man was steeped in quiet grief. Draco was more skeptical, finding very little in his recent behavior to suggest Snape was anything but in complete control of himself. He'd even remembered to send them their Christmas gifts.

"We'll know when we see them," Natalie said off-handedly as the carriage came to a halt. She climbed out first, and looked around. The castle keep was crowded with students hurrying to get out of the cold. She gave up her search when she realized it was unreasonable to expect Harry to block an entry way just to wait for them.

She stalked towards the Great Hall, her pace quick with intent, and forced Draco and Hermione to rush to keep up. She outpaced Ginny and Clyde, who were walking together, and went right pass Pansy Parkinson and Millicent Bulstrode, who were snickering to each other at her approach. She'd deal with the last two later, but she had someone more important that she wanted to see. She stepped into the main chamber, bright and warm, but looking sad and plain after a month of beautiful decorations, and turned towards the Gryffindor table.

Harry was in his usual spot, and he seemed to be waiting for her... or rather them. He raised his hand in greeting, but didn't come over to meet her. She didn't really blame him. He looked as if someone had been keeping him prisoner in their dungeon for ten years, and wasn't in any state to battle through a crowd. The smile he gave her was tired and sad, but from what she had heard from Hermione it was better than the nothing he'd given her at the funeral.

"He looks better," Hermione said, sounding relieved. Natalie raised an eyebrow. The Gryffindor princess gave an ironic smile. "His eyes are clearer. I think he's stopped wallowing, at least."

"Should we all go talk to him?" Draco asked, "Or wait till after dinner?"

"Lets wait till after dinner. He won't want to talk with the entire school listening in," Natalie said, though all she wanted to do was go over and hug him and kiss him and make him smile for real. "We'll meet in the dueling hall, say in an hour?"

"Alright," Hermione agreed and went to join her friend. Natalie was severely irritated when she went ahead and sat next to Harry and gave him a hug right in front of everyone. Didn't she realize that was the girlfriend's job?

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Harry felt awkward being hugged. That was odd because he'd liked getting hugs from his godfathers, but 'girl hugs' left him shy and embarrassed, particularly when being done in front of the entire school. At least, he had an excuse. Everyone knew about Larousse, everyone knew she was supposedly going to adopt him, and thus everyone was walking on eggshells around him. There had been no accusations or even accusatory looks yet, but then the paper hadn't mention his involvement in Moody's destruction or Larousse's death beyond helping to evacuate the school. He wondered how long it would be before those few students who had actually been there leaked out that Harry had lead the teachers right back into danger or if they ever would. Did they even realize what he had done? Surely, McGunny did. He'd seen Harry run off himself, and he was the Hogwarts' Herald's editor and chief. Of course, McGunny hadn't questioned him, and he always seemed to be the sort not to make assumptions when it came to a story. There was no real telling what the next issue of the paper would tell or what reaction it would bring.

"Welcome back," he said. "I hope your Christmas wasn't completely ruined."

"No worries. Lucius was absent through most of it, so it was actually one of my happier holidays," she said lightly, but her smile faded quickly. "I've been worried about you. You look tired."

"I've been in detention for a week. I'm very tired."

"Detention? What for?"

Killing my teacher.

"I skipped my appointment at the Iron House and got completely lost in London. Took nearly six hours before anyone found me. Snape wasn't happy with me at all. Nor was the sentinel who had to travel all the way from London on Christmas morning to take my statement. Bother what a mess."

"How on earth did all that happen?"

He shrugged.

"Can it wait? I have a feeling everyone else will want to know too. Plus, I have something important to discuss with you all."

She nodded. "Alright. We're suppose to meet up with Draco and Natalie in the dueling hall. Did you want to bring anyone else?"

"Ginny, the twins, Clyde, and... I guess, Ron. Yeah, I suppose I'll need to talk to him too."

That clearly surprised her. That Harry would have a meeting with his friends was one thing, but Ron hardly qualified as more than a barely tolerated acquaintance. What could they possibly have to say to one another?

Harry didn't feel it a worthy subject to get into for the moment, and turned his attention to eating his dinner. He spared just enough courtesy to greet Clyde, Ginny, Fred, George, and various other individuals who came and went in his line of sight, but otherwise seemed to ignore his surroundings.

"I'll meet you there," he said, finishing his meal before anyone else was even half way done, and left the table. He could feel many eyes on his back as he left the hall, but pretended not to notice. He hadn't even reached the dueling hall when Natalie caught up with him. She spun him around and wrapped him in her arms, holding onto him tightly.

"I'm sorry, Harry."

His first instinct was to hold her back, like he did Hermione, but then he remembered he wasn't in love with her and he'd led her on for long enough. So instead he gently pushed her away.

"You don't have anything to be sorry about."

She didn't seem to realize something was wrong yet, and continued. "I'm sorry you were here alone. I tried to convince my mums to let me come back, but they wouldn't let me."

He hesitated, his mouth going dry with the realization he was about to say something that would hurt her. "They were right. You should spend your holidays with the people who love you."

She looked as if he had just slapped her, surprise gradually giving way to disbelief and then horror.

"Why did you say that? Why did you say it like that? I'm not expecting a 'death to us part' vow, but come on."

"I'm sorry."

She looked like she was going to hit him, which he was expecting, but instead she clenched her fists and forced herself to remain calm. "Is it Hermione? Ginny?"

His look of perplexity must have been answer enough for she asked a different question.

"Do you like another girl?"

He smiled just a little at that. "If I were to like any girl it would definitely be you, but I don't think I can. Either I'm too young or too weird or too something... or not enough of something. I don't know, but I can't love you like you want. I can't love anyone like that. I thought liking you as a friend who held my hand and occasionally kissed was enough, but it's not, is it? Not for you? It's not really fair, especially since..."

He felt a headache building as he fought to keep back tears and grief and hurt and a dozen other things from twisting his expression. He massaged his temples as an excuse to cover his face for a moment.

"Larousse died for me, Natalie. She died because she loved me like a son or at least thought she did, but I didn't love her. I pitied her. Sometimes I even admired her. But I never loved her, and now I have to live with knowing she died for something that wasn't worth dying for. A casual affection that wouldn't lead to anything. I can't do that again. I can't stand the idea of something happening to you because you thought we were something we're not. We're just kids, and your friend. That's it."

"That's it?" she repeated, disbelieving.

"That's it. I'm sorry. It's for real now. I can't be your boyfriend."

They didn't say anything for a minute, didn't even move. He was more resolved than he had been before, and she seemed to realize it the longer she stared into his tired eyes. Finally, she nodded.

"Okay."

"Okay? You're okay with this? Just being friends?"

"Fuck no," she snapped, fire returning to her eyes. Her temper could easily match his own when provoked, and he knew he'd been whacking it with a stick since he'd told her staying home was the right thing. "I'm not okay with just being your friend. I was your friend, then I was your girlfriend, then I was your friend, and then I was your girlfriend again, and now I'm suppose to be your friend again? Screw you, Harry. I'm not a damn yo-yo. I'm not playing this game every

time you get a savior complex and then get over it the next week. We're over, Harry. Completely. We're not dating, were not talking, and hopefully we won't even be thinking about each other pretty soon. Happy fucking New Year!"

And with that she stormed away and he just watched her. He felt sick watching her leave, knowing it was the end of a special friendship that could have been more someday. But someday wasn't soon enough. It hurt, more than he thought it would, even though he knew it was the right thing to do. That honesty was something to be upheld in the making of friendships and even in the ending of them, and he failed at that more often than not. He would have to do right by the others too, and if he were completely alone afterwards... that was a fear he'd have to face.

He went ahead to the dueling hall to wait for the others. The torches lit upon his entry, revealing rows of mannequins standing at attention, like soldiers ready for battle. They were all identical to one another in design, but Harry found his 'Rolfe' easily by the unique scars in the woods. He ran his fingers over the grooves and roughened sections of wood filled in with special polymer and resins to keep it's shape. He was inexplicably reminded of Moody, a monster if he'd ever seen one, tearing apart the body of another man to add to his own, a mockery of wholeness. Thought of himself, wondered if he weren't exactly the same, and then realized that was disgustingly melodramatic and didn't make much sense.

He really needed to get out of this funk or he was going to turn into one of those gloomy types who waxed on and on about pain and suffering and death until they turned a taboo subject into a tedious one.

The arrival of his friends effectively distracted him.

"Our Great Lord of Chaos!" the twins called as they stormed the hall, fighting each other to get through a door that should have been able to easily fit four of them. Fred squeeze through first, shoving his brother into Clyde, and rushed forward to throw his arms around Harry. "You kept your promise! And then some! Even we never thought you'd blow up the school!"

Okay, really that wasn't in anyway tactful considering he'd watched his teacher die that day, but it did surprise him enough that he didn't immediately plummet into depression again. "I didn't actually blow up the school," he pointed out, "Moody blew it up. I just happened to be nearby."

"So modest!" Fred said, ruffling the smaller boy's hair.

"That isn't funny!" Hermione scolded as she entered the room. "Someone we all know died! Show a little respect."

George rolled his eyes at his brother (wisely facing away from Hermione when he did so).

"It's too bad that," Fred said. "She was a great teacher, but not all there in the head. For Merlin's sake, she wanted to marry Snape. She was chewing mushrooms for sure."

"George!" she shrieked in outrage, while Harry could only gape.

"Fred, actually. And she didn't perform three miracles before she died, so stop treating her like a saint. It's sucks what happened, but it happens all the time all over the place."

Harry supposed that was true, but didn't necessarily think they should be glib about it.

"They have a point," Draco said. "However crass they state it. If it bothers you so much, just remember that their heathens and don't know any better."

The twins smiled at him, causing the Malfoy heir to gulp.

"Anyway," Clyde interrupted, "Hey, Harry."

"Hey, Clyde," he said, smiling slightly, "Welcome back. Where's Ginny?"

“Trying to convince Ron to come,” Draco said, looking put upon, “The idiot is being stubborn. Thinks you're trying to turn us all into your minions to ordered around on a whim.”

“Ooh, sounds potentially kinky,” George chirped, earning a slap upside the head from Hermione. And another slap from Ginny as she walked through the door with a sulky brother on her heels.

“Alright, tell me what you want so I can leave,” the dueling captain said, crossing his arms impatiently. Suddenly, Harry wished he'd talked to Ron separately. Or not at all. If the boy got killed for being in his vicinity, would that be so bad?

Well, too late now.

“I have something to tell you, and then I need you all to make some important decisions.”

“Think he's going to ask one of us to marry him?” Fred asked George, who looked thoughtful. “Maybe. Might explain why Cypher was so pissed off.”

Harry glared at them. “This is a matter of life and death. Possibly your own. So could you be serious for ten bloody minutes?”

It sobered up everyone's demeanor except the twins (and Ron's, who looked as constipated as ever). He took a deep breath and began to explain to them what really happened that day at the castle, keeping the matter of the ritual that led him back to the castle a vague prequel and detailing the events that followed meticulously. He'd practiced this speech in the bathroom mirror half a dozen times, until he could tell it without feeling the need to vomit.

“... and then the medi-wizards took her body away.”

Everyone was silent, even the twins, for a long moment. Ron coughed into his hand, and fidgeted uncomfortably, breaking the silence.

"Well that's... a really bloody fucked up story and all mate. Does it have a point?"

Everyone scowled at him, but he ignored them. Harry nodded.

"The point is... someone or something has tried to kill me every year since I've gotten here. I've had so many brushes with death... it's like knowing I'll get the flu every winter. It's sucks, but I know its going to happen. I just... it can be contagious. Larousse died saving me. Other people have gotten hurt just being near me. I need all of you to decide if it's worth it. If our friendships is worth risking your life for. And in Ron's case whether he still wants me around the other duelists knowing they might get blown up off the platform rather than on it."

Ron snorted. "Whatever. They're just rookies." He stalked out, muttering about stupid Gryffindor nobility or noble Griffindor stupidity or something to that effect.

"Our father's a Death Eater, Potter," Draco said, shrugging, "So it's not like you're any safer hanging out with Hermione and me. We've had people try to kidnap or hurt us and done just fine without the flowery speeches. I'd rather have you guarding our backs and us guarding yours than go at it alone. It's common sense."

Harry turned to Hermione whose face was pinched in determination.

"Not quite how I'd put it, but Draco's right. It's better if we stick together. We'll be happier and safer that way."

Ginny just nodded, mirroring Hermione's stance. Harry turned to the twins just in time to see them grinning at each other, and then at Harry. Suddenly, they both held out their arms and charged towards him.

"Group hug!"

Harry's survival instinct kicked in and he bolted around them.

"Thanks guys!" he shouted back to the others quickly, "I really appreciate-"

Clyde interjected, "We know, Harry! Tell us later. Just run or they'll catch you!"

"Traitor! You just want to get Harry alone for some private luv'ins!"* Fred accused, causing his nephew to turn beet red. Luckily, this was just enough of a distraction for Harry to slip under his outstretched arms and through the door. From there he managed to escape into the castle, feeling laughter bubbling up from inside him for the first time since Larousse's death.

He wasn't alone! He had lost Natalie, but everyone else had stayed. They knew and understood the risks, and he would try so hard to truly earn that loyalty they had so willingly given. He would find some way to make himself worthy of it.

Somehow.

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The New Year began on a dark note for the Order of the Phoenix. Three of their spies were dead and the families they'd left behind were either imprisoned or under surveillance. Their end was even harder to bare when they later learned that their comrades were mere hours away from learning that Larousse was a trap from 'Ladybug', their inside source at one of the wizarding newspapers. Moody was lost to them long before he'd died, but the ignominy of his actions and subsequent defeat sat ill with those who had known him personally. Augusta Longbottom had only escaped captured through her strict adherence to anonymity, but even she had come dangerously close to discovery.

So with heavy hearts and steely resolve the Order gathered at their newest hideout, an abandoned muggle farm house some twenty miles outside of Hamburg, to decide their next course of action.

"My friends," Dumbledore began solemnly. "We've suffered a grave loss this last year. Our brave agents in Britain have paid for their beliefs with their lives and the reputations of their families, and worse

yet, their sacrifice was used to benefit the Dark Lord and escalated tension in Britain and Europe.”

As Tonk's listened, her hair began turning an ever darkening shade of gray, like a storm was building around her head and at any moment lighting bolts might shoot out of it. Beside her, Viktor's expression told a similar story. They were the youngest members of the Order, and they still took every defeat personally. Johan, Gilfred, Timmons, Fredric, and Phoebe took it all in stride, their true feelings on the matter buried under layers of jaded acceptance.

“However, some good did come of this,” he continued. “The German Minister of Magic has agreed that the situation in Britain is a direct threat to the country and can no longer be ignored. There is a project in the making to uncover and make public the Dark Lord's plans to send his growing army into the continent. It is an extremely delicate situation, but one that promises to bring about the decisive actions we have been driving towards since the Dark Lord took power.”

From the window he was guarding, Johan made a derisive sound. “Another scheme? What will you use now? Cripples and vampires? Animangi and centaurs?”

“School children, actually,” Dumbledore said. “Among others, but mostly school children.”

Everyone looked suitably horrified except for Krum, who, being a school child himself and actively participating in an underground war, didn't see the problem.

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High above the English countryside, where the the Earth became little more than a patchwork quilt of fields and trees and rivers, Turnis mentally cursed wizards. One moment, he had been sitting warm and snug in his roost with the rest of the Hogwart's owls, ignoring the few students who came and sent off some of his neighbors to deliver their letters, and the next, he had been rather rudely manhandled and

tossed out a window into the cold, gusty winter with a letter flopping around awkwardly from his leg.

He was very tempted to tear the blasted thing off and leave it in a snow bank, go back home, find the vulture of a man who'd ousted him, and poop on him for good measure. He wouldn't of course. He wasn't stupid. A free roost and free food for the occasional delivery was a sweet deal, and he wouldn't break his contract over something as petty as a few ruffled feathers.

So he flew on, as fast as he could, south towards England with a tailwind to make the trip that much faster. The sooner he got rid of the letter, the sooner he could get home to snuggle with Leila, the pretty barn owl with the mischievous glint in her sloe-eyed gaze. The address on his letter was wrong, as was the name, but Turnis had been doing this for seventeen years and knew not to rely on a wizard's sense of geography or spelling unless he wanted to find Atlantis before he found the correct address. The magical signature was strong though, and easily traceable to a cottage deep in a young forest.

He circled once to look for potential predators, found nothing more threatening than a couple of hungry foxes, and landed on a windowsill. It looked directly into a kitchen, where he saw the biggest rat in his life nibbling on a sandwich. He had to blink and shake himself twice before he realized it was actually a human, and he was still a bit skeptical. This wasn't who he was looking for. The one he was looking for was upstairs, but this one might let him inside. He pecked at the window.

The rat-man jumped, dropping his sandwich. Turnis laughed, a screeching sound to human ears. The rat-man glowered at him, but shuffled over to open the window.

"What does he want now? He could have easily kept all of this junk at one of his-"

Turnis ignored him and flew past, dodging his madly groping little paws and went straight for the stairs just beyond the kitchen. The entire place was quite small, especially for a wizarding home, and it

took him only a moment to find the magical signature he was looking for. The upstairs was just an open space with magical artifacts secured behind magicked display cases. The entire place radiated magical energy, but the one he was looking for stood out easily from the rest.

He landed on the case, ruffling his feathers and wondering what to do now. Normally, his intended recipient actually had hands. Of course, normally, his intended recipient had a body. Beneath his claws and glass, a golden coin pulsed with dark intent like the heart of some sleeping monster just waiting to be awoke. Turnis tapped on the glass with his beak.

“What are you doing over there?! Shoo shoo!” the rat-man shouted, running up the stairs with a broom in hand. Turnis screeched at him in annoyance.

“Shoo! Get out of here this instant or I'll cook you over a spit!”

An empty threat he'd heard many times before and wasn't impressed by. He wasn't going anywhere until he delivered his letter. He tapped on the glass a bit harder this time. The pulse of magic started to quicken. At last, he was getting somewhere.

Rat-man's broom came up to push him away from the case, but he hissed at it and flapped his wings angrily, refusing to budge. The magic beneath him beat so fast now it sounded like the hum of a bee, and was steadily increasing in power. It seemed Turnis had succeeded in waking it up. Which was good, because he really didn't want to stay here long enough for his attacker to get brave with his broom. Or remember that he actually had a wand.

“That's it, you're barbecue!” The nasty little wizard was fumbling inside his robe, and Turnis was ready to bolt, delivery or no, but then the world went white.

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Tom stretched his wings and gave an experimental flap. Everything moved easily and painlessly. Good, he hadn't damaged his new body. He reoriented himself just in time to dodge a curse from Pettigrew and flew straight for him, slashing at the man's face with his talons as he passed. Pettigrew screamed and curled himself up on the floor, covering his bloody face with his hands. With nothing to fear at his back, he flew down the stairs, out the open window, and into the forest. He kept going until the little cottage was miles away and flew into barn. In the comfort of darkness, he took stock of himself.

Possession of an animal wasn't particularly difficult, especially when you had little connection to the original body (or in his case, object) housing your soul, but he had so little power left after his brother had killed him. Certainly not enough to take possession of Pettigrew, not that he would have forced himself into that body even as a last resort. So he'd slept, soaking up what little power he could, until at last an opportunity presented himself.

Turnis wasn't physically impressive, being a mere tawny owl and heavy with years, but his magical intuition was impressive. He'd found his way to him despite the measures the Dark Lord had erected against such an action. Perhaps his elder counterpart hadn't factored in owls when setting up his little hiding spot, but that would have been unforgivably foolish on his part. Voldemort was many things, but foolish was not one of them.

It didn't matter now, though. He was free and no one the wiser.

A dragging sensation on his leg drew his attention. There was a letter. Hardly unusual. The fact that it was addressed to him, or rather Thomas Rook, was. He pulled it off his leg, and very carefully broke the seal with his beak. In the scant moonlight, his enormous eyes scoured the page.

Dear Tom

I hope this letter finds you well. I have been meaning to send it since I learned you weren't coming back to school this year, but there have been so many distractions. I am truly sorry...

Harry. Tom let out a shrieking laugh. His dear Harry had re-birthed him a second time! His timing was perfect. Despite his apology, three months ago he wouldn't have had the strength to possess even an owl, and would have ruined his chance at escape. This was destiny. The will of something. God or the Earth, he didn't care.

He beat his wings and took to the sky. There was somewhere he was supposed to be and since fate had proven kind so far, who was he to defy it?

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Before anyone suggests it, no Clyde does not have a crush on Harry. The twins don't either, even though they have fun pretending they do. They aren't actually gay.

If you're confused about the Tom, Pettigrew, owl, cottage thing, here it is in summary. Tom was never really 'dead', his soul merely moved into a magical coin, which the Dark Lord gave to Pettigrew to keep safely hidden away in the little cottage with various other magical artifacts (he's a collector and has several such places, and he's assigned Pettigrew as janitor in one since he has nothing for the over grown rodent to do lately). Turnis, the owl, was given Harry's letter, and used the magic of Harry's intent (which is particularly strong due to his dalliance into Earth magic which owls' ability to find people is also based on) to find Tom rather than the name or address (that Snape used, not knowing that both were fake. Voldemort never told him the truth about Tom, remember?). Tom took possession of Turnis' body without Pettigrew knowing it and escaped. Clear?

IMPORTANT NOTICE

I'm behind on my writing. I usually have three chapters written at any given time, but now I don't even have one, so I'm taking a break to get these advance chapters written. I know you don't like it, but it's better than me missing a week after a cliff hanger or during the middle of some event in the story, and this is likely to happen. I've started a new job, am applying to graduate school, and it's the holidays. The graduate school application is actually why I've fallen

so far behind. I've been scrambling to find recommendation letters and write my statement of purpose. Sigh. Please be patient. The story is going to get crazy fast in book IV.

Book IV:

Chapter 1: Foreign Affairs

“Allbright, you're after Ginny,” Ron said, stepping off the platform as his sister made her way up. The entire Hogwarts' Dueling Club was at their fifth dueling tournament in Edinburgh, competing against Westwidgen, the local wizarding school. Three platforms had been set up in the great hall to accommodate three different skill levels; beginner, intermediate, and semi-professional, and each had their own selection of four judges. Spectators were placed safely behind a ward, protecting them from the odd renegade spell and protecting the duelists from overzealous fans and angry parents. The ward muffled some of the noise from the crowd, but you could still hear the cheering and shouting and cursing, and even if you were deaf you could tell who was rooting for who by the color of robes they wore and the many signs and flags they were waving.

The locals were decked out mostly in blue and black and made up the majority of the crowd, but Hogwarts' supporters were every color under the sun and were by far the most enthusiastic. There were also a lot more student supporters, who had considerably less shame than their adult neighbors.

As Ron walked by one crowd of girls he smirked at them and they broke out into squeals of delight. With a considerably less friendly look towards Allbright, he said. “Don't screw up.”

The young Hufflepuff grimaced, but nodded. Harry placed his hand on the boy's shoulder and smiled.

“Don't mind him. He says the same thing to everyone. You're going to do fine. I've seen the other guy, he's got poor endurance. Just keep up your defense and he'll tire himself out. Got it?”

“Yeah, thanks Captain.”

Technically, Harry was still just vice captain, but since Ron tended to ignore the 'Rookies', they had, unofficially, given him that honor. It annoyed the hell out of Ron, but not enough for him to actually take

charge of them. Harry just grinned and went to talk to the arrogant bastard who was standing next to Snape and watching Fred duel... or rather toy with the Westwidgen team captain on the semi-professional platform. There were only a handful of duelist in either school qualified to be semi-professional, and all of them sixth or seventh years. Both Jr. Division duelists looked on with a sort of longing as the two boys battled it out in what appeared to be a fight to the death. Harry shook himself out of it to talk to Ron.

"If you don't want to bother with the rookies, that's fine with me. But I'd appreciate it if you didn't shoot down their morale just before they're about to fight."

The red head tore his eyes away from Fred to glare at Harry in annoyance.

"We're sitting in third position because you can't teach them to do more than put up shields. We'd be going to the championship if it wasn't for losers like Allbright."

Harry came very close to setting fire to Ron with his eyes alone at that moment. Instead, he grabbed his arm and hissed in his ear.

"Don't put your fucked-up leadership skills on my shoulders, Weasley. My rookies have been performing on par or better with every other school's beginner level duelists, despite the fact that you've neglected to give them their fair share of duels during practice and despite the fact you've gone out of your way to make them feel like shit. If they were performing poorly, which they're not, it'd be your damned fault as their captain. The only reason we're in third position is because the Sr. Division sucks at swordsmanship. No, offense professor."

Snape shrugged. It wasn't his fault after all. Most Sr. Division duelists were supposed to have started practicing swordsmanship while in Jr. Division, but since the club was so new, most had only a year of practice. It wasn't a big deal. Sword fighting only came in to play when both duelists spent too much of their magic to fight with their wands. It had happened only twice since they started to compete, but one of those times had cost them the competition. Snape had decided to put more emphasis on it when they began practicing for

next season. Otherwise, their team was doing incredibly well. They'd even featured in some of the national papers.

Ron jerked his arm free and shoved him away, looking ready to draw his wand.

"Boys," Snape warned evenly, his expression neutral, "Save it for the platform."

They broke it off, and Harry stalked back to the other end of the platform to watch Ginny finish her duel and lend his support to Allbright. The youngest Weasley walked off the platform, shaking out her hand and grimacing.

"Damn, I should have seen that one coming. The Disarming spell is so obvious."

"You okay?"

"Yeah, nothing hurt but my pride. And I think my wand rolled underneath the other team's bench."

"Want me to get it for you?"

"Would you? I'm not afraid, but boys can be such perverts. Did you notice they don't have a single girl on their team?"

She found this strangely offensive, even though the Dueling Club had a mere six girls (it had been nine but two girls had graduated and Natalie had quit) out of almost forty duelists.

"Yeah, I noticed. I thought that one guy was going burst a vein when Owens knocked him off the platform," he chuckled. He saw the rookie head for the platform. "Good luck, Allbright! Alright, wait here while I get your wand."

He circled around the room to avoid getting in the way of the judges and headed towards Westwidgen's bench, a long row of blue and black uniforms and buzz cuts. They all watched him approach suspiciously. The crowd on this side was mostly Westmidgen parents,

and they hissed and booed as he passed them. He stopped in front of the bench.

"Excuse, my friend believes her wand rolled over here. Have any of you seen it?"

"Who wants to know?" a first year grumbled. He was the boy Owens had beaten, and still sour over the matter. Everyone was sour over the matter, in fact, especially since their team was losing.

"Me, obviously," Harry said, knowing they knew damn well who he was. Most people did nowadays.

"Well, we don't have it," said another boy.

"I never said you did. I said it may have rolled under your bench. Would you mind moving for a moment so I can look?"

"Maybe we would."

Typical. Harry wished he could just take out his wand and summon Ginny's, but all someone would have to do is accuse him of casting a spell on an opposing team, and their entire school would be disqualified. So Harry sighed and held out his hand and closed his eyes.

"What are you doing, weirdo."

"Magic, you neophyte... come."

Ginny's wand leaped into his hand. There was a gasp and several boys jumped up and away from him. He just turned and walked back to his team. Hermione was there, her arms crossed.

"Must you provoke them?"

"Don't be silly. That was me avoiding provoking them. Well, except for the 'neophyte' comment, but they started that one."

"Do you even know what 'neophyte' means?"

"Isn't that Ron on a good day?"

She slapped his shoulder, but he just grinned and went to find Ginny. She was talking to Owens, and they both grinned at him. Clearly, they had seen what he had done.

"Show off," Owens said.

"You shouldn't waste your magic going wandless during a competition," Ginny pointed out. Harry shrugged.

"I've won all my matches already, and it's not like my job requires a lot of magic. I'll be fine."

Plus he'd been practicing since school had let out, and couldn't help wanting to 'show off' as Owens put it. His decision on whether he still wished to sacrifice his chance at heaven and seeing his family after he died for the different sort of immortality that paganism had to offer was still up in the air at the moment, but the subtle gifts in magic he had been granted since the ritual hadn't dissipated and he saw no reason (and also no way) to avoid using them. Wandless magic came easier to him now, though it was still draining, and his ability to sense magic as a smell or a change in temperature (which had always been there but never really noticeable until now) was becoming more and more pronounced. Aside from a few 'parlor trick' wandless summonings, like with Ginny's wand, he hadn't told or shown anyone, but he thought Snape and Hermione might both be suspicious.

Allbright won his match, just barely, but was ecstatically happy when Harry told him he'd done a good job. Allbright was the weakest duelist on the team, and he knew it, but he was so determined to get better that Harry couldn't help but admire him and want to help him reach his goal. If he could one day get the Hufflepuff skilled enough to fight as a semi-professional, he thought all the stress and annoyance Ron caused him would be well worth it.

The last match was between Cedric Diggory and the Westwidgen Vice Captain (Fred had already defeated the Captain), which Cedric won with a spectacular Arching Arrow spell, a stun spell that flew over

the target and then turned around to hit them from behind, bypassing any shield that didn't encompass the back as well as the front. Hogwarts won 58 matches to 22.

And just in time too. He was running late.

"Professor, I've got to go!" he said, running past him. "I'll see you at home!"

Snape glowered at his undignified escape, but waved him off. He still had an entire team of students to re-unite with their guardians. Potter was the least of his concerns at the moment.

The Gryffindor hurried through the crowds, careful to avoid the group of girls with the 'Potter's #1' sign, and out the school's auditorium doors. A long flight of stairs rolled down the hill where carriages and horses and stalls of valets keeping broomsticks and portkeys safe waited to transport their owners home. A single car stood out amongst the throng, surrounded by curious onlookers wondering who amongst the crowd was ostentatious enough to bring such a contraption to a humble school sporting event. Victoria stood at the passenger door in a chauffeur's uniform, keeping the crowd from touching or attempting to peek inside. Harry waved to her as he reached the bottom of the stairs, and she smiled and opened the door for him.

"I left your change of clothes inside, Young Master," she said.

"Thanks, Vicki," he said, and hopped into the back seat. Once inside, he knew he was invisible to everyone outside, but he still waited until Victoria drove them away from the crowds and into the city to start changing. Black dress slacks, a pressed white shirt, gray vest and red tie replaced his dueling leathers, and a light black robe with the symbol for the Court of Foreign Affairs (a crown of laurels and sword set in the center and 'Honor to our Brothers in War and Peace' spelled out in Latin encircling it) stitched across the left breast to make it all official looking. His watch was found amongst the pile and he slipped it into his pocket. While waiting to arrive in London, he attended to the care of his dueling uniform, casting the routine cleaning spells and strengthening spells and repair spells.

"How did the Oxford Ogres do today, Vicki?" he asked by way of conversation.

"Still duking it out last I checked. I think the Irish Selkies are going to win though. The Ogres' Seeker was acting a blind fool after he got hit with a bludger."

Harry sighed, "They never should have replaced Jameson."

"Amen to that."

Traffic was flowing smoothly on Saturday, and they made it in good time to the Forum, a series of buildings set about in a circle, each designated to supervise Britain's relationship with different parts of the world. Below ground all these buildings were connected, but only a handful of individuals had the security clearance to walk those conjoined halls. Harry had been through them once with the Dark Lord and the Judge of the Department of Germanic States, Isaac Drumm, on the first day he had been assigned to work there. He had never been below again, but he could recall his unease walking those quiet, empty halls and the sense that bad things happened behind the series of locked doors that bore no names or numbers.

They pulled up to the Department of Germanic States (sadly termed the DOGS House), a majestic building with Baroque architecture and an abundance of paintings involving the Black Forest, largely considered the most magical forest in the world even by British wizards. He didn't wait for Victoria to open the door for him, but called out a quick 'thanks, I'll see you later' and sprinted for the entrance. His watch was already starting to grow warm, so it was with some sense of urgency that he approached the security check point manned by a young Brass Cult* lieutenant. He was checked head to toe for spy paraphernalia, handed a security badge, and then waved through. An elevator took him to the third floor.

The moment he stepped off the elevator he was welcomed with a rather nasty scowl from his supervisor, Simeon Schultz, who had the misfortune to resemble his namesake. He didn't like Harry, and had made that fact known from day one. The Gryffindor didn't know his reasoning, but he thought it might be professional jealousy. Judge

Drumm actually knew him, a mere mail room clerk, by name and would talk to him when he delivered the man's mail, where it took Herr Schultz three years to reach mail room supervisor and another two months for his boss to actually remember his name.

"You're cutting it close, Herr Potter," Schultz grouched, crossing his unusually long arms.

"Sorry, sir."

"Don't apologize to me, apologize to Richter Drumm und Ambassadeur Swartzmann. They asked to see you when you finally decided to show up."

"Ambassadeur? As in, a German ambassador?"

"That's right, the first one we've seen in person for seven years so don't keep him waiting."

"Yes, sir. Is there any mail for the Judge?"

A pile of envelopes and scrolls were shoved into his hands, and he hurried on his way. Men and women sitting in cubicles and offices, poked out their heads as he passed asking for reports and deliveries to and from Düsseldorf and Mainz and Erfurt. He apologized as he went, promising to get it all taken care of as soon as he got back. Mail room clerk was by far the most hectic of Harry's summer jobs, but he thought it might also be his most fun. There was a contagious excitement in the air. Everyone was busy with important things that he got to help with, and despite it all being centered around another country, it made him feel strangely patriotic for his own. It was as if his job was to show Germany what a fine country Great Britain really was, and that they would be good friends if given a chance.

The Judge's office was concealed behind an ornate wooden door, on which was carved a dragon that would blow fire at you if you tried to open the door by force. Wisely, Harry knocked first.

"Kommen Sie bitte herein."

Inside, the office was laid out like a study, filled with books and instruments and comfortable furniture for studying or working in repose. The Judge, a slender man in his sixties with a grandfatherly demeanor and a lawyer's shrewdness, sat in an over stuffed chair across from an unfamiliar gentleman who could only have been Ambassadeur Swartzmann. He was in his late forties, with a handsome Scandinavian face, a thick mustache, and despite being a little heavy in the middle a picture of physical strength. They both smiled at Harry as he entered.

"Guten Tag, junger Mann. Wie lief dein Wettkampf?" the Judge asked.

"Ganz gut, dankeschön. Hogwarts hat sich in diesem Wettkampf sehr gut gemacht. ."

"Excellent news. Do you think you'll make it to nationals this year?"

"I'm afraid we only placed third. Next year we'll definitely go."

"Herr Potter here is part of Hogwarts's new dueling club. They've done very well for themselves," the judge explained to the ambassador. Swartzmann grinned and nodded.

"A fine sport."

"Ah! Forgive me, where are my manners? I haven't introduced you both. Harold, this is Ambassador Franz Swartzmann from the German Ministry of Magic. Ambassadeur Swartzmann, this is Herr Harold Potter, temporarily on loan to us from Hogwarts."

"A pleasure to meet you," Harry said, shaking his hand politely. The man's grip was firm, but Harry thought if he'd applied full pressure he could easily ground the bones in his hand to dust.

"Likewise. And I would just like to say, that I hope, despite the rumors going around, you know the Ministry of Magic and the witches and wizards of Germany wish you no ill will."

Harry blinked. He'd almost forgotten about Moody's support from Dumbledore, who in turn was supposedly supported by Germany and

various other European nations. He had been working very hard to forget about the Moody fiasco and its deadly conclusion in its entirety, and had succeeded but for the occasional nightmares and Natalie's conspicuous absence. He forced a smile.

"That is good to know. I hope to visit again someday without worrying about assassins and angry mobs... and that came out really badly, didn't it?"

Swartzmann just laughed, a booming sound like a fog horn.

"Ah! Young man, I hope you introduce yourself to Krum. He could use some of that British humor."

"Krum?"

"One of Durmstang's students and a professional Seeker for Bulgaria's national quidditch team. He's the most likely to be the schools champion during the Triwizard tournament. Real intense guy. Driven, I guess you could say. How about Hogwarts? Can you think of any likely champions? Think you might try yourself, perhaps?"

Harry just blinked at him, not understanding a thing he was talking about. Judge Drumm chuckled.

"I'm sorry, Ambassador, I forgot to mention I hadn't told him yet. It's suppose to be a secret until the start of the school term, after all. But I suppose I've been a bit too strict. Herr Potter has proven himself quite capable of discretion," he said, then turned to Harry to explain.

"It's really quite exciting. Germany and France have both agreed to participate in an international school competition called the Triwizard Cup. A sort of magical decathlon. Traditionally, Hogwarts used to host this competition every forty years or so, but the war disrupted things. It seems diplomacy is finally starting to pay off. Hogwarts will be receiving some forty or fifty exchange students for the year, and if everything goes smoothly, we hope to expand our friendly relations into other sectors such as trade and tourism once again."

Swartzmann nodded. "There's an election coming up, so the Minister is under a lot of pressure to ease international tension. This is an excellent opportunity for both our countries."

That did indeed sound very exciting and important, which resulted in a definite unease settling over Harry. A school competition didn't seem that bad on the surface, but having been nearly fed to werewolves by sore losers in quidditch and nearly throttled by Ron on several occasions in dueling club, the threat of juvenile intrigue was very real. British wizards were bad enough, who knew what level foreign wizards played at?

"So what do you think?" Swartzmann said, "Interested in trying your hand? We've heard rumors all the way in Berlin about some of your exploits. Killed an acromantula, didn't you? Befriended werewolves? Fly like the devil. Ah, I bet Krum would love a chance to fly against you What do you say? It could be a lot of fun!"

Harry shook his head.

"My hands are quite full without knocking heads with professional quidditch players, thank you."

The ambassador sighed, but didn't look too disappointed. "I suppose it doesn't matter. You'd only be what? Fourth? Fifth year?"

"Fourth."

"So young. The competitions are pretty dangerous so only sixth and seventh year students are permitted to compete. Oh, well."

The unease evaporated. It seemed that just this once, someone else was going to be in more danger than him, and no one could say he was shirking some weird responsibility to school and country by avoiding the matter. Rules were rules after all.

A full year of nothing more hazardous than Ronald Weasley in a mood (or possibly Snape in more of a mood than usual), sounded wonderful. His grades hadn't been bad last year, but they were not what they could have been. This year he wanted to focus on his

studies, quidditch (would there be a house cup with two other schools taking up residence for the year?), dueling club, and any other skills that would decrease the chances of him dying before graduation.

He shook himself out of his distraction.

"Sounds great," he said, seeing they were still looking at him. "I'll try my best to help them feel welcome. Oh, and I forgot, you've got mail, sir."

Judge Drumm nodded. "Thank you, Harold, just put it on my desk, and I'll let you get back to work. It was good to chat with you."

"Thank you, sir. It was a pleasure, Ambassador."

"Likewise, Herr Potter. You have a nice day."

Harry bowed slightly to them both and left. What an interesting turn of events. Should he tell any of his friends? How secret was 'secret' in this case? National news worthy certainly, but national secret worthy?

He wasn't given much time to think about it. No sooner than he stepped out onto the floor than people started demanding their reports and mail and forms and a variety of materials deemed too sensitive to left flying through the air like it did at the Court registration offices or the Court education department. What exactly had been Voldemort's intention when setting him up with a job here? One that was technically meant for someone with German language skills higher than that of an eight year old? True, his German vocabulary had not only returned but was greatly increased since he'd started working almost a month ago and the pay was impressive for a part-time minor, but he wondered who he had cheated out of a job with the Dark Lord's meddling.

The sudden idea that Voldemort was setting him up to rule Germany popped into his head, almost making him laugh.

Until he remembered, you could never tell with that man.

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Harry arrived home at a quarter after five, with Inana waiting on the porch for him like a loyal puppy and Snape expecting him to cook dinner like an overbearing husband.

“You're late,” the potions master informed him.

“No, I'm not,” he said, dismissively, heading for the kitchen. “If I were late my watch would have gotten hot. I can make yesterday's leftover stew into a pot pie or I can roast the chicken. The pie would be faster, but it's up to you.”

“I ate the stew for lunch. And you're fifteen minutes late.”

“I'm fifteen minutes later than usual, but I'm not late. Would you mind washing and rinsing the vegetables?” He wandered around the kitchen, picking up pots and bowls and herbs and measuring spoons as he went. The kitchen had become his domain, just as the potion lab was Snape's, and though his professor liked to tease him with names like 'fishwife' and 'Miss Potter', even he knew better than to challenge his authority there.

“I've been working in the potion's lab today.”

Didn't necessarily mean the man didn't try to get around it occasionally.

Harry gave him a look, that threatened to become nagging if Snape didn't do as he was... well, requested. Snape rolled up his sleeves and went to the cupboard. “Don't blame me if mushrooms start growing out of your ears. Did you stop somewhere?”

“No, I was just running behind. There was a visitor today, and I ended up talking to him. Do you know Ambassador Swartzmann?” While Snape prepared the vegetables, Harry made a glaze with herbs and chicken broth. This was a routine that had been established the year before, and as bizarre as it seemed once the young Gryffindor

returned to Hogwarts, it was natural and even comfortable in their house.

Yes, it felt like their house now. Last year, he had only been a guest. These days it felt more like a home. A home with an older, bossy, nosy, and perpetually hungry man as a roommate, but home nonetheless. He couldn't say why or how exactly things were different. It had to have been Snape's doing, though he wasn't any nicer or less snarky than before. There were days when he thought it was because Snape was going to adopt him at one time, which meant he had to have felt something other than professional responsibility towards him. Those days were few because it didn't take him long to remember it had all been Larousse's idea and Snape hadn't seen him as anything more than indulgence to his fiancée. He took out the chicken from the 'chilling cupboard' and started to glaze it.

"Not personally," the man said, flicking his wand about so that he wouldn't actually have touch his food. "But the Dark Lord has made him known to me. What do you know of his intentions here?"

"Triwizard tournament."

"Ah, yes. Do you understand its significance?"

"Probably not. I know it's the first time in over a decade Germany's allowed civilians to visit. I know... I heard the German minister is under a lot of pressure to ease the tension between our countries. I know I don't have to worry about it since I'm not old enough to compete."

Snape snorted, the potato dropping out of the levitation charm as a result.

"This tournament is a competition, plain and simple, just on a larger scale than previously. It's a matter of national pride. Depending how each champion performs, generalized statements about the character and educational quality of their school and country can be made. Superiority- is this still edible?"

"Just wash it off again."

“Superiority can be inferred. It is each champion's intention to be considered the most powerful, skilled, and intelligent and pass on their glory to their nation.”

“Does this mean we're really just fighting a miniature war?”

“Essentially. Now what do you want with these?”

“Put them in the pot.”

“Of course, it's a war of pride. The Dark Lord believes this sort of thing is necessary in order for Europe to recognize his sovereignty over Britain. If the youth of the nation are as strong or stronger than they were during the reign of the Ministry, what right does anyone have to say that his cause was not justified?”

“And if we lose badly?”

“... Europe will feel justified in denouncing him... continuing to denounce him and then things will get messy. I'm not worried. I've visited both schools. They have some subjects they excel in, but their education is mediocre overall in comparison to Hogwarts. Now what?”

Harry cast a spell into the pot, slicing the vegetables into large chunks. He poured the rest of his herb broth over them, set the chicken on top, and put the whole thing in the oven.

“Forty-five minutes and it should be done.”

“Mm... you have a letter. I left it on your bed.”

Harry was half way up the stairs before he remembered to call back a 'thank you!' He entered his room, and found it the same organized chaos he'd left in the morning. Elsbeth's perch and Inana's basket both rested empty on their own stands by the open window, charmed to open whenever either creature approached (Inana found she could come and go by climbing the gutter and rain spout). In the corner of the room that received the most light, he had set down a large white

sheet now splattered with paint, an easel, and art supplies carefully stored in totes and bins and tin cans. His latest piece featured Elsbeth on her perch hallowed in moonlight in oil pastels, her large yellow eyes peeking open as he entered before closing again in sleep. His growing collection of books rested on a bookshelf, along with his collection of magical artifacts, a box of letters, and photographs, but soon he'd need another shelf it was getting so crowded. His desk was likewise cluttered with Hogwarts' memorabilia; summer homework assignments, old text books, parchment and quills, and his student manual. Only his cold weather clothes and most secret of possessions remained in his school trunk; his wooden box, Sirius' fang necklace, the runaway box, and the Marauder's Map (once again in his possession, because the twins were broke for Christmas) were carefully hidden away in the folds of his Baluvian cloak and beneath an ever growing number of security spells.

The letter rested on his bed. He read the return address.

'Die Reicher Familie'. He smiled. He had been keeping up a fairly steady correspondence with the Reichers since they'd given him shelter on Christmas Eve, or more precisely he was keeping correspondence with Morgana, her crayon drawings the only clue to as to what the ghastly squiggles that passed for her handwriting stood for. Their letters brought a bitter sweet sensation to Harry, who felt both blessed to have her affection and lonely when he realized she would eventually grow out of it. Her attention was due to childish infatuation, not kinship after all.

He opened the letter and found himself looking at a drawing of the Reichers standing on the beach, blocky beige bodies with red smiles, except for Robert who was very pink and frowning. Harry burst out laughing, easily imagining the poor man's sunburned vacation. He read Morgana's unique calligraphy and managed to make out 'Jersey' and 'swimming' and 'Papa looks like a lobster'.

He spent his time before dinner writing a reply, involving a tale about Sir Weasley the Boorish, a vagrant night and villain whom Prince Harold was intent on turning into a real boar, complete with a little cartoon Ron being transfigured into a pig.

[illegible]

While Harry amused himself upstairs, Snape went to his study to attend to his own mail. Among the usual bills and requests for his expertise on some project or another, was a letter from the Court. More specifically, Voldemort, though he had refrained from signing the letter himself. It contained orders for a report on Harry's current status and instructions for the boy's upcoming stay at the werewolf colony. As far as Snape could tell, Harry was as obnoxiously happy as he had been last year except for the unexplained happening that had driven the Cypher girl away from him and clean out of dueling club.

Sending the boy to play with a bunch of moon-madden savages in the forest didn't seem conducive to keeping him well, but that really wasn't any of his business. Potter was involved in a form of magic Snape had only a vague understanding of, and whatever it was it required the instruction of a pagan, not a potions master or professional duelist.

It was with an uneasy fascination that Snape was waiting to see what precisely Potter was going to become. Another dark lord? It seemed unlikely, given Voldemort's intolerance for challengers. What then? Theorizing would bring no definite answers, so he moved on to the other item contained in the missive.

A list.

More specifically, a list of healthy, single, Pureblood women. A list of potential wives. He snorted. It was five months until he had deemed it an appropriate time to start searching for a 'Mrs. Snape', but it seemed the Dark Lord was getting impatient. Did he perhaps want him to start a family so he could officially adopt Potter as Larousse had wanted? His fiancé's death had done wonders for the Gryffindor's public image, not only repairing whatever damage his parents' rebellious history had brought down on the boy but instilling a sort of paternal instinct in the public. Potter had gone from 'young upstart' to 'Britain's lost son' in the span of a week. The Court was still filtering

out sympathy mail from those few letters by people Potter was actually permitted to correspond with.

If that was the Dark Lord's game... there wasn't really anything Snape could do about it except be grateful that he'd only have to put up with it for two or three years. It wasn't like Potter's company was intolerable. Some days, the boy proved to be quite interesting.

Alcohol was usually required at the end of such days.

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The summer solstice announced itself with a storm. It blew in shortly after midnight, awakening Harry with the sound of thunder. He stayed up for almost an hour watching the lightening illuminate the countryside, and feeling the magic against his skin like an electric charge.

And then he was hit with a powerful compulsion, like an Imperius Curse. He stripped out of his nightclothes, left his glasses on the nightstand, and walked out of the house. He was completely blinded. Blinded by the dark, blinded by the absence of his glasses, blinded by the rain in his eyes, but his feet found their footing true.

The rain was heavy with magic, Earth magic tasting heavily of Voldemort's unique flavor. Harry knew it for what it was. The result of a ritual, a summoning of gods and spirits, a joyous dance between Mother and child. He looked up to the sky and opened his mouth, swallowing down the water and magic, making it a part of himself.

Lightening flashed directly overhead, and he laughed at the electric tickle that ran through his body. His feet were soon doing more than walking, they were running and leaping and twirling, rushing him far away from the house and into the meadow. The mud squished beneath his toes, but didn't swallow him. The rocks rolled under his feet but did not trip him. He danced his way through the tall grass and brambles without fear or self-consciousness, feeling only power and joy.

He wasn't sure how long he remained dancing out in the rain, for he knew no fatigue and his focus was on nothing more than the happiness reveling in his compulsion brought him. He didn't even know when the storm had ended and he'd collapsed.

What he did know was that he had fallen asleep outside, and that he must have slept late, because he woke up very naked in the middle of the meadow with the Dark Lord and Snape staring down at him.

And suddenly, he felt all his self-consciousness return with a vengeance.

"Did you have fun last night?" Voldemort queried, handing him a cloak. "I know I did."

Harry wrapped the cloak around himself and risked a peek at both men. Snape seemed stuck somewhere between intense curiosity and blatant disapproval, but not the least bit embarrassed about staring down at a naked person. Voldemort was dressed in his shaman robes, and grinning like a fox. Harry could feel his magic, the same magic he had felt last night, tingling against his skin like electricity.

"What did you do?" he groaned.

"Just a little summoning ritual. A Welsh storm god to be more precise. It seems you got caught up in though. I forgot that your element is water. How do you feel?"

Harry climbed to his feet and tried to take stock, but he was feeling disoriented and his definite lack of clothes wasn't helping him.

"Wet. And muddy... and I've got to pee."

Snape snorted. Voldemort chuckled.

"You did drink a lot of water. Come on, you can clean up back at the house. It wouldn't do to greet the Head Alpha as you are now."

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While Harry showered, Voldemort and Snape waited with cups of tea in the study. Snape was brimming with questions over what had just happened. He hadn't even been aware Harry wasn't in the house until the Dark Lord showed up at his door three hours before he was expected and told him to follow him. The meadow was unpleasantly wet and muddy, but he didn't dare voice his complaints, and soon forgot them altogether when they came upon Potter lying naked in a circle of crushed grass. Even more startling was the abundance of clovers that seemed to have grown up directly beneath the child, fluffy white blooms smelling sweetly of nectar.

It was one of those 'interesting' moments Snape was coming to dread, and the intense wave of curiosity that followed was unlikely to be satisfied. The Dark Lord seemed content to ignore it.

"Should I expect this sort of thing routinely?" he asked.

Voldemort looked at him over his tea cup, incongruous in his barbarian garb and perfect manners. He smirked.

"I shall make him a ward. It wouldn't do if someone found out they could summon Harry like a mere nature spirit. Although, I may have invited him to join in the ritual myself by accident."

"I thought you would be performing a solstice ritual during the full moon?"

"The full moon isn't close enough to the solstice to be worth it. Besides, I can't really entrust my apprentice's wellbeing to the moon. She has proven... unreliable."

Imagine that, Snape mused.

"But you are still going to celebrate with the werewolves?"

"My participation in werewolf festivities is primarily for diplomatic reasons, but I intend to make use of my time there to teach Harry more of the pagan arts. He has seen so little of it, but it has a strong hold over him already."

Snape nodded, believing this was very much the case. He had noticed the unusually quick progression of the boy's magic, particularly his wandless magic, and the odd moments when the child seemed to just know things he shouldn't. Like when the weather would change or what herbs and vegetables were at their best or what sort of spell a duelist was going to cast. Little things no one would think much of unless they saw how frequently accurate these predictions were. It made Potter's reticence ironic.

"I believe he is having doubts, my Lord."

Voldemort gave him a curious look. "Doubts?"

"About becoming a pagan. Vesper's death shook up some questions in him about the afterlife. He's been questioning his godfathers about it in his letters."

"What have they said?"

"Nothing. They wish to see him in person before they discuss it. I thought you should know before you let them run off with him."

Voldemort nodded, but didn't look too concerned.

"Thank you, Severus. I'm glad you told me, but I'm not worried. At this point, Harry can no more claim himself a child of God than his godfathers can. The Earth has a firm hold over all their spirits. It would require an extremely potent spiritual conversion for Harry's soul to reject what has been offered to him, and more sacrifice than I imagine he is willing to give. I will be careful with him, however. He may or may not be able to become a Christian, but his dedication to paganism can still be greatly influenced by his experiences and his belief in choice."

Snape considered that, and wondered at its meaning. He wasn't a Christian really nor a pagan, as both religions seemed to him bizarre and pointless and more than a little bit scary. There were forces out there beyond the scope of human understanding, he accepted that, but why anyone would want to or have to tie their soul to some deity

with questionable intent was beyond him. Why would such beings even want to tie spirits to them? Did they taste yummy?

"You received my list, I trust?" Voldemort asked, interrupting his internal musings.

"Of eligible women? Yes, I narrowed down my selection to four, but I haven't done much more than that. It's still several months before I can start placing formal inquiries."

"I know you want to be respectful to your fiancé's memory, but if you delay too long you will certainly lose opportunities. These are women of quality. They will have many offers before you even try your hand."

Snape tilted his head in concession, but didn't seem particularly bothered. Voldemort sighed. The potions master could be such a child when it came to some things. Before a lecture could be given, or really an order, Harry entered the study, squeaky clean from his shower. He was dressed in leathers, with Inana resting around his neck, and a light black cloak folded in his arm.

"How do you feel now that you are dry, clean, and don't have to pee?" Voldemort asked, amused when the boy blushed and looked at his toes.

"... Tingly... kind of lightheaded."

"Good. Just relax and let the magic settle."

Harry just nodded. Aside from a few brief encounters and setting him up with the job at the Court, they had seen very little of each other in the past couple of months. The Dark Lord had been busy with a series of new projects, and Harry hadn't had much time on his hands once the spring semester had started. He was feeling shy, and being discovered naked in a field had done nothing to relieve that.

The Dark Lord set down his tea and stood.

"Thank you for the tea, Severus. I think we will be going now. See you in six days."

“A pleasant journey, my Lord,” the potions master said, escorting them too the door. To Harry he gave a warning look. “Behave.”

Harry crossed his arms and muttered, “Kind of hard not to misbehave in a werewolf colony.”

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Fenrir watched Blackbone from inside his house as the younger alpha paced in the shade of an oak tree nearby. Every so often, the man would stop, look towards the path leading into the commune, then resume pacing. The Head Alpha found Blackbone's behavior vaguely amusing coming from someone normally as aloof as rebellious male.

“What do you see, Father? A snorkleburk?” came a curious voice, and a moment later, Luna was beside him, peeking out the window with him. “It's Blackbone. He's moving around like he sat on an ant hill.”

Fenrir chuckled, and patted Luna on the head. The goddess that had previously been inhabiting her body was now gone, but though she now lacked that omniscience that defined her divinity she wasn't left entirely untouched. The strangest things still came out of her mouth, but now they amused Fenrir more than guided him.

“You're friend is coming today. Twilight Seeker. Do you remember him?”

Luna thought for a moment. “Harry?”

“Yeah, that's the one.”

She smiled, and wandered off. Fenrir watched her go and wondered what she was up to. Nowadays she was even more mysterious that she had been before. She was no sooner gone than movement drew his attention back towards Blackbone. A young beta came running down the path, and the alpha grabbed his arm before he let him pass,

snarling something. The beta cowered, said something, and the alpha released him. Blackbone stalked out of the commune and into the forest.

There was a knock on his door.

"Greyback!"

"Enter," he commanded, and the beta from the path opened the door and stepped inside.

"God Eater is here."

Greyback stalked towards the door, and glared at the young beta, who cringed and cowered, staring resolutely at his toes.

"I don't suppose you told Blackbone this fact before you told your alpha?"

"Ah! I- I'm sorry! He w-wouldn't l-let me p-pass!"

Fenrir knocked him to the floor a powerful backhand, snarling. "Decide now whether you fear your alpha or Blackbone more!"

He walked away from beta, still curled up on the floor. It was becoming an increasing problem, his packs not knowing when to bow to Blackbone's natural dominance and when to uphold their Head Alpha's desires. The black werewolf's status had been diminished after his months away at Hogwarts, but he had returned more aggressive and defiant than before. The fights between them had become increasingly violent. The packs were becoming uneasy.

One of them was going to kill the other before the next summer solstice, of that Greyback was certain. He wasn't worried about himself, as far as alphas went he had been the most successful in history in terms of increasing the werewolf population and improving their quality of life, and he would go to his grave satisfied with that. Blackbone was a strong man, a strong leader, and despite his sometimes juvenile sense of humor, he wasn't afraid to get serious. Greyback's only true fear was that Blackbone, out of some misguided

attachment to the wizarding world and his grudge against the Snake Lord, would foolishly undo everything that he had built in war that could only hurt them.

It was a matter he desperately needed to discuss with Voldemort.

And with Harry Potter.

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1. For those who forgot, the Brass Cult is Voldemort's new army. British Assembly for Cultural Preservation and Defense - BrAss Cult. Also named because their uniform buttons and insignia are made of brass, at least for the typical foot soldier. The higher the rank, the more expensive their uniform fixtures.

2. Also, note, 'Judge' in Voldemort's Court isn't the same thing as a 'judge' in a muggle court. 'Judge' is a high ranking Court official, in this case rather like an ambassador. German translation is Richter.

And yes, I know this wasn't a very action packed chapter, but a little background in what's happening in Harry's life and in the world since school ended is necessary. Next chapter has more action in it, I promise. Voldemort and pagan rituals feature prominently, which I'm sure makes all of you quite happy.

Book IV:

Chapter 2: Political Skirmishes

The forest was still wet from the early morning storm, and a lingering chill had Harry wrapping his cloak tightly around him and Inana laying docile beneath it. He was muddy again already, and with each soggy step his condition was only getting worse. Harry didn't mind in the least. Voldemort had told him that his element was water, and surely he was right, for the young Gryffindor's skin tingled pleasantly at every stray drop that landed on his exposed skin. In the ozone laden air, he could smell out that which he couldn't see. Plants and animals and decomposing earth.

Voldemort watched him with equal parts amusement and fascination.

"You seem quite happy. Has the rain always made you feel this way?"

Harry thought about it and shook his head.

"I always liked water, but I never really liked rain. Of course, I wasn't allowed to play in the rain when I was younger. They always said I'd get sick. What about you? Do you like the rain?"

"Not particularly, but water isn't my element."

"Fire?" he guessed. Voldemort smirked.

"Yes. Is it that obvious?"

"Yeah... You're a conqueror, after all. Fire seems the most likely element for conquerors."

"Water can do considerably more damage than fire," Voldemort pointed out.

"I've never heard of conquerors drowning countries. Although, if we're talking about witch and wizard conquerors, I'm sure there were a few who managed it."

“Bulgief the Wet. More of a Viking pirate than a conqueror really. Used to created huge tidal waves that he'd use to wash his boats straight into coastal towns and cities, and then pillage in the chaos.”

“Never heard of him.”

“Was drowned by angry selkies before he got far. They didn't appreciate all that human trash getting washed into their underwater villages.”

Harry smiled, and shook his head. They said nothing for a while, simply enjoyed the forest, and ignored the werewolves that watched them from their hiding places. Voldemort was the first to break the silence.

“Harry, are you afraid of dying?”

The boy looked at him in surprise. “Why?”

“I'm told you've been having doubts about continuing to learn the old magicks. Are you afraid of what will happen to you after you die? Are you afraid of hell?”

“Hell? I hadn't thought about hell. You said if the Earth took my spirit, I'd simply be reborn.”

“And do you not want to be reborn?”

Harry was quiet for a long moment.

“I don't know. I want to see my family again. They were Christian. They'd definitely be in Heaven.”

“Are you sure? The requirements for Heaven are difficult to meet from what I hear. Are you certain they are in Heaven?”

“Definitely. They are definitely there,” he said, his voice sharp with conviction.

“And what if they are and you do indeed see them again one day? Then what? Will that make you happy for eternity? Will that satisfy you?”

Harry looked at him, confused.

“I have never understood the appeal of Heaven. Where is the challenge once you reach it? An eternity of bliss? How dull. All the people you love in life? Don't you think there are more interesting people to be met? Other people to share your love and your hatred with?”

“But to live forever in different bodies?” Harry interrupted. “To die forever? To lose and forget about everyone and everything that had meaning in your life over and over again? I don't see the appeal in that either.”

“To experience the length and breadth of existence, of course. To know all the joys and sorrows and wonders the world has to offer. It is such a magnificent world.”

“My mother... my father...”

“You will have other mothers and other fathers.”

Harry blinked. He hadn't thought of that. If he were reborn, he would indeed, have new parents. A new family to start over with. Brothers? Sisters? Grandparents? He had never had anything more than his parents before. The Dursley's didn't count.

“What if I'm not born human?”

“You are highly sentient. You will not rebirth into a mere dumb animal or a tree. If you're not born human, you will be born to some other sentient race, which tend to raise their young.”

“...”

“Just think about what I have said. You were made for this world. You will achieve great things here.”

“... Okay. I'll think about it.”

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“Du solltest nicht gehen.”

Viktor looked up, turning away from the horse he had been harnessing to a cart, to see his father standing behind him. The cart was laden with the finest quality wood, soon to be carved into broom handles and other magically rich devices, but only if he managed to get it all into town before the next rain hit.

“Mach dir keine Sorgen, papa,* I have at least an hour before the rain hits. Mr. Abalone will put me up for the night if it's too heavy to return home,” he replied, pretending the use his father's native German was perfectly ordinary, rather than an indicator that the family patriarch was angry.

“That's not what I meant. I meant you shouldn't go to Britain. It's not safe for you there. You've said that to your mother and me for years now.”

Viktor sighed, looking up at the sky to track the progression of the gray clouds rolling in from the east.

“And you wait till now to believe me? Or did you believe me, and just not care?” he asked, returning to finish hitching up the cart. His father had the decency to look uncomfortable, quite a feat for a man who boasted being the descendant of Viking chieftains, and looked the part.

“Whatever the case, it doesn't make it any safer for you,” the man said, crossing his arms and looking firm. It was the sort of look that intimidated most of the townsfolk into awe and submission, but Viktor, who had the same stubborn blood running through him even without his father's Scandinavian features, plus his Bulgarian mother's stoic indifference to bravado.

"Shall I wait until the danger comes pounding on our door? I will go to see for myself what threat, if any, the Dark Lord poses to Bulgaria and to our village," he said.

"Absolutely, not!" Krum Sr. shouted, "That isn't your responsibility."

Viktor turned a dark glare over to his father.

"Maybe if you actually gave a damn about Germany's future, I wouldn't have to take responsibility!"

"Viktor!"

"I have to go," he interrupted before they really go into it. He really did need to go if he wanted to get to the village before the wood was ruined. "We'll talk later."

His father let him go. They both knew they would only end up fighting and nothing would get resolved. Viktor had a will and a know how about him that frustrated his father to no end, and Viktor wasn't going to change anytime soon, regardless or perhaps because he loved his father.

Or perhaps because he loved his grandmother and the grandfather he never got to meet. It had been Grandma Freida's tales by the fire side that motivated him to fight now, tales of how the tyrant Grindlewald and his followers had deceived and lain waste to most of wizarding Europe, and how it was the cowardice of the people that had allowed it to happen. His own grandfather, Fredrick Yule, had died trying to stand up for what was right, defending a family of squibs from Grindlewald supporters. His grandfather had died, and the Yule family had fled east like hundreds of other families until they settled in the Bulgarian mountain village of Anastas. Four years later, Frieda had married a broom maker, Iordan Krum, who in turn had adopted his father, Xiomar and given him his name and trade. Xiomar honored the Krum name by upholding the family trade, but he held an even greater pride for his blood history and a love for the country of his birth that he had passed on to his only son. He had made sure that Viktor knew German and gone to great length to ensure his son was admitted to the Durmstrang Institute. It was why Viktor couldn't

turn a blind eye to the danger he sensed, a danger that threatened to destroy all he loved and taken pride in, and perhaps why his own father refused to acknowledge it.

Regardless of his father's wishes, he was going to go. He was going to find out the truth for himself, about Voldemort, his Death Eaters, his Court, and his child protégé.

And if he did not like what he found there... he had Viking in his blood. He was not afraid to die in battle.

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Greyback greeted his guests just outside the commune, cautiously searching the surrounding forest for Blackbone and Slivermoon, but they remained out of sight. Voldemort seemed to sense his distraction, but graciously ignored it. The Potter child seemed to be searching for the two errant werewolves, as well, but Greyback knew his vision was ridiculously bad. Aside from that, the boy looked significantly grown. He was not the brawny muscled creature that his own adolescent pups were, but there was a definite musculature to him, not unlike the Dark Lord's, and there were a few battle scars. His posture was straight, his gaze direct, but his constantly roaming eyes detracted from the overall dominant demeanor.

He smelled different than Greyback remembered. Better. More natural, at least. Caution, decomposing leaves, and snakes.

The alpha hoped these changes were something he could work with. The year before the pup had been too innocent, too curious, and too self-absorbed for anything more than learning and appreciating the world around him. Greyback needed someone who was strong enough to actively change it.

“Are you alright, my friend?” Voldemort asked, as they walked together through the commune. Harry trailed behind, following close, but not paying much attention to them. “You do not look well.”

This was likely true. The left side of his face was purple, his right arm was bandaged forearm to wrist, and he was limping just a bit. Minor wounds, but it was rare for anyone to see him in anything less than top form. He grinned.

"Blackbone's been real interesting lately."

That caught the boy's interest. Intense green eyes were suddenly locked on him. Greyback sent him a nasty leer. The boy glared back. Yes, he could work with that.

"He's challenged you?" Voldemort asked, concerned for a completely different reason than his protégé.

"Not directly, but he wants to."

"Can he win?"

"Sure. So can I. If I could trust him to do what needs to be done, I'd let him."

The crowds parted for them as they passed, easing their way to Voldemort's private tent. The tent itself had been modified a bit per the Snake Lord's instructions. A few items had been added, an extra pallet, an empty cistern, and box with parchment and ink stored safely inside. Greyback wasn't entirely certain what it all meant, but thought Harry's apprenticeship might have advanced a level. Despite his poor vision, the young wizard noticed the changes as well, and looked to his mentor curiously, but wisely didn't interrupt them.

"How bad is it?" the Dark Lord asked. "Is he unstable?"

"No. Not yet, but the full moon is only three days away. If we get through that, I think he'll be manageable until the winter solstice."

Voldemort frowned, but didn't say anything. He would leave the matter to Greyback. If he didn't like the result then he'd interfere, but not before.

"I'll leave you to settle. Boy, come with me."

Both wizards turned to him, surprised. The younger looked away reluctantly, the elder suspicious. Greyback snorted.

"Can't have you wandering around blind as a bat. Diana will fix you up."

"I can do it," Voldemort said.

"I'm not going to eat him," Greyback muttered. The dark wizard raised a brow, and the alpha rolled his eyes. "That was only once, and I was drunk."

A long sigh.

"Alright, but I expect him back in one piece."

The werewolf grinned, and before his charge could protest, grabbed him by his cloak and dragged him out of the tent. He wasn't halfway to Diana's little plot of earth when the boy worked up the nerve to speak.

"What do you want?"

"I just want to test something," he said, and paused, looking around. He found what he was looking for quickly enough. Blackbone was standing amidst a group of men, gambling over something or other, but his eyes weren't on the dice. He had eyes only for the alpha and the pup in his less than gentle hands. A smirk slowly slid across the elder werewolf's face, and he could practically see the hackles rise. "Yeah, this will work."

"What will work?"

"Hn. When Blackbone arrives, he's going to start a fight."

He started moving again, jerking Harry roughly along behind him. The irritated sound that vaguely resembled a growl, amused him greatly.

"When that fight starts, I want you to break it up."

“What?! Are you mad?”

“By wizarding standards or werewolf?”

“I'm not getting between two alpha werewolves! That's crazy by both our species' standards.”

Very true, but he needed answers.

“If you don't break up the fight... if you can't break up the fight, then I'll kill Blackbone. I'll kill him right in front of you, and no one will stop me. It's in my right.”

The pup's posture lost all its nerve, slouching into an arch of submission. Pathetic, but strangely endearing to his canine brain.

“No! Please, no. Why are doing this?”

“If you want to succeed in stopping the fight, you're going to have to straighten up. He won't listen to you if you're all curled up like that. It'll just make him protective.”

And sure enough, Blackbone came in fangs bared, seemingly out of no where, snatching his godson away and putting his body between them. Up close, the younger alpha looked as bad as Greyback, a gash across his face and chest, but it only made him look more savage. Greyback grinned, crouching in preparation for the attack, the knife in his belt in easy reach.

“Don't you touch him!” Blackbone snarled.

The other werewolves quickly made room, knowing if they started fighting they wouldn't care who got in the middle of it. The women took the youngest children towards the relative safety of the trees, while the menfolk and more daring youth made a loose circle. They said nothing, waiting anxiously for the outcome of a long awaited fight. There were not shouts of encouragements or taunts. This wasn't a mere scuffle or a display of dominance. To them this was a matter of

life and death, not only for the fighters themselves but for everyone who would live under the leadership of the victor.

"Touch?" Greyback sneered. "I didn't want to touch him. I just wanted to smack him around a little. He's pretty damn uppety for a goggle-eyed pipsqueak. He needs to learn his place."

Blackbone snarled and made to lung, and he reached for his knife, but Blackbone was brought up short by a pair of slender arms. Potter had grabbed the charging werewolf around the middle and was holding tight.

"Stop! Sirius, just stop it! He didn't do anything and he wasn't going to!"

"The hell he wasn't!"

For all the anger in that pronouncement, Greyback noted that he hadn't tossed the child off, which would have been easy. Harry's slender arms tightened around the alpha's waist.

"No, he wasn't. We're just going to get my paints. Okay? You know I can't see without my glasses. He's just taking me to get my paints, so I can see. Please calm down. Please?"

Blackbone looked hesitant, his attention now torn between leaping at his enemy and turning to comfort the child. His seemed stuck in indecision, so Greyback prodded him, letting loose a menacing chuckle. Blackbone's eyes hardened, and he tensed for another attempt at attack.

"Sirius, no! I don't want to see it!" Harry shouted, demanding his attention again. "I don't want to see anyone killed in front of me again. Don't make me watch it! I swear to God I won't forgive you, if you do that to me..."

There was a moment of absolute stillness. No one moved, no one spoke, no one so much as breathed. Blackbone looked as if he'd been hit with a paralysis spell, his expression frozen in a sort of horrified shock. At last, Greyback broke out into a barking laugh.

“Ha ha! You should see your face.”

He moved forward, and the other man tensed but wasn't really able to move around with Harry still latched onto him. Rather than give him a well deserved smack to the head, he gave him one to the back instead, chuckling.

“So damn high strung lately. I was just mess'n with ya.”

The tension eased amongst the werewolves like an audible sigh, and the crowd broke up again to do whatever they were doing before. Blackbone just sort of blinked at him, not really trusting him, but not really distrusting him either. When it came to disputes and challenges, Greyback was always straight forward. He never made you guess his intentions.

“Come on, boy. Best not to keep a goddess waiting.”

He pulled Harry off the alpha easily enough, but no sooner had he pulled the child up than he jerked himself free. His green eyes were as savage as any alpha he'd known, and for just that instant Greyback thought the boy must see him perfectly from the inside out. It only lasted half a second, and the boy was putting himself between the alpha's again, distracting Sirius.

“I'm fine, Sirius. He's no threat to me. Just relax, okay? Once I'm done getting painted, let's get something eat. I haven't eaten since yesterday. Where's Remus?”

Reluctantly, Blackbone tore his gaze away from his enemy. “I don't know. He must still be out fishing. We weren't expecting you until later.”

“You should go find him. He would be hurt if we started anything without him.”

“But-”

They both looked at Greyback unhappily, and he leered back. Harry sighed.

"Don't worry about it. He's just messing around with us. He'll leave when he's bored."

A very astute observation, and perfectly true, but now that Harry had passed his test with flying colors, Greyback needed to speak with him in private. He gave Blackbone a dismissive gesture.

"Go fetch your meeker half. The pup and I have a matter to settle."

Sirius hesitated, but after looking between the Head Alpha and his godson for a long moment, gave up and walked away. Alone again, Greyback took Harry's arm more gently and lead him behind some stalls to where the goddess was waiting. Harry was more than a little surprised when the girl there wasn't Luna, but a freckle faced child of no more than nine. She regarded him with the same steady and omniscient gaze he remembered though, and the same undefinable luminosity. Then he recalled that Sirius had told him that the goddess was leaving Luna's body to possess someone else. This was obviously the new girl, but what had happened to Luna? What was she like now without a spirit inhabiting her body?

"Welcome back, Twilight Seeker," the girl said, staring straight passed him. Her head inclined towards Greyback, "Greyback."

"Diana," he greeted, inclining his head to her respectfully. Harry remembered himself and bowed, but she was already turning away.

"Sit, child."

Harry removed his cloak and uncurled Inana from his neck, placing them on a bench to keep dry before sitting on the stool in front of the girl. She took his chin in her soft, little hands and tilted it up, painting a red stripe over his eyes. He kept his eyes closed and relaxed under her ministrations, basking in the cool pulsing magic that her presence brought.

"That was impressive," Greyback said, drawing Harry's reluctant attention. "What you did back there, I mean. Wrapped Blackbone right around your little finger."

The teen scowled.

"It's nothing to be ashamed of. There aren't a lot of people who could stop an alpha like him in their tracks. That's a rare sort of power."

"Power doesn't have anything to do with it. He cares about me, and did what I asked because of it."

Diana smacked him on the nose with her paint brush. "Do not speak until I'm done painting your face."

Greyback barked out a laugh.

"You've got it wrong, pup. I love my children just as much as he must love you, but do you think their begging could ever make me restrain my nature? It isn't compassion that stays our hands. It's respect. He respects you. He respects the fact that when you say you will hate him, that you mean it. That when you say you can take care of yourself, you can. Last year, do you think if I had tested you like this that you would have been able to stop him?"

Harry couldn't reply, but his forced silence left him with forced thoughts. Would he have been able to stop Sirius then? Looking back on it, he didn't think he would have even tried. Sirius was the adult, the alpha, the person who looked after him, informed him of what was happening around him, and the man wasn't to be questioned anymore than he would have questioned his parents or teachers. Yet, last December he had been the one to look after his godfathers, he had been the one to tell them what was happening, and they had been forced to rely on him as much as he had relied on them. Werewolves defined themselves in terms of their dominance and submission to others, how had his attempted rescue of them altered his position in their family? They had been forced to leave too soon for Harry to even realize that there might even be a change.

"Pup, when the time comes for Blackbone to take my place, you are going to be to him, what Voldemort is to me."

Diana's brush left his face, and he turned to glare at the man. "I seriously doubt that."

Greyback smirked, but after a moment it slid off his face. Harry watched the physical change from playfully antagonistic to dead serious, the smoothing of his facial features, the straightening of his back, the rising tension in his shoulders and hands.

"I am not playing. I am mean what I say. Your position... your role amongst my packs has changed the moment your will overcame Blackbone's. You have the power to maintain the peace between our two peoples. The peace that Blackbone would throw away to destroy a single enemy among potential thousands."

Harry looked away, turning to Diana to see what she was painting. She was fully focused on creating an eye on the back of his right hand.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"You can't ignore this. Now that I've told you, you have a responsibility. When your godfather finally succeeds in killing me, you must convince him not to go to war against Voldemort. If you do not stop him, the werewolves will all be destroyed, including him."

"Stop it. What is it that you think I can do? Why do you even think Sirius would start a war with the Dark Lord, anyway? He cares about the werewolves. He wouldn't do something he knows would hurt them. He's not an idiot and doesn't need me holding his leash."

"Like he was just five minutes ago? Rushing in, knowing we could kill each other, and over what? Instinct. The instinct to protect. The instinct to destroy threats. That instinct is what makes an alpha. It's an instinct that defies logic and even self preservation for the security of others. It is what allowed me to establish my packs and keep them safe, and it is that same instinct that Blackbone will use to tear it apart. He doesn't trust Voldemort or me, and the prisoners of war I brought

into my fold have only made things worse. That's why I need you. I need you to curb that instinct, to appeal to the... wizard in him. The part of himself that will see beyond the emotions of the moment, to the long term good."

"Remus-

"Feh. A beta, no an omega. He won't contradict Sirius. Even if he did it wouldn't make a difference. It has to be you."

"I'm just a kid."

"Excuses. Do it or don't."

Harry closed his eyes and sighed. "I'll talk to him."

"I wasn't expecting you to wrestle him into submission."

"You're welcome."

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Sitting under the awning of a little café in the shadow of Notre Dame, Fleur thought she should be quite comfortable even in the summer heat, but Clotaire's restless fidgeting was making it very hard to relax. Honestly, they might have been in a muggle café, but he didn't have to act like such a tourist. True, their clothes made her feel like she was on her way to a costume party, but that was half the fun of roaming these parts of the city. The thrill of being discovered, the participation in strange customs, the novelty of a completely foreign way of life.

"Veux- tu bien te calmer?"* she said to her companion, lifting her glass of sparkling grape juice for a sip. "No one is going to jump up and cut off your head."

He frowned and took a drink from his own cherry soda, and grimaced.

"I don't know why you like to come to these places."

"Where's your sense of adventure? Don't tell me you're going to university already complacent?"

"That isn't fair. Especially coming from someone with no sense of self preservation."

She smiled at him, condescendingly.

"Clotaire, why can't you just let that go? Someone has to go to Britain, and I think we both know I'm the most suited. Madam Maxime said so."

"That woman has the brain of a giant, just like the rest of her."

Slamming down her glass, she reached across the table and grabbed the boy by the lapel of his shirt and practically dragged him across the table. She glared down at him, her pretty face drawn back into the true horror of her veela heritage.

"Madam Maxime is a great woman, who's gone through a lot of hell because of insensitive assholes like you. N'ose pas te moquer d'elle!"

Clotaire floundered, terrified by her birdish face and embarrassed by the people who were now staring at them like they were mad.

"D'accord! Je ta demande pardon! I know she's a great woman, I just don't understand why she's going through with this silly idea! It's not your school's responsibility to start public relations with a country still in the middle of a civil war."

She let him go, and he quickly straightened up and smoothed out every possible wrinkle he could find on himself. She sighed as she watched him. Really, what had she been thinking when she agreed to go steady with this peacock? Sure he had an invite to every wizarding house party and club in Paris, but ask him to do anything truly daring and he became a narrow-minded coward.

"They're not in the middle of a civil war. That's just rumor-mongering. Truth of the matter is, we don't have a very good idea of what's going on over there."

"Even better. They could be sacrificing virgins to dragons for all you know, and you're just going to skip right in."

"Well, I'm lucky I'm not a virgin, then, aren't I? Besides, it can't be that bad. I'll be spending most of my time at the school anyways. How bad could a school be?"

He looked at her as if she were crazy. "It's Hogwarts, Fleur. Even we get news about that place. Plus all the Death Eaters send their kids there and even Voldemort's heir is supposed to go. I'm telling you if you leave, you'll be raped or dead or both within the week."

"Then why don't you come and protect me?"

"Why don't you just stay here?"

She rolled her eyes. "You're just afraid you'll get raped."

"Dammit, why do you have to make light of this? You're going to be gone for a whole year to some god forsaken country and when you get back, if you get back, you'll be going straight to university. This could be our last summer together and you act as if you don't care."

"It had to end sometime."

"Why? Why does it have to end? You could stay in France, we could get in the same university together, and... and..."

"And what? Get married?" she said, looking unimpressed. "You're dreaming. I'm going to The Luxemburg Institute after getting back from Britain. Do you think you could get in?"

He fidgeted in his seat, looking around to see if anyone was watching her make a fool out of him. She wasn't normally this antagonistic, and up until someone had put this stupid idea of going overseas in her head, she had been nothing but sweetness and fun.

"You don't need to go to Luxembourg and you sure as hell don't need to go to Britain. Why don't you just stay here in Paris? The university is great here, and all of our friends and family are here too. You could do a lot worse."

"But I want a lot better. I didn't have tutors since I was in diapers, lessons in music and magic and manners for ten years, or get into the finest magic school in the world just so I could settle for being your arm candy."

"Is that what you think? That I'd just drag you down? I want what is best for you. I want you to be happy. Why don't you think I could make you happy?"

She looked at him, looking somewhere between amused and frustrated. Delicate fingers came up to run through her hair, and he could only watch transfixed. Fleur was easily the most beautiful being he had ever met, and on most days he could hardly believe that she was his. Now he could hardly believe that she wasn't.

"Do you love me, Clotaire?"

He blinked stupidly.

"I... Of course, I love you. Why would you think I didn't?"

"You've never said it, you know?"

"I haven't? Yes, I have! I say it all the time."

"You say the words, but when you say them it's the same as when you say 'you're beautiful' or 'kiss me'. A complete stranger could say it the same way you do. Not that it matters, because I don't love you. I never have, and I never lied and said I did."

"Are you breaking up with me?"

"Yes. We're both almost adults. I think we should both stop playing childish games."

He stared at her, disbelieving. She stared back in cool amusement, then took a sip of her drink.

“You... you bitch! You cold-hearted little slut. You used me to get popular and now you're just dumping me?”

“Don't embarrass yourself by making accusations, Clo,” she said, her expression darkening to match his own. “You used me to get popular, not the other way around. I suggest you remember that before you go off to rant to our friends about how I supposedly wronged you. We went out, we had fun, and now it's over. And just for that 'bitch' comment, I'll leave the bill to you. Waiter, check please.”

She stood up, and when he looked as if he was going to get up as well, snapped her fingers. He was suddenly forced back into his seat with a heavy 'umph'. He tried to get up again, but couldn't budge.

“Goodbye, darling. I hope you find someone who can actually love you back someday.”

She walked out of the cafe, pretending to be oblivious to all the boys who turned their heads to watch her go, and turned the corner into a narrow alley between the café and an antique store. Gabrielle leaned against the wall, wand in hand and expression disapproving.

“You could have handled that better,” the girl said. “You didn't need to be mean.”

“Oh, Gabi, you'll understand when you start dating. It's better not to leave them with even a little hope that you'll change your mind. They'll just keep waiting for you to come back if you do. Now give me back my wand.”

Reluctantly, Gabrielle handed it over. It had been fun tricking Clotaire into thinking Fleur had done some wandless magic, and even more fun to actually do some magic of her own for once. Her big sister was always casting spells left and right, but she still had to wait another two years before she was allowed to get a wand of her own and that wasn't fair at all. Fleur would be far away in Luxembourg by the time

she got her wand, and then she'd never get to show off how good at magic she really was. Fleur was always so far ahead of her.

"Sister, is it true that Britain is dangerous?"

The older Delacour looked down at her suspiciously. "Did you cast a hearing charm on yourself?"

"Umm..."

"Gabi, what did I tell you? You can only use the sticking charm or the mute charm, and not anything else, especially on yourself. You could have ruptured your eardrum with that spell."

"I'm not an idiot! And don't change the subject. Is Britain really dangerous?"

Fleur shook her head. "Of course not. Not really. I mean, there are dangerous people there like You-know-who, but they're not going to attack me or the other students. They're trying to make friends. Like that big stray dog your friend Nicodème found. It could have been very dangerous, but it only wanted to play. Right?"

"Oh... are you sure?"

"I'm quite sure."

"Then why was Clotaire so scared?"

"Because Clotaire is afraid of dogs. Even friendly ones. He is a coward."

"Then can I come? I want to see the tournament too. I bet you'll get picked to compete and I want to watch you. So can I? I'm not scared like Clotaire."

Fleur smiled, and put her arm around her sister's shoulder, pulling her close.

"I know, you are like me. And if I could take you, I would. I would take you and mama and papa, but I can't. I couldn't even take Clotaire. I just offered because I knew he would refuse. One day, we will all go. I want to see Ireland. They've got the most darling accents there!"

"When can we go? All together, I mean."

"Who knows? If I do a good job, maybe we can all go next summer."

"Really?"

"Maybe."

Gabrielle tilted her head so it rested against her sister's side as they made their way home, trying to be content with what she had been given. Truth was, she wanted what Clotaire wanted. She wanted her sister to stay in Paris. She wanted her to be safe and close, even if she was at Beauxbaton most of the year. She couldn't say that though. Fleur might not like her anymore if she did, just like she didn't like her boyfriend. She had to practice pretending everything was fine, because when she finally saw her sister off, she had to be able to smile instead of cry.

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"It's so unfair," Draco whined, moving his blue stone across the board until it landed on a picture of a flower. The stone turned into three green stones. Natalie frowned, staring at her two remaining red stones and wondered if she should be more aggressive or evasive now that she was out numbered.

They were out in the gardens, under the shade of the gazebo and surrounded by the scent of roses and lilacs. Between them sat a strategy game and two glasses of chilled lemonade.

"Yes, I know Draco. It's awful. And to think, you could have been Ronald's stooge instead."

"Ch'. Youngest quidditch captain ever and I don't even get to play until next year. How lame is that?"

"Very lame. Extremely lame. The lamest thing I've ever heard of... except for the fact that your father bullied your aunt in order for you to get that position in the first place. It sort of steals my sympathy for you," she said smugly, moving one of her red pieces to jump Draco's green. The green stone turned red. She had him three to two now.

"I didn't even get an explanation on why there won't be quidditch this year," he continued, ignoring her comment. "I swear she just canceled it because she doesn't want me to succeed at something. She's always been horrid wench."

"Mmm..."

He gave her an irritated look and destroyed one of her red stones, turning both stones blue.

"It's not like I expect you to understand. You've never tried to accomplish anything, only applying the minimum effort to anything you do. You quit on Potter and then you quit Dueling Club."

She jumped his blue stone and found herself with two yellow stones, and cursed herself. She'd hadn't thought that move through.

"What do you know? He quit me. He kept on quitting on me. Was I just suppose to pine after him until he took pity? Besides, Dueling Club is for brutes. I'm joining the Riding Club this year."

"Geh. Since when were you interested in something so... girlish?"

"There are boys in that club, you know. Diggory is in that club."

"The Hufflepuff? Isn't he a little old for you?"

"Isn't quidditch captaincy a little much for you?"

"Touché. I've got you in Yield Position, by the way."

"Damn... give me a second." She chewed her lip for a moment, then moved her stone to a corner. Not an ideal situation, but it gave her a few more moves safe from Draco's only remaining green stone. He smirked at her, knowing he had her on the retreat.

"You could always come back. We'd all be happy to have you. Even Harry misses you."

She snorted.

"No doubt he'd change his mind about that as soon as I showed up. Forget it, Draco. I'm through with him and I'm through with the Dueling Club. You're going to have to guard your sister's virtue from Harry all by yourself."

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Harry waited with the new goddess for his godfathers to reappear. She didn't seem to mind, but then she didn't seem to care about much of anything as she stared out sightlessly into space. He thought to talk to her, to ask her things about the year before, but the girl was so unlike Luna he felt as if he'd be asking Snape about his Transfiguration homework.

Inana had slithered off his cloak and gone in search of breakfast, leaving him no one to talk to.

So he waited quietly and wondered what he might say to Sirius. His first thought was to say nothing, and let Sirius handle things as he saw fit as any adult should be able. His second thought was that if he had let Sirius handle things earlier, someone would have gotten killed. Well, bother.

"Harry."

He turned around to see Sirius and Remus standing behind him. Remus had new scars on his arm, but otherwise looked just as he remembered. He was carrying two large fish and a barbed spear over his shoulder.

"Hey, Prongslet, you up for breakfast?" the beta greeted. Harry smiled and nodded.

"Greyback left?" Sirius asked, scanning their surroundings.

"Yeah. It's like I said, once there was no one to aggravate, he lost interest."

"Huh." The alpha looked curiously at him. "Did he say anything to you?"

Well, there was as good of an opening as he was going to get and there was no point in putting it off. He couldn't imagine the subject getting any easier to talk about. He nodded.

"Um... about that. Do you think we could go somewhere private? With the fish?"

"Sure, we'll go to that hollow hill we took you to last year. Remember? Where we taught you how to string a bow?"

"Perfect."

They moved deeper into the forest, the number of werewolves gradually decreasing the farther they got from the commune until at last they came to the hollow hill. It was half a hill eroded away, provided them with a natural amphitheater and a small waterfall to hide them from both sight and sound. They gathered up dry tinder as they went, and once they arrive, built a small fire to cook the fish. Remus placed some flat stones in the fire, and once they were hot, cut off sections of fish to cook on top of them.

"So what did he say?" Sirius prodded after they had run out of things to distract themselves with. "Did he threaten you?"

Harry looked at his feet, then forced himself to look up. Body language was everything with werewolves, and he wouldn't be taken seriously if he couldn't look his godfather in the eye. This was harder than it seemed, because Sirius' eyes were so blunt. He never

bothered hiding or reeling in any of his emotions or thoughts, and projected them so forcefully it was almost a physical thing sometimes. Right now, there was uneasy suspicion and Harry felt awful that his suspicions might be well founded. He needed to be honest.

“No, he didn't threaten me. He wanted me to talk to you about something.”

“Talk to me? If he wants to say something to me, he can do it himself. It's not like he doesn't know where I am.”

Harry couldn't quite bring himself to look at Sirius, but knew looking down would be bad, so instead he looked up, seeing trees and a gray sky with dabs of brilliant blue. He reminded himself that he was doing something important, and his godfather would understand.

“Well... maybe 'convince' you of something is more precise.”

Remus chuckled. “Ah, that makes sense. Prongslet could definitely convince you of something better than Greyback could.”

“Are you calling me stubborn or accusing me of spoiling our godson? I can't tell.”

The beta just smirked, taking a piece of cooked fish, placing it on a large oak leaf and handed it to Harry. The teen accepted it happily, even as he burned his fingertips, and watched his godfathers stare each other down. Remus was no alpha, but to say he was subservient to Sirius, was not only inaccurate but dangerous. It would be like saying Harry was subservient to Snape. Sure he obeyed him, most of the time, but the potions master had to pick his battles carefully. Eventually Sirius just rolled his eyes, and made a tactical retreat back into his conversation with Harry.

“Convince me of what then?”

Harry shoved his fish, still too hot, into his mouth and used it as an excuse to stall long enough to figure out his wording. This backfired, for not only did he burn his mouth, he couldn't think of anything coherent in the mean time, and just blurted it all out.

"Don't fight Voldemort."

Sirius just blinked, then raised a brow. "Well... okay. I can't say I haven't thought of punching him in the face a couple times, but I guess I can control myself..."

"I mean, when you become Head Alpha. When you have hundreds of werewolves willing to do whatever you say. Don't start a fight with him, just because you can."

Sirius' perplexed expression faded into irritation.

"That really isn't something you need to concern yourself with. It has nothing to do with you."

That brought a sting of hurt to Harry's heart, and then a wave of anger.

"How can you say that? Because I'm not a werewolf? Aren't I your godson? Aren't you the only family I have left? If you start a fight with the Dark Lord... it'd be war. You could be killed. You could get others killed. You could kill people yourself. And for what? Because you were enemies in the last war? That battle is over, so why prolong it?"

"Because it's the right thing to do!" Sirius shouted.

"How is that the right thing?" he shouted back. "Why do more people have to be hurt?"

"He's evil, Harry! You were too young to remember it, but he did horrible things. Unspeakable things for stupidest, most bigoted reasons."

"So you're going to make sure I see it all for myself?"

"Would you close your eyes to everything he's done? All because he pats you on the head like a good dog from time to time!"

"You don't understand! He's... he's..."

“Like a father to you? You stupid brat, he's not your father! He would have killed your father if he'd ever been in the same room with him. He would have killed you and your mother along with him!”

“SIRIUS!”

It hadn't been Harry who demanded his attention. Harry was too busy being too shocked to so much as blink. There was so much hate in those gray eyes, and he was looking right at him. Remus' sharp call drew the alpha's attention, freeing Harry from his Medusa's gaze long enough to process exactly what Sirius had said. What he had implied.

Did he think of Voldemort as his father? No. Never. He had never trusted him that much, never loved him like that. He knew, perhaps better than Sirius, exactly what the Dark Lord was and why. He had seen the very composition of his fractured soul, and as horrifying as it had been there was a beauty in it. The same sort of beauty that is found in a force of nature, regardless of how destructive it was.

Would Voldemort have killed his family? Even him?

Harry didn't doubt it for an instant. But that was during a war. A war he didn't want to see reenacted.

“Do you think... I'm saying this because... it's what Voldemort wants? Do you think I'm doing this for him?”

Sirius didn't say anything, but he didn't have to. Such blunt, accusing eyes didn't require words. Harry stood up. He looked towards Remus standing by the fire, finding anger there as well, but directed at his mate's turned back. “I'm sorry, Moony, I don't feel much like eating anymore. I'm going to head back. I'll talk to you later.”

“Prongslet...”

He looked away before he could see Remus' expression, kept his eyes down so he wouldn't have to see Sirius, regardless of how weak it made him look. At that moment, he felt as frail as glass, pieces of himself chipping off with every step he took away from the hill. The last thing he heard before leaving was the sound of a fist hitting flesh.

“Sirius, you're such an asshole!”

It didn't make him feel the least bit better.

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Jackal slunk from his hiding place above the hollow hilled, using the distraction of Slivermoon pummeling his alpha to slip away unnoticed. He made a b line towards the commune, careful to stay out of sight of the wizard child. It wasn't hard. The boy wasn't moving fast nor looking around. In fact, he was moving with all the vigor of a zombie.

Which was sort of funny, considering the boy's master was a necromancer. Perhaps he really was a zombie and the Dark Lord was screwing with everyone's head.

Hey, mushrooms!

No, he reminded himself, his alpha had sent him on a mission and now it was time to report back. He couldn't afford to get distracted. Focus, focus, focus!

What was he suppose to be focusing on again?

He stopped and tried to remember exactly what he had been doing. This was probably why he wasn't even in the running for taking over as Head Alpha, he thought. He really didn't have the attention span for it.

Oh! That's right, he was spying on Blackbone and the Dark Lord's apprentice to see how their 'talk' went. Not very good, it seemed. Jackal hadn't been able to hear most of the conversation, but it was pretty obvious the kid hadn't been successful in whatever he was doing.

He grinned to himself, thinking what Greyback's reaction would be. He would most certainly kill Blackbone now. What choice did he have? He couldn't leave the packs' wellbeing to a warmonger. It was

only a question of how he'd go about the younger alpha's demise. Would he have the packs tear him apart? Would he kill the man himself? With his knife or barehanded or in wolf form?

Maybe if he were lucky he'd get to help. No doubt it would be quite a spectacle one way or the other.

Hey, mushrooms!

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German translation: Krum's father: "You shouldn't go." Krum: "Don't worry, papa,..."

French Translation: "Would you relax?", "Don't you dare make fun of her!", "I'm sorry, I'm sorry!" (Okay, the las part not so much, but basically the same thing)

It's back to normal Friday updates after this, but I hoped you enjoyed the little change in pace.

Book IV:

Chapter 3: Royal Negotiations Continued...

By the time Harry made it back to the settlement, the shock had worn off. He was left instead with a confusing mix of emotions and thoughts. Depression over Sirius' harshness and the honesty in which it had been delivered, confusion about what he should do now and what it might mean for his impromptu family, and a sharp fear that his failure to convince the alpha would result in tragedy. Most of all, however, he felt frustrated. What did Sirius know about what Harry had gone through? Who was he to judge? Sirius hadn't been in his positions, hadn't had to face the same things with only his own admittedly limited judgment.

And Harry didn't regret. How could he? What could he have done differently that wouldn't have gotten him or others killed or imprisoned or hurt? Although there had been those who hadn't escaped that fate because he... But he couldn't have predicted that.

Voldemort himself could not be defined by convention and couldn't be held to the same standards as other wizards. He wasn't like other wizards and never would be. Harry doubted he could even be considered human, but he was a being Harry could find both nobility and devotion in. Voldemort was a creature whose nature he could forgive because the whole of his nature was greater than the sum of his cruelty and ambition.

Harry couldn't hate the man, despite all he had done. Not that he could or would trust him either.

At the same time, there was no way Sirius could understand this. It wasn't even fair to try and make him understand it. So what was he suppose to do? Accept this animosity? Had their bonds truly been so weak to shatter so readily?

There were no answers to his questions. At least none that he could find in himself, and there weren't exactly many people he could ask advice of. His thoughts immediately shifted to Kyle Reicher and his

sage advice on Christmas Eve, but perhaps this was a little beyond even his scope of understanding. Sna...eh... no.

The only person he could think to ask advice of was the other half of his problem. Of course, that might give Harry just the sort of perspective he needed to figure out his thoughts, feelings, and what he was going to do about it.

He moved carefully through the crowds, conscious of his lack of protection amongst the throng of notoriously violent men and women (and children if you ever caught yourself playing football with them), but everyone let him through with a casual sort of respect he'd seen for Greyback's children and mate. Arriving at Voldemort's tent, he found the man sitting on the floor and smoking a strange pipe. It was very long and thin, and made of a reddish wood and decorated with a golden serpent or dragon.

Harry paused, watching as the Dark Lord inhaled from the pipe deeply, then slowly exhaled a reddish smoke. The smoke undulated in an amorphous cloud for a moment, then took on the shape of... something. It wasn't any creature Harry recognized. When it held still it looked rather like the root system of a flower, veiny red threads spreading out into ever smaller threads, yet when it moved he got the distinct impression of legs and arms and fingers not unlike a human's, though he could identify nothing resembling a head. It was the size of a toddler, but watching it move purposefully around the Dark Lord's head it seemed like a somewhat older and more curious child.

"What is it?" Harry asked, coming to sit across from his mentor

"A tree spirit," he was informed. "A holly tree spirit to be more precise. I pulled her out of a woodpile three years ago. Some stupid muggle had cut down her tree for fire wood, poor dear."

It was strange to hear the man take pity on anything, but Harry felt a bit of pity of his own. The spirit moved towards him, undulating like a jellyfish. He wasn't afraid of her, but he was a little startled when she reached out to touch his face. Not expecting it, he sneezed and she dissolved into formless wisps, only to regather herself again and hover a little higher. He noted that with her this close the air smelled

of holly flowers rather than the burnt wood smell he had been expecting.

“And what are you doing with her?”

Voldemort watched the spirit with some amusement. “Waiting for her to grow up. She's much too young for anything significant, right now.”

“And when she is grown?”

“I wonder. Perhaps I will offer her as a bride to one of my gods. Or I might give her a body of her own so that I might speak to her and learn the ways of trees. I have one hundred years to think of something.”

Harry blinked. “A hundred years? You're going to wait a hundred years just to decide with to do with her?”

“I imagine I'll have plenty to do while I wait. There's no point in hurrying. I have much longer than a hundred years to find things to fill my time with.”

Harry knew this. From what he had seen and experienced during the Solstice Ritual the Dark Lord could theoretically live as long as the earth itself, but he suspected it wasn't going to be quite that long.

“How long?”

Voldemort looked away from the spirit and down at Harry, seeming to contemplate his inquiry or more specifically why it had been asked. Finding nothing more than childish curiosity, he answered.

“I was promised a millennium about fifteen years ago*. So... nine-hundred and eighty five years to go.”

Harry gaped. The life span of the earth seemed like a long time, but having a definite number of years made it sound even more impossible.

“Who promised you?”

“Who? I wonder. It was prophesied by a woman from a long line of reliable prophets, but I don't suppose they know where their knowledge comes from any more than I do. The Earth probably, but they are just as often attributed to God. Maybe it's both of them. Maybe it's something else altogether. It is quite the mystery.”

The spirit had moved while they were talking, drifting down to Harry's thigh where his right hand was resting. The gentle touch of her thread-like appendages drew his attention, and he held out his hand for her and watched as she wrapped herself around all his fingers individually, caressing them lovingly. Harry wasn't sure if he should feel amused or violated.

The Dark Lord chuckled, but that wasn't a real indicator since he'd probably laugh at either scenario.

“What is she doing?”

“Your wand is made of holly, isn't it?”

He nodded.

“She's flirting with the spirit in your wand. Or perhaps it's more like she's leaving her scent on you for it to find. The little minx.”

Harry felt an embarrassed blush bloom across his entire face. He gave his hand a vigorous shake, freeing himself from her flirtation-by-proxy. The man laughed harder, and the Gryffindor decided it was a good time to talk about what he'd really come here for.

“Anyway,” Harry said, interrupting the laughter. “I wanted to ask your advice about something.”

That stopped Voldemort's amusement quick. He actually looked surprised. Harry had come to him before, but it was very rare and usually due to a lack of alternatives. As far as he knew, there were at least two others he could turn to before himself.

"And you felt you couldn't discuss it with your godfathers?" he asked, somewhat suspiciously.

"Actually... it's sort of about them. Well, Sirius, at least."

"Ah, I see. And what seems to be the problem?"

Harry told him about Greyback's test, about the task he'd given Harry, his subsequent failure, and Sirius' hurtful, honest accusations. The Dark Lord said nothing through the entire tale and indeed for several minutes afterwards. He sat silent and thoughtful, smoking from his pipe which was now giving off gray smoke but still smelled of holly and watching the spirit swim through the smoky haze. At last, he spoke.

"It is only two days from the full moon nearest the summer solstice. Your godfather is no doubt feeling emotionally volatile like everyone else. He meant some of what he said, I'm sure, but most of it was probably said out of frustration and as a natural reaction to you confronting him as an alpha. I believe it would be best to leave him be, let him spend his aggression during the full moon, and then speak with him again. I'm sure he'll be considerably more amiable then."

Harry felt a swell of hope in his heart. Could it really all just be a reaction to coming full moon? He had never been at the receiving end of Sirius' temper around the full moon, but then he had never challenged Sirius' then either.

"Do you think so? What about Greyback?"

"I will speak with Greyback and suggest he avoid making any hasty decisions until after the full moon, as well. If Blackbone continues to be stubborn, however, I cannot promise his safety."

"Thank you," Harry choked out, the relief he felt manifesting itself in an embarrassing display of tears. He tried again, forcing his voice to sound less shaky. "Thank you. How do I repay you for this?"

The Dark Lord smiled, somewhat condescending, but he felt too grateful to him to care. "I will simply accept your gratitude for this."

After all, it's in my best interest that you succeed in your task. I have no desire to arbitrate the political chaos the death of your godfather would create among the lycanthropes. He will make a fine leader for his people so long as he can learn to be... adaptable. Just like you."

Harry wasn't sure what to make of that. Frankly, he didn't care right now. All he cared about was that he had been given another chance to save his godfathers and possibly many others from death.

He promised himself that this time, he would succeed.

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About the time Harry was finding his hope, Sirius was finding himself in a Grade A sulk. He had said some unforgivably stupid things and now his godson probably felt like crap and Remus had given him a well deserved slug to the face and stormed off. And whatever preconceived notions people might have about his beta's strength, that man could throw a punch like a mule could kick. This left him not only feeling sorry for what he'd said, but also sorry for himself.

Even worse, he only had himself to blame. Well, himself and Voldemort. Mostly Voldemort, though, because this certainly never would have happened if overgrown snake hadn't slithered out of whatever viper pit he'd come from.

As if things weren't bad enough, he didn't have anyone or anything to take it out on. Voldemort and Greyback would have made lovely targets, if not for the fact that his godson was absolutely right about the dangers involved with that, to himself and the other werewolves. He wasn't stupid. He had known the problems he was causing and could potentially cause would result in death, his own and others. It was just...

"Are you ill?"

He looked up from the tree stump he was sitting on to see Luna balancing herself perfectly on the top of a boulder. Strange, beautiful Luna, who came and went as mysteriously as the moon she was

named for, a profound presence even in her silence. He could only stare at her for a moment, perplexed by her sudden appearance. She rarely approached people of her own accord aside from Athena and Greyback.

"You look like you're having stomach pains," she continued, when he didn't answer. "Do you need a laxative? I think we've got someone at home. I promise I won't tell anyone."

Sirius snorted. That was the other thing about Luna. After five years as a goddess she had missed several essential lessons in social graces.

"No, I don't have a stomach problem. I just feel bad about something I said."

"Something bad you said to Harry?"

He sighed and ran a hand through his hair. This wasn't something he wanted to talk about with her. There was no telling what would come out of her mouth.

"And how did you figure that out?"

"Jackal came by the house to talk to Father. He said Harry failed to convince you not to make war. Father said he would have to kill you now. He was really sad about that. Harry must be really sad too."

Sirius grimaced. It wasn't that he cared if Greyback would try to kill him now. He wasn't afraid of fighting the other alpha or even of being killed by him, but he sure as hell didn't want anyone to feel sad about it. And he really didn't want Jackal of all people to be privy to the things he'd said to Harry. He stared at his bare feet and the mud squeezing up through his toes, and wondered if there was any way to fix things.

While futilely trying to think of what Remus would do in his shoes, he failed to notice that Luna had moved until her nose was practically poking out his eyes. He jumped back, slipped, and fell off the stump and onto his back.

"Luna, don't do that!"

"Sorry," she said, coming to sit beside him and leaned in almost as close as she had before. "You should apologize to Harry before you die."

He smirked, and lifted a brow. "What makes you think I won't kill Greyback first?"

"I never said you should apologize before Father kills you," she said pragmatically.

With a sigh, he closed his eyes. There really was no winning against Luna.

"It wasn't suppose to be happen like this," he said.

"Like what?"

"James wasn't suppose to runaway in the middle of the fight. Dumbledore wasn't suppose to abandon his people. The Snake King wasn't suppose to become the Wise King. Harry was never suppose to be his prince."

Luna tilted her head curiously, pondering his words. He watched as her expression shifted, knowing she was tearing apart his words like a child tears apart a particularly complicated toy.

"Is Harry a prince because Voldemort made him one or his Harry a prince because Harry made himself one?"

Sirius blinked up at her stupidly. "Huh?"

"Did Voldemort make Harry a prince or did he make himself one?"

"What? I don't know what you mean by that."

She made a frustrated expression. "It isn't a trick question. Would Harry still be a prince without Voldemort being a king?"

"I... I don't know... I mean... Well, yeah. Harry is Harry. The big snake didn't have anything to do with him being brave or kind. That's purely James and Lily's doing."

"No."

"No?"

"Harry being brave and kind is Harry's doing. His parents aren't here to help or hinder him from being good or bad. It isn't their decision. It isn't your decision. It isn't Voldemort's. It isn't Father's. Harry is the way he is because that's how he decided to be. He loves you because he chooses to love you. He asked you not to make war with Voldemort because that is what he believes is right, not because it's what Father or Voldemort told him to do. But you knew that already, didn't you?"

Sirius said nothing. There wasn't really a point. She had him pegged, and her vaguely amused smile proved that she knew it too.

"And you know he's right, don't you? You know his way is the best way for everyone, because he made his decision out of love for everyone."

The alpha looked away.

"You better decide what you're going to do soon," she said, finally standing and moving away. "Father has run out of patience."

He sat up, but of course she was already gone as if she'd never been there. What to do now? He needed to speak with Harry and apologize, but that was easier said than done now that the Head Alpha was out for his blood. His best chance was to find Remus first, who could bring Harry to him without causing too much of a fuss, and they could start their conversation over again, preferably without anyone suffering any physical or emotional damage.

Of course, finding Remus might not be any easier than finding Harry.

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Tom looked down imperiously at the masses crowding through the square, the summer heat wafting up in a humid haze, bringing with it the stink of the city. After a long, cold winter of hiding and building his strength, he thought the magic and warmth of spring and summer would be a welcome change, but all he had found was intolerable amount of sunlight and heat. The city only made it worse, for he thought he might be reasonably comfortable living in a hollow tree or the rafters of a barn, but his own purposes forced him into the squalor of the streets, at the busiest intersection in all of wizarding London. There was too much stone and not enough shade, too many people and not enough trees, but this was his medicine and he had already accepted that it would taste bitter.

And really he couldn't complain about his accommodations. Barnabas was a considerate landlord, if not particularly bright. He politely ignored him taking residence in his newspaper stand, and graciously renewed the cooling charm in his shadowy niche in the stand's awning every so often. In return, Tom refrained from crapping on him while he was working and leaving pellets* on the floor.

There was far too much noise during the day, but that was part of the reason why Tom had chosen this particular spot. The hundreds of witches and wizards that passed beneath him provided him with two essentials. Magic and information. They were just down the street from half a dozen Court Offices, including the Forum, and the officials and soldiers and sentinels all came to this stand to and from work, leaving behind traces of their magic and gossip which he devoured ravenously.

Already he felt strong enough to take the body of a human, and there were so many to choose from, but he had to be cautious. His plans involved more than living out the life of some government sheep, and he needed to find the perfect individual in which to pursue his latest quest.

Information was abundant, yet frustratingly incomplete. Those who came and went were in the center of political life, but their individual

views did not see the shape of their own government as a whole. Tom thought, having listened to tantalizing bits and pieces from many perspectives, had a better view than most but even he couldn't say he understood current events completely.

He knew there had been a recent push to renew relations with Europe and he knew of the Triwizard Cup, but he did not know Voldemort's intentions in sponsoring it nor Germany or France's when they accepted the invitations. He knew about the recent death of the professor who was to adopt Harry and the national sympathy that had earned the orphaned boy when she had been killed, but not how Harry himself was taking the tragedy. He knew war was in the air, but not from which direction it would blow.

Britain was calm now, but only as a sleeping dragon that at any moment would awaken to set the world on fire. He needed to be ready. Ready to destroy his enemies and save his poor Harry from his brother's machinations. Ready to seize power when the chaos finally broke out.

He needed to return to Hogwarts.

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Harry sat outside Voldemort's tent, performing his first official task as the Dark Lord's unofficial pagan apprentice. As was expected, it was little more than grunt work. He was making incense or more precisely, the extract that would compose the incense, grinding up nutmeg, clove, camphor, and opoponax* with a crude wooden pestle and mortar. His teacher said it was for a summoning lesson, though he hadn't specified for what exactly. He'd gone off to talk with Greyback, and Harry wasn't about to delay him with questions that could wait for later.

"Mmm... smells nice. Are you trying to lure something?"

Harry looked up to see Luna nearly standing on top of him, but not the Luna he remembered. She was mostly the same shape, except for being slightly taller and with the beginnings of a feminine curve to

her chest, and the same ivory skin, but the divine, disinterested ethereal glow had disappeared. Her hair, which had seemed yellow as corn silk, was now dirty blond and her slender body now came off as rather bony. Her aloof omniscience was replaced with wide-eyed curiosity and a complete lack of respect for personal space. If she had stepped any closer, he would be looking up her loincloth.

And there was another difference. Instead of the shimmery robes and layers of beads, she had dressed down to match her pack mates in a leather two piece with a poncho made of roughly woven hemp draped over her. All remnants of her former divinity were gone.

This didn't keep his last memories of her in human form (her very naked human form pressed up against him) from inserting themselves into his awareness, and a massive blush bloomed across his face. He quickly looked for something to say to keep his thoughts from straying into pervert territory.

"Er... yeah. Spirits. For later... um... He's teaching me summoning," he said bashfully, then tried smiling up at her. "Hi, Luna."

She smiled back down at him.

"Hi, Harry." He scrambled for something else to say in his awkwardness, but she beat him to it. "Can I help?"

"Oh. Sure. Grab that bowl of nutmeg and start peeling the shells off the seeds."

A silence fell, and though Harry couldn't order his thoughts enough to create a conversation, Luna looked perfectly at ease as she set about the task he had given her. For the life of him, he couldn't think of what to say. She had once known him with the omniscience only a deity could possess, and he hadn't known her at all except in the physical sense, which did nothing to ease his discomfiture.

"So..." he tried, not really knowing what was going to come out of his mouth. "How have you been?"

She paused in her peeling and considered. "I don't know. Father says I'm perfect, but Mother says I'm lonely. I'm not sure I believe either of them."

"You don't know how you are? What you're feeling? About anything?"

She shrugged.

"Well, I used to, but after the goddess took me, I just sort of forgot. But I'm learning. I know the important feelings. Anger. Fear. Love. But the subtler emotions like jealousy or pride... I don't know. I finally figured out 'worry' though. I kept getting it mixed up with anticipation and fear."

"I can see why that might confuse you. They're all pretty similar," Harry said sympathetically, though inwardly he was baffled by her naivety. "What are you worried about?"

"I'm worried Blackbone is going to kill Father."

Well, fuck. He looked away.

"I'm trying to talk to Sirius, but it hasn't gone well. If they can hold off killing each other until after the full moon, Voldemort thinks I might have more success."

She shook her head.

"No, one will have to kill the other eventually. It's in their nature."

Harry tried to wrap his mind around the idea that two people would be drawn to kill each other, not out of personal grievance or ambition or even of preference, but as a biological drive. Then came the horrible conclusion that one way or the other, Sirius was going to have to fight Greyback and he could be killed. Then came the other horrible realization that even if Sirius won, he was going to kill someone. Someone who happened to be the man Luna considered her father.

"I'm sorry," he said, unable to think of anything else. She looked at him intently for a moment, perhaps to gage his honesty.

"I'm sorry too. I said I was worried Blackbone would kill Father, but the truth is I think the reverse is going to happen. Father won't allow Blackbone to kill him as things are now. Blackbone will-"

"Luna," he snapped. "Shut up."

Her already wide-eyes grew just a fraction, and she tilted her head curiously. "Did I say something wrong?"

He sighed. There wasn't a point to snapping at her. She didn't know any better, but he really didn't want to talk to her any more. Not if she was going to keep on this particular subject.

"No, Luna, but I don't want to talk about it. I'm trying to fix the things I can, but I don't see the point in talking about the things I can't. Especially when those things haven't even happened yet. We don't even know that they will happen."

There was a silence, this time mutually awkward and tense. Harry's eyes remained fixated on his hands, but he could feel her gaze on him. Nothing was said for a long time, and then she spoke again.

"Do you..." she started hesitantly, "Do you think you could fix this? Do you think you could stop them from killing each other?"

He turned to her, and to his surprise he found she was crying. Large tears poured soundlessly down her cheeks, her silvery gray eyes sparkling like shiny new silver Sickles. She didn't try to wipe them away or hide them or announce them with noisy sobs or sniffles like he had seen other girls do. In fact, she didn't seem aware of them at all. Her expression was exactly the same as it always was, a strange mix of curiosity and dreaminess, always making you wonder where her thoughts lay. She just looked... wetter.

He set down his pestle and mortar, and crawled the short distance towards her. She didn't pull away or hesitate when he pulled her towards him, and hugged her tightly. She merely rested her head on his shoulder and let him hold her, and thought how very much like Father he was in that aspect. Harry just held her for a long time,

ignoring the wetness on his shoulder and numbness that was spreading through his legs.

"I'm going to try Luna. I'm going to try so hard to save them both. You've got to try too, okay? If we both try, maybe we can do it, and even if we can't, we will have tried, right? Will you help me?"

"... okay..."

"Maybe I can convince Voldemort to ask the moon goddess for advice... Or maybe you can convince Greyback to send Sirius away for awhile. I bet it wouldn't be hard to have him assigned as my personal guard again this year. We're suppose to be having an international event at school and could use the extra security, I'm sure. Don't worry, we'll figure out something."

She nodded against his shoulder, but didn't say anything, moving just a bit closer so they fit more comfortably. Harry mused it was much different than hugging Hermione. Hugging his friend always felt awkward, and he was never sure where to put his hands or how tightly he should squeeze her back or for how long. The science of hugging a witch was a mystery to him.

Hugging a werewolf, even a female one, held about as much decorum and intimacy as a pat on the back. Everyone did it. Men, women, children, friends, lovers, relative strangers. No one was going to question it, make lewd accusations, or scold them for doing it public. They didn't question it, and neither did Harry.

When Luna finally pulled away, it wasn't because of embarrassment, but because something had caught her attention. She turned towards the center of the commune where the majority of the werewolves were gathered for the festivities. Harry followed suit and realized something was going on. The people were excited, but not the sort of excited that preceded a hunt or one of their savage sporting matches. This was an anxious excitement, strung through with voices of disbelief and outrage.

Harry had a very bad feeling.

“What's going on?”

“I don't know,” she said, tilting her head curiously.

It didn't take long to find out. From the crowd ran a boy of no more than seven that Harry recognized as one of Greyback's sons. He looked proud and triumphant, but when he saw the person his sister was with that expression quickly disappeared.

“Luna...” he started, then stopped again, looking nervously at Harry.

“What is it, Specter?” she prompted.

“It's Father,” he said, cautiously glancing back at Harry. “He's killed Blackbone.”

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It wasn't hard to find the battle grounds. A steady stream of spectators moving towards them, deeper and deeper into the forest. Harry didn't pay much attention to who he was following, making his choices based on who was moving the fastest at the time and then selecting another after he had passed them. The forest was crowded and he bumped into several werewolves much older and stronger than him, but though a few turned to snarl at him, none were fast enough or brave enough to retaliate as he rushed pass them.

Heart beating like a humming bird, and feet near as quick, he raced his fear into the forest and felt its clammy breath whispering into his ear 'he's dead, he's dead' as he went. At last the migration of people ended at a small clearing, where a thick wall of bodies marked its boundaries. He was forced to slow down, and when he did his fear slammed into him with all the speed he had been using to avoid it. 'He's dead', a mere statement, became a fully illustrated vision in his mind's eye, with a body and blood and these hundreds of gawking faces.

But there were still noises coming from the clearing and the crowd here was deathly quiet as they had been when Greyback and Sirius

had faced each other earlier that day. Merlin, had it really just been a few hours ago?

Fearfully, he touched the arm of the person nearest him to obtain some answers. It was a older man, stone faced and cold as he turned to him. There was a flash of recognition, perhaps even a second of pity, but it became just as quickly unreadable.

"You shouldn't be here for this," the man said. Despair threatened to drown the fear, but he swallowed it down so that he could speak.

"Is my godfather dead?"

The man studied him for a moment, but Harry was too impatient for him to sort his thoughts.

"Tell me!"

A grunt and a sigh, and finally an answer. "May as well be... he's down and out. Jackal is trying to finish him off but Slivermoon keeps- Hey!"

Harry didn't wait for him to finish, diving into the wall of people, and shoving his way through forcefully. It was hard, most of the people there were stronger than him and not a few of them landed him a hardy smack or elbow before they realized who he was, but he kept shoving and clawing and squeezing his way through until he finally broke out the other side.

It was how he had imagined it. There was blood everywhere, and Sirius lay unmoving, curled around the worst of his wounds. Everyone stood tensely, but for Greyback, looking more resigned than anything as he stared down at the man he had seemingly killed.

He made to rush to his godfather's side, but someone quickly drew him back and just in time too, because two large bodies landed where he had been running. There were snarls and vicious kicks and punches and biting, and in general what he imagined Sirius and Greyback's fight must have looked like.

But it wasn't those two alphas going at it, it was...

"Remus..." he breath. It was Remus, but not a side of Remus he had never seen before. The beta who followed quietly, who reasoned before he acted, and shied from his werewolf nature was beating the bloody shit out of an alpha. Harry watched disbelieving as the man grabbed hold of Jackal's head and smashed it into the ground, once, twice, three times. It would have killed a normal man, but the skinny alpha had enough moxie left in him to make a clawing swipe at his attacker, knocking the other man off him in a spray of blood. Jackal scrambled to his feet and made for Sirius' prone body, but Remus caught him by the ankle and dragged him back.

Not wanting to watch anymore, Harry waited till the two fighters were out of the way before sprinting towards Sirius. He came to a stop and knelt, looking for some place he could touch to feel for a pulse what wasn't sliced opened. In his search for undamaged flesh and with the noise of the fight distracting him, he nearly missed the Sirius opening one of his eyes, and would have if the rest of him weren't so very still.

"Sirius..." he whispered. "You damn fool..."

"Sor... nn.. sor...nnn..."

"Shhh... don't speak. Don't try to move. I'll fix this. Just stay still."

And even as he said it, he realized he couldn't fix any of it. He wasn't a healer, and even if he were he didn't even have his wand on him. Tears were falling fast and heavy now, and he couldn't see and couldn't think, only panic and mourn and pray for an answer.

And an answer came.

It came with the tears and the memory of a past prayer, and the awareness that tears were more than salt and water for those who worship the Earth. He stopped panicking and the tears were coming faster and heavier than ever, but that was what he needed.

"Where are you hurt the worst?" he asked, leaning in very close to him, letting his tears fall onto the man's face and flow into his open

mouth. Sirius didn't answer at first or even move, but his tongue peeked out for just a second to lap up wetness at corner of his mouth. After a long, painful swallow, he spoke weakly.

“Sto... mach...”

Harry went to examine it, and nearly vomited. Even without removing Sirius' hand from the wound, he could see inside of it, all the way to the visceral organs nearly falling out. Another wave of panic and the thought it was too much for him to fix made him hesitate. His eyes found Sirius', to convey that there was nothing he could do, but those gray eyes were now wet with tears and he thought of Luna's tears and the promise he had made. He might not be able to do anything, but he had to try.

“I have to roll you over. I'm sorry, it's going to hurt.”

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Sirius' body didn't want to uncurl, but as close to death as he was, Harry's strength was enough to get him on his back and after that everything just sort of fell flat. It hurt. It hurt incredibly, and he didn't want to do it. There wasn't anything more for him to do at this point, but close his eyes. He was dying and he knew it, and more than anything he didn't want Remus or Harry to be there to see it.

But Remus was fighting and now Harry was fighting too, and they were both so brave he felt for all the world like a coward because he didn't think he could keep himself alive for them. His battle had gone along like it normally did with Greyback, blows landed by each of them, seemingly equal, until the Head Alpha had pulled out his knife. It wasn't something the elder man had ever bothered with before. Sirius knew from that point on there was no turning back, and had pulled out his own knife as well.

And lost. Again, his own damn fault, like everything else that day. He'd hesitated too much, mind distracting him with thoughts of Harry and everything he had said, the pleas he had made. What did that hesitation get him? His godson's hands in his guts and his tears in his

mouth, and by the Goddess, Remus was going to kill someone and all to save a life that couldn't be.

On his back, he couldn't see Harry. His head was tilted too much, and irony of ironies, his gaze landed directly on Greyback. What a strange look on his face. He didn't think he'd seen the likes of it before. The blood thirst, the arrogance, the possessiveness he had always associated with the man was absent. The triumph he was expecting wasn't there either. Funny how he'd never noticed the man's eyes were blue or-

“AAAAHHHHhhhhhh...” A slash of pain, so alike to the one Greyback had inflicted overcame him. He thrashed, finding strength in the throes of pains. Harry little body was knocked away, but returned a moment later, weighing down his legs, and bringing back the pain with his fingers burning his insides like acid.

“REMUS! HELP ME!”

His beta climbed on top of him as well, holding down his shoulders with his legs and his arms with his hands All Sirius could do was scream, the pain increasing exponentially, trying to knock them off. His love for them turning to hate in the midst of his suffering, and he gladly would have dragged them into death with him if he only had the strength.

And finally, blessedly, he passed out.

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“Merlin, Harry, what are you doing?”

He wished he had an answer to that, but right now he was working on instinct and instinct required a lack of rationality to work.

“Trust me. This is the only way.”

And it was working. Unbelievably, it was working. Like a potion, everywhere his tears fell the wounds sizzled and then healed, clean

and unscarred. It was too slow, though. Too much blood was lost already, and the tears repaired so little at a time. His own magic was burning away too quickly. It poured out with his tears, a strange form of wandless magic and likewise completely inefficient.

His only hope was the he could heal Sirius enough that the pack healers could take care of the rest. So far, none of them had dared approach to offer their assistance. The reason for their reluctance finally stepped forward, moving towards them with slow but obvious intent. Remus stiffened, and slowly looked over his shoulder at the approaching alpha. Greyback paused briefly to stare down at Jackal, unconscious and breathing raggedly on the ground, before stepping over him.

"Harry," Remus said, trying to draw the boy's attention to the latest threat.

"I see him," he said, clinging to his calm desperately when all his mind wanted to do was fly to pieces. "You can step away."

"Harry..."

"It's alright, Remus. You better step away now. I don't think I can patch up the both of you at the same time."

"..."

"Trust me. Please."

Reluctantly, the beta crawled off his alpha and slunk a short distance away, although close enough jump in if the Head Alpha attempted anything. When Greyback finally came to a stop a mere foot fall from crushing Sirius' head, Harry turned away from the wound to look up at him. He couldn't imagine that he looked at all intimidating or impressive crouched on the ground with tears streaming down his face, but the man stopped anyway. They regarded each other quietly for a long moment.

"It would be kinder to let him die at this point. You're only prolonging his suffering."

"He's not going to die," Harry insisted.

"I can't let him live. I've already explained to you why. Move aside. I promise to make it quick."

"No."

"Boy, you're asking for a world of hurt. Even if you managed to close the wound, he's too messed up to survive the full moon."

"I'll find a way."

"These isn't a way.

"At least let him try," a lite, feminine voice said. They both turned to see Luna, and behind her stood the Dark Lord, surveying the damage. His eyes settled on Harry crouching protectively over his godfather.

"I leave you alone for half an hour..." A heavy sigh, and he turned to Greyback. "You acted sooner than I had thought."

"I'm not one to beat around the bush," he said, smirking at his disgruntled look. "You gonna interfere now? You have more reasons to let me kill him than anyone."

"Which is why you should listen to me when I offer an alternative."

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Alone in Voldemort's tent, the Dark Lord and Head Alpha relaxed a little in the absence of the packs and their own young charges. Luna, ever one to surprise, had been the one to find the Dark Lord and request his assistance, and had since followed the wizard child to look after Backbone while the pack healers tended to them. Greyback wasn't sure how he should take her odd behavior. He didn't doubt she loved him as her father, but recent actions seemed to suggest that her affections might have taken on a new dimension with

someone else entirely. He wasn't entirely sure what he should think of her choice of 'someone' either.

Certainly, Potter was a remarkable boy, admirable in many ways, but by the Goddess what kind of relationship could his little girl have with a wizard? A willful, pain in the ass, wizard no less?

“So what are you proposing? The boy already failed to convince the fool of the proper state of things. I didn't do this all on a whim.”

The Dark Lord smiled and shook his head. “I'm not going to reprimand you, Greyback. Your actions were perfectly reasonable. In fact, I was going to propose you do almost the exact same thing you did. Just... after the full moon.”

Sensing a plot, which was always did wonders to amuse him, Greyback took the bait.

“And how exactly would that improve anything? How does maiming Blackbone at all improve anything other than my mood?”

“It's simple really. You have heard of an Unbreakable Vow, correct? I believe werewolves have a form of it themselves.”

Greyback started. Oh wow. That was so supremely simple of a solution. An Unbreakable Vow between Blackbone and Voldemort would prevent Blackbone from ever defying the Dark Lord and leading the packs into trouble. True, it also left the packs vulnerable to Voldemort's whims, but there were ways around that.

“What difference does the full moon make? Can't you use your magic or nasty potions to heal him before the full moon?”

Voldemort snorted. “As you should be well aware, wounds inflicted by werewolves are 'cursed'*. They are much more difficult to heal than normal injuries. Even my best medi-wizards and witches wouldn't be able to heal him in time for the transformation not to kill him.”

“Why not? Your apprentice did some of it. I saw him closing the wound all by himself, and I don't think he had half an idea of what he

was doing. You telling me, a true shaman, a full Druid priest*, couldn't do it?"

The Dark Lord scowled.

"That's exactly what I'm saying. My apprentice did something I could not possible do. It is a form of the 'Old Magics', a form that I cannot reproduce. It is based in love, a love strong enough to bend the laws of physics and the laws of magic. Blackbone is quite lucky that Harry seems to possess not only enough love to perform this magic, but the blessing of the Goddess to harness that magic to achieve a specific purpose. If Harry hadn't the intuition to use that magic, he might just as easily have killed them both. Or perhaps just you. That sort of magic tends to get vengeful when interrupted."*

"Can the boy fix him?" he asked, not bothered by his potential near-death. The Dark Lord smirked.

"I think he might, but not with his own magic. He's lost too much of it already just stabilizing Blackbone. There may be another way, however. It's tricky, but I think the benefits will be worth it for the both of us."

This all sounded very intriguing, although considerably more complicated than the Dark Lord's original plan. It might be worth all the fuss just to see what happened.

"Alright, I'll go along with it. What will you need on my end?"

The Dark Lord grinned.

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Snape was just settling in to a nice, quiet vacation from having a nagging fishwife of a teenager underfoot, when a letter arrived and ruined it. He had finished catching up on his unread issues of Potion's Weekly(he was so far behind he'd completely forgotten that he'd actually written some of the articles), opened a bottle of fine whiskey (a birthday gift from Lucius), and was half way through his fourth year

lesson plans (which were much funner with a slight buzz) when he received a rather unpleasant visit from a raven.

It all started with a loud tapping at his kitchen window, which he studiously ignored for ten straight minutes. When ignoring it didn't work, he sighed and went to find out what it was. The annoying creature sat perched on his windowsill with a tiny scroll attached to its leg, and when it spotted Snape, it made another round of impatient taps on the glass. And, of course, chipped it.

Scowling, he opened the window to let it inside. It flew straight at him, and he barely had time to duck. Unlike owls, ravens made poor deliverymen, and this particular raven was a nasty piece of work. It refused to hold still long enough to be relieved of its letter, and when he finally managed to get a hold of it, the little savage drew blood with its sharp beak.

Snape promptly let go of it, drew his wand, and exploded the little beast... then regretted it when he realized Potter wasn't there to pick up the feathers and guts splattered across his formerly clean kitchen.

Well, bother.

He fished the little scroll out of a gooey mass by the stove, checked it for curses, and opened it. It was from the Dark Lord, who was requesting some vials of Blood-replenishing potion, some pain potions, a particularly potent batch of Wolfsbane potion, and some 'Indestructible Parchment'.

What the bloody hell had Potter gotten himself into now?

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For those who don't know what owl pellets are, they are essentially owl fur balls. Any bones, fur, feathers, or whatever that an owl can't digest, they upchuck. Science classes often use these 'pellets' to be dissected in class and the skeletons inside reassembled to identify what was eaten. We are a strange, strange society.

Camphor and opoponex are real ingredients used in some incense and are types of tree resin, though not native to Britain. I just love their names.

I'm not just bullshitting here. Rowling really does state that wounds inflicted by werewolves are cursed and don't heal properly, even with magic. (Book 6, ch.27)

Shaman and Druid Priest are titles, not indicators of Voldemort's religion. He qualifies to be both, but isn't sole one or the other. Just like a doctor can also be a pilot and an investor at the same time. He's a pagan without a denomination, plucking out ideas and rituals that he likes and using them to suit his needs and philosophies.

If this situation is starting to sound familiar, well it should. Harry's essentially replicated the same sort of magic that would have saved Harry's life at the expense of Lily's, if the Potters had stayed in Britain. This 'Old Magic' is pagan magic at its purest and most powerful form, and Harry is better able to use it than his mother would have because of the bonds he has formed with the Earth. Voldemort can also use Old Magics better than most people, but 'Love Magic' [insert snickers here] escapes him because of course, he doesn't love at all.

Book IV:

Chapter 4: Treaties

“You understand, of course, that if you do this, there is no turning back,” Voldemort said solemnly. “You may look the same and think the same and feel the same, but your soul will be different. The Christian God will never accept you. Your fate will be tied to the whims of the Earth.”

Harry nodded. As much mental anguish as his spiritual debate had caused, he could see no way for him to turn back. With the opportunity to save a life, one he could never reunite with on the other side, the decision to pursue paganism was made that much simpler. Beside him, Sirius remained unconscious, gray skinned and cold to the touch, but stubbornly taking one wheezy breath after another. On the other side of Sirius, Remus held his hand, and sat so perfectly still he seemed as much a part of the Healer's House as the rows of pallets and shelves of herbs.

For them, Harry would officiate his decision and accept the consequences that would follow. Sirius, who was surely suffering far more than he would just holding his tenuous grasp to life, deserved no less.

“Very well,” the Dark Lord said, the hint of a smile, of pride, sneaking into his tone. “I will make preparations. Stay here and listen to the Healers. Eat when they tell you to, rest when they tell you to. You will need your strength.”

The Dark Lord left, so only Harry and his godfathers remained. The rest of the healer's patients had been moved, none being as seriously injured as Blackbone, not even Jackal with his cracked ribs and broken jaw. Remus sported injuries of his own, a gash across the face that had nearly taken his left eye being the worst of it, but came out of the fight relatively well considering. The healers cleaned and bandaged his wounds at the same time they had tended to Blackbone, the beta refusing to be separated from his alpha.*

Harry had watched it all nervously from across the room. Luna had come with him, sitting him down on an empty pallet, and tended to the cuts and bruises he hadn't even realized he'd acquired in his haste to find Sirius. His feet were cut up pretty badly, and she had sat on the floor with a basin to wash them. He didn't recall much of what she had actually done while watching the elder women and the odd omega male stitching Sirius back together, but he did remember at one point that she had painted honey onto his feet.* She'd explained what it was for, but he'd been distracted by a keening sound from across the room before she was half way through it.

She and the healers had all left with the Dark Lord's arrival. He had performed a few healing rites of his own, ignoring Remus' suspicious glare, and by the end of it Sirius lay more peacefully, if not any better. Now Harry was alone with them, and not at all sure what to say. Remus seemed to need his attention the most at the moment.

"It's going to be okay, Moony. This will work."

His godfather looked up at him, his expression pained.

"I'm so sorry, Prongslet."

"Remus?"

"I'm so, so sorry. I know it's horribly selfish and unfair of me to expect this of you. That I should tell you that you don't have to do this. It's not your responsibility. Sirius made his decisions and I, as his mate, failed to protect him. This is all our own fault, but I can't... I can't ask you not to do this. I don't think I could forgive myself if you didn't and he died."

The beta looked away, covering his eyes with his free hand, the other not leaving Sirius' for even a moment. Harry reached across Sirius, and placed his hand over both his godfathers'.

"Oh, Moony, please don't start crying. No one can seem to hold it in today, and I'm so tired of the tears. You don't have to feel bad about this. You have no idea how happy I am to be able to protect you for once."

"I'm still so sorry. Especially after what Sirius said... you know he didn't mean it, don't you? We both love you like a son."

Harry smiled weakly, even though Remus was still turned away.

"I know, and when we get through this I expect a full apology... and a pair of leather boots. A really nice pair of leather boots."

The beta choke out a laugh, rubbing away the tears before looking back up at him. He looked awful, battered and exhausted, but the hopeful look in his eyes was all Harry needed or wanted. It was his turn to finally make things right for once.

"You'll have the nicest damn boots in Britain, Prongslet, I promise."

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A night and day passed, and Sirius' condition did not improve. Harry's magic had prevented an infection in the stomach wound, but there were plenty of other wounds that hadn't been treated quickly enough, and now the man was feverish and refused to awaken. Voldemort had come and gone only twice since obtaining Harry's approval for Sirius' unconventional treatment, and the most he was willing to do for the injured man was cast a calming spell to ease his sleep. The fever he deemed necessary to fight off the infection, and potions would only complicate an already delicate situation.

Harry tried to take comfort in the Dark Lord's confidence that his godfather would survive, but it was hard to remain optimistic with the pall of death lingering over the entire hut.

"You must eat, Seeker," one of the Healers instructed, handing him a bowl of fruit. He ate because that was what Voldemort had instructed him to do, but the smell in the confined space and constant buzzing of flies had robbed him of his appetite long ago. The Healer, a formidable alpha female, eyed him critically. "Then you must go take a walk and get some fresh air. At least two laps around the field, and then you can come back."

Now, Harry hesitated, looking to Sirius and Remus, who remained dutifully by his side. The beta looked back at him, and smiled a little. "It's fine. I'll keep an eye on him. Go stretch your legs."

Reluctantly, he left the hut with his fruit and started towards the field where the performances were held. Even from a distance he could see the platform had been torn apart and burned sometime the night before. Outside the air was hot and smelled of food and flowers and people, and though it was a great improvement from the stale, musky scent of the healer's hut, Harry felt ill at ease.

He was distinctly aware that people were watching him, and not just the casual observation he was used to, but people actively moving around and following his movements. When he turned to see exactly who was staring at him, no one even tried to pretend they weren't. Their expressions were strange, not entirely aggressive, but definitely tense.

He stood staring back at them for over a minute, waiting for someone to do or say something, but no one approached him and eventually he walked away.

"Dammit, what is everybody's problem?" he muttered, not caring if anyone heard. The walk to the field was uneventful, but he received a bit of a surprise when he arrived. Voldemort was there, instructing several werewolves as they began the assembly of two large cages. Harry suspected they were for the ritual, but since he hadn't asked for specifics (he really didn't want to know exactly how much this was going to hurt since he'd already decided to do it regardless) he had no clue exactly what (or possibly who) they were for.

There was a very obvious pause in the work when Harry approached Voldemort, but an annoyed snap of the Dark Lord's fingers reminded them who they were working for and they returned to their task. The man sighed and smiled indulgently. Harry felt his annoyance rise. He wasn't expecting him to care about his godfather, but he really wished he didn't have to act so ecstatic about how all of this was turning out.

"What's got you so chipper?"

If Voldemort noticed his irritation, he ignored it completely and grinned even more mischievously.

"Why shouldn't I be happy? We're making history tonight. This is a thing of legends."

"If it works," Harry pointed out.

"It will work."

"How do you know if this is the first time it's ever been tried?"

The Dark Lord smirked, and pointed towards a holly grove where the goddess possessed Diana stood watch. "I consulted her first."

Harry supposed that was something, but he didn't feel wholly reassured. Diana's goddess had been in possession of Luna during the last solstice, and he still didn't know how much of the attack that night was Luna's doing or the goddess'. What happened tonight might leave him a werewolf or at least with Lycanthrosis or perhaps with something completely new, and that might be her intention. If this was a trick and Sirius died, he thought he might be capable of murder... divinity or not.

He changed the subject before his thoughts grew too dark.

"What's with everyone acting so weird? I've never seen them this interested in anyone but Greyback."

"They may be barbarians, but they are aware that you're doing something very special. Something to protect one of their own, even though as a wizard, you are an ancestral enemy. You are an enigma to them."

"You're not their enemy."

"No, but I serve only myself, and they know that."

"Well, I wish they would stop."

Voldemort ruffled his hair. "Eat and then go take a nap. We'll perform a ritual cleansing a few hours before sunset and make our final preparations."

"Yes, Teacher," Harry said offhandedly, wandering off. He failed to notice Voldemort's surprised and then pleased expression. He hadn't even thought about the fact that this was the first time he'd used the honorary title on the man.

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When Harry stripped off his clothes for his 'ritual cleansing', which truthfully wasn't anything more than a shower under a waterfall to wash off his paints, he assumed he was actually going to get them back.

"Is it really necessary that I not have any clothes?" he asked, pointedly not looking at Diana as she painted him yet again, this time with a mixture of blood and oils, or Voldemort as he took detailed notes. The delivery of parchment and potions that afternoon via Elsbeth had led to a flurry of activity that left Harry reeling after a day and a half of nothing but waiting. This resulted in Harry being rushed from the Healer's hut to Voldemort's tent to ingest a variety of nasty herbal concoctions, the sacrifice of a dove (which was unpleasant but not nearly as psychologically jarring as killing the sianach had been), his shower in the great outdoors, and now standing around naked not far from the field while the goddess-possessed child had her wicked, artistic way with him. Spirals and stars and the moon in all Her phases painted with his godfather's blood covering every inch of his body.

Every inch.

"I mean, is a pair of shorts too much to ask for?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"You're starting to whine, you realize that I hope?" the Dark Lord said, not looking up from his notes.

"I'm not whining. I'm... learning. Isn't that what apprentices are suppose to do? I just want to learn why I have to spend the night in the buff."

The shaman sighed. "You said you didn't want to know the details."

Harry didn't speak for several minutes after that, although anyone could hear him squirming and yelping when Diana's brush descended below his naval. The Gryffindor nearly screamed like a girl and ran away right there. After a minute of the most violating experience of his young life, she moved on to his legs and he could actually breath again.

"I'm not going to get raped, am I?" he blurted out.

"A little late for bringing up that particular concern, don't you think?" Voldemort asked sardonically.

"It just now came to mind."

"You should be happy to know, that no, you will not be rape or involved in a sexual act of any sort once the ritual has begun. In fact, I would highly recommend avoiding touch of any kind. Hence, the lack of clothes."

"Mm... How much longer? It's starting to get dark."

And probably chilly too, but he was burning with too much embarrassment to notice something like that.

"A half hour until sunset. A little under an hour until moon rise. How do you feel?"

"Naked? And kind of itchy."

“Don't scratch or you'll get the blood under your fingernails. You'll end up giving yourself lycanthropy if you draw blood with your fingernails. It's bad enough that you have so many cuts on your legs and feet.”

Harry started to ask how the Dark Lord had gotten so much blood out of a nearly dead man to begin with and why he would scratch himself bloody, but then thought better of it. He'd ask for an in depth explanation after everyone got through the night. Anything before that would probably just make him more nervous, and he was already anxious enough as it was.

So he had to stand there, embarrassed, itchy, and pointedly not thinking about what was going to happen while the blood dried and the Dark Lord took pages and pages of notes. It didn't help matters that he was nearly blind again after washing off his paints.

A rustling sound, distinctly not the sound of Voldemort's parchment, drew his attention and as blind as he was, he still caught the movement of a large form. Feeling even more embarrassed than before, Harry pointedly turned his body away.

“We're ready for you,” came Greyback's guttural voice. “We've already moved Blackbone into position.”

“The Healers gave him the potions?” the Dark Lord asked.

“Yeah, though how you can call that swamp muck anything other than poison is beyond me.”

“I don't expect you to understand, but I couldn't very well take anymore blood without replenishing what little was left. Slivermoon has taken the Wolfsbane Potion?”

“He's ready, just like everyone else,” the alpha growled impatiently. There was a tense silence, and Harry could feel the man's gaze fall on him. “You ready, boy?”

As embarrassed as he was, Harry still bristled at the challenge in the werewolf's tone.

"Yeah. What the hell took you so long?" he snipped.

Greyback just snorted, and walked away. Voldemort stood, folding up his papers and quills and placing them in the folds of his robe. He took Harry by the arm and lead him in the direction Greyback had gone.

"Since you seem so eager, we should head over now. I still have an incantation to perform and than we must secure ourselves before the moon rises."

The walk to the field was incredibly awkward for Harry, who could feel people staring at him again, and though most of them were as naked as he was, they could actually see him. Their attention only made him itchier, and his hands shook to scrape away the drying blood and oil from his skin. The closer they came to their destination the more werewolves appeared, crowding in around them though never so close as to touch, and the simple stares were supplemented now with sniffing and low keening sounds.

They broke through the trees, and the masses parted before them to create a path leading to the area Voldemort had cleared earlier. As Harry drew closer he could make out the bars of the cages. There were two of them and they stood side by side with about a yard between them. One of them was completely empty, but the other was carpeted in deer hides and instruments and...

"Sirius?"

"It's all right, Harry."

"Remus?"

His godfather moved from Sirius' side to his, and reached out to touch him but hesitated when he saw there was no place he hadn't been painted in blood.

"I'm here. I'll be here through the whole thing. I promise."

The Dark Lord ignored Remus and lead Harry into the cage.

"We haven't much time. Kneel here. I am going to be speaking in Gaelic, so when I ask you a question you will agree by saying 'aontàim' and when I remove the wolf spirit from Blackbones' body, hold out your arms and say, 'tagaimid'. Do you understand?"

"Aontàim. Tagaimid," Harry repeated, tasting the words and nodded. He knelt on one side of Sirius and Voldemort stood on the other. Luna appeared out of the periphery of his vision, bearing the staff the Dark Lord had foregone up till then. If Harry weren't embarrassed before he certainly was now. He had only glanced at her briefly, and she was quite blurry, but not so blurry that he didn't realize she was also naked.

Voldemort struck his staff on the ground the werewolves around them quieted. Another strike to the ground, and they stilled completely. Another strike and then another and another. And then earth shook, not with magic, but the with the force of hundreds and hundreds of feet stomping down, picking up the rhythm where the shaman's staff had left off. Voldemort took the staff in both hands and lifted it above his head, the werewolves continuing the drumming beat around them.

"Deathair, mac tìre," the Dark Lord began, continuing on, chanting to the rhythm in words Harry didn't understand, but felt against his senses like the summer breeze, laden with strange scents and the promise of storms. "... beocht fuil?"

The Dark Lord look down at him expectantly, and the beat pulled from him the word with perfect synchrony.

"Aontàim."

The itching against his skin intensified, prickling like a numbed limb. And the Dark Lord repeated his incantation, the rhythm beginning to increase.

"Aontàim."

A shiver run up his spine, then another, sending waves of prickles up and down his body.

The chant switched to different lyrics, faster and faster, the urgency of the summoning carried in the Earth, beating like a heart beneath him. A black haze slithered out of Sirius' mouth, expelled in a series of choking gasps. Harry couldn't see what it was perfectly, but he was close enough to get an impression of the spirit. It wasn't like the delicate holly spirit, drifting about like an aerial jellyfish, but shimmied about purposefully, like a sidewinder, on the ground but barely touching, sliding in and out and over and under Sirius' body, nervously seeking shelter.

Harry held out his arms to it.

“ Tagaimid.”

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“Harry!”

Ginny sprung up in her bed, her terrified cry echoing in her little bedroom. Through her open window she caught sight of the moon hanging fat and yellow, staring down at her like the bestial eyes from her dream. She recoiled, her hand slipping off the side the bed, and tumbled on to the floor awkwardly. Her foot caught the nightstand and knocked it to the floor with a resounding crash.

She had not even righted herself when the door to her room burst open. To her mortification, it was Abraham who caught her with her knickers in the air.

“Gin! What's the ma- Eep!” he quickly turned his eight year old self around and back the way he had come. A moment latter, her mom and aunt stumbled in, curlers in their hair and wands drawn. Thankfully, she'd managed to get her knees under her and righted her nightgown.

“Ginny, what happened?!” her mom exclaimed, flipping on the light.

In her little bedroom, surrounded by her books and photographs and hand-me-down bricabrak she felt all kinds the fool, the yellow eyed moon now nothing more than a celestial bauble, far removed from anything relevant to her. She looked up at her mom and aunt's worried faces, and blushed with embarrassment and shame.

"N-nothing," she said, "I had a bad dream and fell out of bed. I'm sorry, I didn't mean to wake you."

Her Aunt Suzanne sighed in relief, and luckily didn't seem to be overly bothered by the impromptu wakeup call. You could never be too sure with Suzanne. She had inherited the same temper as her sister as well as her red hair, and you never could be too sure when her maternal patience would snap.

"I'll leave it to you, Molly," the woman said and walked out. Through the door, Ginny could hear her talking to her own son. "She's fine Abe. Go back to bed."

Ginny groaned. Abraham might have been too startled right now to make much of a fuss, but she could just imagine the ridiculous songs he would be singing in the morning to commemorate her less the elegant fall. She used to think having older brothers was a real pain, but having a younger brother was ten times worse. Even if he was just her cousin, they had lived together since he'd been nothing more than bulge in his widowed mother's tummy, and the familiarity bred familial contempt.

Her mom helped her to her feet, and even though she really didn't need it, Ginny let her tuck her back in. She could tolerate a little babying after waking everyone up in the middle of the night. Of course, her mom wouldn't let it go at that.

"It sounds like a pretty bad dream. Do you want to talk about it?" She said it very casually as she righted the night stand, and returned the nick-nacs to their proper place, but Ginny blushed and looked away.

"It was just a stupid dream. A monsters under the bed kind of dream."

"Monsters under 'Harry's' bed?" she asked knowingly.

As if she couldn't get anymore embarrassed. "... I'm just worried about him. He said he was going to visit his godfathers at the werewolf colony. I'm sure he isn't visiting during the full moon and his godfathers will protect him and everything, but... It's just a stupid dream."

Her mom smiled comfortingly, walking towards the window to look at the moon outside.

"It's a evil sort of moon. I'm not surprised you're having bad dreams."

She closed the curtains, blocking it from view.

"All better. If you're worried about your friend, you should write him in the morning. You'll definitely feel better."

Ginny thought about it, hating how childish she felt being worried over nothing and having her mom coddle her. But... she had been feeling strangely anxious all week, since she'd last seen Harry at one of their dueling tournaments. He had been so excited to be seeing his godfathers, seeming to forget completely that he'd be surrounded by werewolves. Even though he had told her he wouldn't be visiting until after the full moon when they'd be at their most mild, she couldn't help but feel his expression had been strangely stiff when he'd said it.

"...okay. Just don't tell, Abe. He's going to be unbearable enough as it is."

"You have my word. Goodnight, dear."

"Goodnight, mum."

Mrs. Weasley smiled and kissed her forehead, smoothing out her bedsheets before finally turning off the lights and heading to bed. With the curtains closed her room was dark as pitch, but strangely comforting after the dreams of glowing eyes and bodies in the moonlight. Thank goodness her mom hadn't asked for specifics. If she ever found out that Harry had been naked in the dream, she doubted she would ever see Hogwarts or Harry again.

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Sirius woke to a full moon and howling. For several long minutes, he thought he was dreaming or dead. He lifted his hand to his face and stared through his human fingers at the Moon, and felt strangely unmoved by the sight of Her. Dreams, he thought. Just dreams.

But pained, human cries found their way through the animal sounds, frantic and tapping against his psyche persistently. Reluctantly, he turned his head towards the sound. Bars and beyond that werewolves, pacing excitedly, snapping and clawing at his prone form but too far away to reach. It sounded like they might have gotten something... someone, but no, if they had gotten someone that person would have been dead and eaten long before.

A scuffle broke out, one moderate-sized werewolf tenaciously chasing three others away, and it took him only a moment to recognize Remus. The significance of the cries suddenly made itself known to him.

"H-har..." he coughed, unable to speak with his sandpaper tongue.

"Yes."

He was too weak to immediately turn his head, but his eyes found Voldemort's readily enough. The great snake was right beside him, and he felt himself tense at the proximity and his own helplessness. The Dark Lord merely smiled coldly, and made a gesture back to where he had been looking before. Remus was busily chasing away anyone who got too close, and through his efforts Sirius could just barely make out a naked form writhing on the ground a short distance away behind another set of bars.

"I had to tie him down," Voldemort offered, "Taking possession of your wolf knocked him flat, but once the full moon rose he was ready to crawl out of his own skin. It's a good think I thought ahead."

Sirius was confused, but he hadn't the strength to question and really his only care was that his godson was suffering. Sensing the injured man's distraction, the Dark Lord took Sirius by the chin and forcibly turned his head back towards him.

"I know you're very tired, Blackbone. I know you're very weak, but I need you to concentrate for just a few more minutes."

Sirius glared at him, attempted to growl but only ended up coughing painfully.

"Now, now, don't be like that. I've done you an incredible favor. I've saved your life. I've obtained you a pardon. With Harry's help of course."

Voldemort sighed, and tilted his head as Harry's distress faded into a long moan. Around them, several werewolves broke out into long mournful howls, mingling their songs with his.

"You owe us both a great deal, Blackbone. He suffers now to save your life, and I risk losing my precious apprentice to obtain your pardon. I'm going to collect the compensation due to us, one way or another."

Sirius didn't really understand why he was even alive or looking at the full moon as a human or really anything beyond the point that this was all somehow Voldemort's doing and he was going to pay a terrible price for it. The thin blanket that had been placed over his body, was pulled back so that the Dark Lord could retrieve his hand, and he felt a quiver of fear and revulsion at the touch but hadn't the strength to pull away.

"You owe us a life debt," the Dark Lord continued, "And that debt will be paid with an Unbreakable Vow."

Dread came over Sirius like the touch of a Dementor, cold and consuming.

"N-never..."

Voldemort's expression didn't change, and he didn't look surprised in the least. With complete calm, the dark wizard covered Sirius' mouth with his hand and pinched his nose shut. His eyes widened, and he tried to lift his arms to fight him off, but they were weak and the monster had always been so very strong.

"Then you die, and all that Harry has suffered will be for nothing, and I have my apprentice all to myself once again. Slivermoon won't last the year, I suspect, deprived of both his mate and his godson. Greyback will continue his rule completely unchallenged until his strength fades enough for some weaker alpha to finish him off, and I will pull the leash on your people as I always have. But what do you care? You'll be dead. Absolved of responsibility. Reborn as a shit eating worm or something else equally appropriate."

Voldemort removed his hand, leaving his prey gasping weakly, struggling to retrieve the oxygen he had lost.

"Or you can promise never to raise your hand against me in war or to allow any under your authority to do so, either. I believe my price is quite cheap considering. I'm not asking that you to be my ally, Blackbone, I'm just making sure you can never be my enemy."

Sirius glared hatefully, wishing more than anything that he were a wolf right then, and tearing the other man to tiny meaty pieces. But all he had left to him were two impossible choices. To live as another one of the Dark Lord's pawns or to abandon everyone and everything he cared about to the creature's mercy. Staring up at the monster's amused red eyes, he was ready to choose death, but he could hear Harry's voice drifting towards him, soft, tortured sounds and Remus whined softly on the other side of the bars, pacing helplessly to and fro. He knew he couldn't just leave them. He didn't know what Voldemort's pawn could do to protect them, but it would definitely be more than his corpse could.

As if he'd read his mind, and that was actually quite likely, the Dark Lord's mouth curled back into a wicked grin.

"There's a good dog."

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The next morning was quiet. Exhausted men and women stumbled to the nearest shelter they could find, curled up with whoever else they found there, and fell asleep. Sirius was unconscious again after the Dark Lord forced half a dozen more healing potions down his throat, and once the door to the cage was open Remus drug himself inside to sleep beside him.

Voldemort was feeling quite energized, however, his latest magical experiment a resounding success so far. All that remained was to make sure that Harry was alright. The boy was more exhausted than anyone, and didn't so much as stir when the Dark Lord lifted him up into his arms and carried to his tent. Predictably, the tent was partially destroyed by the night's activities, but nothing left inside was breakable, and after kicking out a few sleepy pups it suited his purposes just fine.

"Is he alright?"

He turned to see Luna standing in the doorway of his tent, naked as could be, mud covering her hands and feet and forest debris sticking out of her hair. Something about her struck him as charming, so he indulged her.

"His breathing and heart beat are strong, but of course he's exhausted. And dirty. I'll know more once he wakes up."

She nodded once, and wandered off. Thinking that was the last he'd see of her for a while, Voldemort flipped over a torn pallet to its undamaged side and laid Harry down. He went back to the field to retrieve some of his possessions from the cage, and when he returned Luna was back. Her hands were clean, although she hadn't bothered fixing her feet or hair, and she had pulled on a cotton tunic. She had brought food, drink, some blankets, and a bucket full of water.

"You're tenacious, I'll grant you that," the Dark Lord remarked, settling himself a short distance away in order to watch her as he reviewed his notes. "But I hope you realize, he isn't for you."

Leaning over Harry, she gently washed his face, unperturbed by the man's presence.

"He's not for you, either," she said. If she had sounded smug or accusing, Greyback's daughter or not, Voldemort would have smacked her and thrown her out, but there was only a dreamy sort of observation in her voice.

Instead, he merely said, "I could argue with you, about that."

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Greyback went in search of Luna late that afternoon. He'd slept away most of his post-transformation drowsiness in his own house, and in the course of finding himself something to eat, had become aware that a member of his family was absent. His adopted daughter, though remarkable, was the most fragile of his children, and it was with some unease that he went out in search of her.

He didn't have to search long. His suspicion that she might have followed Harry was proven correct when he found her sharing peaches with the Dark Lord. The wizard was cutting up pieces of fruit, and when Greyback entered he offered some to him.

"Hungry?"

While meat sounded better, he wasn't going to turn it down.

"Thanks." He entered the tent and found a place to make himself comfortable, taking a quick inventory of the space. Harry was wrapped in a blanket, deeply asleep and smelled a little different, but otherwise seemed okay. There was a place beside him composed of ruffled blankets where Luna must have been napping. The Dark Lord himself was situated nearby, but Greyback thought he must have

wandered the entirety of the tent throughout the morning. "So did it work?"

Voldemort smirked.

"Almost perfectly. Blackbone didn't transform at all, and I managed to wrangle an Unbreakable Vow from him, as well. You will have your successor Greyback, and you will never have to fear war between our peoples for as long as he rules."

The Head Alpha nodded once, not revealing exactly how much of a burden had truly been lifted from his shoulders. They might be allies, and to some extent even friends, but that didn't mean the wizard wouldn't call on a debt if he thought he could get one.

"Almost perfectly?"

The Dark Lord's cockiness faded a little.

"There was an unexpected... side effect."

He made a gesture towards Luna, who turned to Harry and pulled down a portion of his blanket. The blood had all been cleaned away, but an expanse of flesh on Harry's chest remained marred with a red crescent moon.

"It won't come off. I suspect it's tattooed into his skin and will never come out. Magic of this magnitude frequently leaves magical scars, but I hadn't anticipated this. There is no way of knowing if or how it may have affected him physically or magically. I do know he's not a werewolf or even contracted lycanthrosis. I checked him for possible spirit possession, but the only spirit in his body is his own."

"Mm. Fascinating."

The Dark Lord made a rude sound. "It might be. He's been touched by a wolf spirit and by the Moon Goddess. His fate may now be linked to that of your people, if it wasn't already."

Greyback yawned, climbing to his feet. "I'm sure I'll care more tomorrow. We'll talk more then. Right now all I want is about ten pounds of meat and a half a galleon of beer. Come on, girl, your lover boy will still be here tomorrow."

Luna looked down at Harry for a moment, shrugged, and followed after her father. Voldemort let them go with a wave of good-natured disgust.

"Last time I try to have a meaningful discussion about magic with a wild dog," he muttered.

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"Padfoot," Remus growled as his friend cautiously stretched himself out. Sirius had woken up looking much better than he had in days. He was still sickly looking, but his skin was now just pale rather than gray, and the infections had all but disappeared. The wound to his stomach was still an ugly mess of stitches and scars, but even that looked better. After an afternoon of being hand fed fruit, broth, and well ground pieces of meat, some of his strength had returned as well. "You're in no condition to wander around. Lay down. I'll go and check on Harry myself and then come back."

"I'm fine, Moony. Besides, I need to talk to him myself," he said, trying to find muscles he could stretch that wouldn't pull at his stomach wound and having little luck. "I put it off long enough."

"He might not even be awake yet, and if he isn't, you shouldn't wake him."

"Or he's awake and wondering why his asshole of a godfather hasn't come to visit him after saving his life. Give it a rest, Moony."

"You know I almost preferred you comatose," Remus muttered, lending his shoulder for Sirius to lean on. Sirius smirked, and hobbled his way out of the Healer's hut. It was vaguely embarrassing to be so weak out in public, especially when those few werewolves actually out and about watched him so intently. A few started to approach

them, but Remus gave them a warning growl and they quickly backed off.

“You know they may have just wanted to wish me well.”

“They probably did, but you said you wanted to talk to Harry and I'm not making you stand around in this heat because they feel chatty. If they want to talk to you, they can do it while you're laying down.”

Sirius rolled his eyes, but didn't argue. He was happy just to have his beta talking to him, and having him actively mothering him was more than he could ever have hoped for. Dying, or in his case almost dying, had brought things into perspective very quickly for a lot of people. Sirius, in particular, was seeing things clearly. He could now even list his revelations in order of significance.

Being alive was a lot better than dying.

Remus and Harry loved him more than he deserved, which was why being alive was so important.

He needed to be more careful with his actions, since he wasn't the only one affected by them.

Voldemort was still a #& *#&\$! , and deserved to die horribly, but he wasn't going to be the one to bring it about.

And speak of the devil, there's the giant snake now, slithering out of his den. Elsbeth was perched on his arm, a scroll attached to her leg, and after finding an open space with enough room to take off, flew from his arm and into the sky. The Dark Lord watched her until she disappeared, then his crimson eyes slid over to the two approaching guests.

Sirius could feel his hackles rising, but reminded himself it was pointless. He wasn't here for him anyway.

“Is Harry awake?”

Voldemort said nothing for a moment, simply looking at him as if he hadn't spoken, then looked back at the tent as if to consider.

"Sort of. You can have ten minutes."

Sirius was very tempted to snap at him for thinking he could limit his time with godson (never mind that he technically could and did so regularly), but settled for an annoyed glower and let Remus lead him inside the tent. Both werewolves grimaced at the strong smell of incense as they entered. They waded through the haze to the prone figure laying beside one wall.

Harry was wrapped in a blanket, despite the day's heat, and his eyes looked bruised with exhaustion and his face smooth with sleep. It was jarring to see him so exposed, so vulnerable, so very, very young. They were both used to seeing him alert, focused, and self-possessed. Even in a crisis, when everything was falling apart, Harry had always retained some sort of strength. Magically or intellectually or psychologically or all at once. It had been a long time since either man had really thought of Harry as a child. He had become a young man in an even younger body without either of them realizing when the transition had happened.

"Harry?" Sirius called softly, thinking perhaps the Dark Lord had lied about Harry being even 'sort of' awake. Bright green eyes peeked out between his slitted lids, staring up blearily at two unrecognizable globes.

"Mmm?"

The werewolves shared an amused look. It might have been a while since they'd seen Harry so childlike, but that didn't mean he didn't make a cute kid. They sat down on either side of him, Sirius grimacing as his wound was stretched in a new and particularly unpleasant way.

"Hey, Prongslet. How you feeling?"

"Siri...?"

"In the flesh, except of course for the few pounds Greyback took out of it. Remus is here too."

"You did great, Harry. I'm so proud of you."

"Mmmm..." the boy sighed, his eyes drifting shut again and a smile tugging at the corner of his mouth. "Tired."

"I know, and I'll let you rest in a minute," Sirius said, gently touching his shoulder. "I just needed to say this to you, because it's important."

"What is?" His green eyes drifted open again, trying to look serious but just came out looking adorably pouty.

"I'm sorry, Harry. For everything. You were only looking out for me when it should have been me looking out for you. I said a lot of stupid things that I didn't mean, knowing they'd hurt you, saying them because I knew they would. I'm sorry. All I've ever wanted from you was your respect, and when I failed to earn it, I lashed out at you. And even though I didn't deserve it you went ahead and... This is all my fault..."

Sirius broke off, unable to continue. He wasn't prone to overly sentimental displays of affection or grief, but he had never felt so much regret for something he had done as he did now. He wasn't going to cry, he wouldn't allow anyone to see such an obvious sign of weakness, but he had to stop talking. Harry didn't do anything for a moment, his sleepy green eyes just looking up at him, then slowly he lifted his hand to lay on top of Sirius.

"It's alright. We're family."

Everything that needed to be said was held in those four words, and having said them Harry drifted back to sleep as quietly and suddenly as he had awoken. Sirius just stared down at him, completely flabbergasted. Surely it wasn't that simple. Not after everything he had done, and not after everything Harry had been made to pay for it.

Remus drew back his attention with a hand to his shoulder.

“Don't over think it, Padfoot. If he wants to forgive you that's his prerogative. I hope you'll be able to do the same as well. Come on, we'd best let him sleep.”

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After his godfathers left, Harry slept for several more hours before yet another visitor disturbed him. He couldn't say what had woken him, for Luna hadn't made a sound. One moment, he was dreaming he was drifting quietly across a lake in a boat, and the next he opened his eyes to a face so close that even he could recognize who it was without his glasses. As startling as this was, his body was still much too weak to allow him do anything more than blink owlshly at her.

The corners of her mouth pulled back to reveal a broad grin.

“You did it, Harry,” she said, happily. “You said you'd try, and you did it. Thank you.”

Slowly, it dawned on him what she was saying, and gradually, he found a smile of his very own to give back to her.

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Alright, as gay as that might sound, they're not really homosexual. I feel it important to reiterate it at this point, since it becomes significant later. While I don't have anything against homosexuality, I didn't see Rowling's Sirius and Remus as gay (indeed they showed a clear preference for women), and I don't see any justifiable reason for making them so just for this story. Even if they do make a delightful pair. :)

Honey is an ancient form of antiseptic. When it ferments, it creates hydrogen peroxide, which stings like a bitch but is a magnificent disinfectant. Hurray for the History Channel!

Real Gaelic words, but they don't mean much by themselves. Unless one of my readers can actually speak Gaelic and offer up a nifty translation. That would be awesome.

Harry and company return to Hogwarts next chapter! Plus, you'll all get to see the nifty side-effects associated with his new tattoo.

Book IV:

Chapter 5: Travelers From Near and Far

Harry couldn't say how long he slept, but he could guess about how deep, for his last memory was of Luna smiling down at him in Voldemort's tent and the second time he woke up it was to a considerably less happy person scowling down at him in a hospital room.

"Honestly, Harry," Hermione snipped, "are you really this unlucky or does someone have it out for you?"

He blinked up at her, blearily, and then slightly less blearily when she put his glasses on his nose. Surveying the room, white, cold, and smelling of antiseptic, he wondered how much of what he remembered really happened and how much was the result of some sort of head trauma. He sat up, and she handed him a glass of water. He drank nearly all of it.

"How do you feel? No one has been telling me anything, except that you're suffering from exhaustion... and that I shouldn't kiss you. Why would they think I'd kiss you? Honestly! I even looked through your chart- I hope you don't mind- but it just says they're running some weird tests I've never heard of. At least I know you don't have lycanthrosis. Your test came back negative for that, you'll be happy to hear, but they still want to keep you under observation just in case. Uncle Severus won't put up with it for much longer though. He hates hospitals, and doesn't like being in them any longer than necessary, so you'll probably get out when you can walk around unassisted. With all that sleeping you might be a bit stiff and weak. If you want I can get you nurse to get you something to make you more comfortable. Or perhaps you'd just like to get home. They wouldn't let you keep Inana in the hospital obviously, but she seemed worried we left her at the house. I mean, not that I can really tell when a snake is worried or just hungry-"

"I feel fine, thanks," he interrupted her, afraid she'd pass out at any moment from lack of air. He peeked under his blankets to make sure

he had pants on, then moved his legs onto the other side of the bed.
“What day is it?”

“Wednesday.”

Only the second day after the full moon? That wasn't so bad. He stood up...

“The first of July to be-”

...and fell to the floor. Oops. It seemed he'd miscalculated his inactivity by nearly a week.

“Harry!”

Shakily, he climbed back to his feet. “I'm fine. Not to worry. If I hurt myself, hey, I'm in a hospital. Where better to do it?”

She gave him a disapproving look, but he just smiled at her. Her sternness melted away, and she raced around the bed to hug him tightly. He heard a suspicious 'snuffling' sound, but couldn't be sure she was crying or not with her head at his shoulder.

“Idiot. I don't want you to get hurt at all.”

Awkwardly (it was so different hugging a witch than it was hugging a werewolf!), he hugged her back.

“Don't worry, Hermione, I didn't get hurt. I wasn't in any real danger. It's just exhaustion. Partied a little too hard and all that.”

She pulled back from him, glowered at him as if she'd never stopped, and poked him in the chest.

“I don't doubt it. How much had you drunk when you decided that would be a good idea?”

He followed her finger, which had pulled aside some of the lapel of his hospitable pajamas to expose a sliver of red on his chest.

Rushing to the bathroom and the nearest mirror he could find, he lifted his shirt to get a better look.

“Bloody hell!”

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“Bloody hell!” McGonagall cursed, right in the middle of transfiguring plain wooden chairs into overstuffed reading chairs. The disruption caused the semi-padded chair to break out into splinters, making it resemble a giant pin cushion rather than anything one might want to sit on. Flitwick sighed, turning from the stain glass windows he had been charming against drafts. He had been waiting for this moment since they had first been assigned the rather dubious honor of making the newly reconstructed wing of the castle inhabitable for their foreign guests. He was himself a bit resentful of having his precious free time impinged upon, but McGonagall seemed to be taking it as an intentionally vindictive act rather than a security precaution.

“What is the matter, Minny?”

“Do you really have to ask?”

“No, but I have the feeling you really need to tell.”

“What are we doing here, Filius? We're teachers, not interior designers! They could have pulled in half a dozen university students for a summer job, and been done in a week.”

“That isn't true, and you know it. There are many perfectly good reasons why we should be doing this and not some kid fresh out of the dorm,” he said gently, trying to placate her.

Her response was to kick her transfigured monstrosity across the room. “If you give me that same load of crock about the school's safety that Lestrage was dishing out, I swear I won't talk to you for a week.”

"Of course not. There are other even better reasons why we should do this. Not the least of which is because this castle recognizes us and our magic. Hogwarts hasn't accepted this part of the building into its magical matrix again since the attack. It will take time, but considerably less time will be needed if the area is saturated in magic of one of its own residence."

She looked slightly mollified, but not entirely convinced. Sensing her wavering conviction, Filius decided to add a bit of humor to the situation.

"Besides, you should be honored. In a way, we can now be counted as among the schools founders. Think of it Minerva, you could have your own House. McGonagall House, house colors will be orange and copper, and the mascot will be a cat. Flitwick House shall have purple and pewter, and the mascot will be a goat."

Her expression had turned stony, and for a moment he hadn't made a mistake, but then the mental image of what he had just suggested seemed to really sink in, and the muscles in her cheeks started to twitch until they'd pulled back her lips into a smile and her shoulders shook with suppressed laughter.

"Alright," she said, "But I get to keep Potter, Granger, and LeFoy."

"As long as I can have Diggory, Boot, and Allbright."

"Diggory and Allbright aren't even Ravenclaws!"

"I know, but in Flitwick House, persistence is the defining character, not curiosity. I've never seen a pair of boys that persistent in trying to prove themselves, and since you've already taken Granger..."

She chuckled. Turning about, she seemed to regard the plain room with considerably more enthusiasm, and a bit of the old mischievousness that Flitwick could remember from when she herself was a student.

"You know, if we're going to have our own Houses, this end of the castle would be the the perfect place to start."

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A month after his hospitalization, Harry was relieved to be celebrating his birthday with the knowledge that the full moon brought nothing stranger than the ability to see perfectly (and that meant without his glasses) in the dark, some rather bizarre eye shine, and giddiness that resulted in insomnia during the full moon. Voldemort had actually taken the day and the night of the full moon to visit the house to record his observations. The Dark Lord seemed to find the results amusing (or perhaps laughter was contagious because Harry couldn't keep a straight face the entire time). Snape, who had stayed up to see what sort of madness he was housing under his roof, had drunk an entire pot of coffee and didn't find the situation funny at all.

Snape had been snippy the entire month Harry had been home, and at first he had thought it was because the potions master was nervous about his condition. Nothing had improved after the full moon, however, so he suspected there was something else bothering the man. Of course, once the full moon was over, Harry had an entire list of other things to worry about himself, and hadn't bothered looking into it. He had spent so much time just working to appear unaffected by what had happened for his friends and coworkers (who knew he had gone on a vacation with the Dark Lord, just not what that entailed), that he had neglected not only what remained of his homework, but also what he was going to do for the new school year. The foreign exchange students were only a small part of it.

This year, he had elective courses.

Lots of elective courses to choose from. Lots of electives he should choose, but couldn't without another body and perhaps Hermione's brain. Intro to Magical First Aid (a definite), Intro to the History of European Magic (which seemed a good idea if he continued to work at the Ministry or didn't want to seem a complete idiot in front of the exchange students), Care of Magical Creatures, Fundamentals of Spell Design I, and Celtic Magic and History I (the closest he was going to get to a formal education in pagan magic without following the Dark Lord around every day). The thing was, he could only take

two electives on top of his core classes. Which was why he was celebrating his birthday in Diagon Alley with Draco and Hermione by brooding over a piece of chocolate cake.

"For the love of Merlin, Potter," Draco said in exasperation. "If you wanted white cake you should have just said so."

The three friends were tucked into a corner booth in a trendy little restaurant a block away from the main shopping area. They were taking a break after shopping for some non-academic essentials (owl treats, underwear, candy, etc.), their potion supplies (which the waiter had eyed resentfully when they were being seated), and some sporting gear for dueling club (and quidditch even though Hermione said it was pointless if they weren't going to be playing for the year), before they finished the day at Banikey's Books for their writing supplies and text books. Harry had to decide and decide quick what classes he was going to take.

"I like chocolate cake," he snipped, and shoved a giant piece of it into his mouth to prove it.

"You do seem a bit glum," Hermione said, grimacing at his chipmunkish cheeks. "Is everything alright with your godfathers?"

Harry waved off her concern while he finished chewing.

"Yeah, they're fine. I told you about the boots they sent me, didn't I?"

He doubted they had forgotten. The boots were black leather, bronze fixings, and lined in the softest black mink. They were charmed so that they left wolf prints rather than boot prints when you walked in snow or mud. The Malfoy siblings had both been completely envious. Remus had kept his word. They were the best damn boots in Britain.

"Then what is it?"

"Nothing serious," he assured, "I just don't know what electives I'm going to take this year."

Hermione sat up straight, and Draco let out a pained moan. “Oh, no you're going to get her started again. She's been driving me nuts about this all summer.”

“Do you have your school list?” she said, ignoring her brother. Harry pulled out his list, and handed it to her. He'd already scratched out the supplies he'd bought and the classes he wasn't interested in, but that still left a lot undecided and undone. Hermione eyed his selections critically, and Harry smiled and took a more enjoyable bite of his cake as he imagined he could see the endless aisles of books that lived in her head shooting out reference materials like canon balls to decimate his latest problem. This was the obvious solution, but truthfully he preferred fixing his own problems. Kyle Reicher's lesson on friendship had been learned, but sometimes it was hard to break old habits.

“Why on Earth did you cross out Magical Theory?” she said, disapprovingly.

“The Fundamentals of Magical Design covers the same thing, just with more practical application,” he pointed out. “I like classes I can actually do magic in, not just think about. Didn't you say I was a kinetic learner, or something?”

“Kinesthetic learner, and yes, I did. Fine. I see you put a star by Magical First Aid. So you've decided on that one? A good choice.”

Draco snorted, “Especially for you.”

Hermione continued as if he hadn't said anything.

“I don't know if Uncle Severus bothered to mention that all 'Intro' courses are only one semester long. So that gives you Introduction to Magical First Aid and the only other 'Intro' course not crossed off is... Introduction to the History of European magic. That leaves three classes to choose from. Can I ask why you put down Celtic Magic and Culture?”

“I'm pagan,” he said simply. “I'd like to know what that means.”

"Yes, but are you a Druid?" she said a bit condescendingly.

"Not yet. I don't have a definite religion right now, except that it involves lots of spirits and gods and rituals and running around naked."

"Maybe I should join."

Hermione slapped her brother on the shoulder.

"Anyway, Druidism is the closest thing I can find to what I am, and I know most of the rituals Voldemort performs are spoken in Gaelic, which they teach in the class. It's more of a commitment than the other classes though. If I want to take the entire course, I have to start this year and follow it all the way through my seventh. That means I won't have as many options for electives every year."

"Considering you had all summer to figure out courses for this semester and haven't figured it out for yourself, that's probably for the best," the Slytherin pointed out. "Although, I'll admit it's fun seeing you indecisive. Just like watching Hufflepuffs try to play poker or Uncle Severus sit next to Lestrage."

Hermione gave a long suffering sigh. Harry reached across the table and patted her hand comfortingly. "There, there. He'll be married off soon."

"Hey!"

"Well then, you should probably take the Celtic class. Care of Magical Creatures would be fun, but academically useless unless you want to go to Beastiary School, and you can still take three years of the Fundamentals of Spell Design later. The fourth year of that is actually a university level class, but you'd still have a better quality course at a university. What do you think?"

"I think you're a genius, and a bow before your superior wisdom."

"Don't encourage her."

Before she could come up with a clever retort of her own, Snape strode into the restaurant. Not being much of a cake person, he'd left them there while he ran some of his own errands with explicit instructions for them to wait till he came and got them. They weren't expecting him for at least another half hour, and once they'd spotted him, Draco and Harry raced to finish their cake before he actually reached the table.

"Why Potter, I see you're passing on your remarkable skill of inhaling food rather than eating it to Draco. Thank you, so much," Snape remarked blandly. Harry had a come back, but after swallowing his cake and downing half a glass of milk, his timing was off so he didn't even bother.

"We weren't expecting you back so soon," Hermione said. "I hope everything went well."

"I'm not actually done. Barnikey's Books seems to be running low on some of their stock. I thought I should come and get you before they ran out and we'd have to search for them in Glasgow. Hurry up."

They paid their tab, and hurried to the book store. The store was full, but not crowded this early in the month, but a gaunt man with graying hair and gnarled hands was arguing with the store clerk and holding up the line. Harry thought he heard the man curse in German, but before he could investigate, Snape was turning him back towards the aisles with a look that told him pointedly to stay out of it. The textbook shelf was looking alarmingly bare, and the three of them split up to gather their core class books, collecting three of the same subject at a time and then came back together to exchange between them.

"I got the last three books for Transfiguration. They were completely out of both the new and the used, after I left," Hermione said breathlessly. With their core classes out of the way, they now had to search out the harder to find elective course books. "I wonder what's going on? I've never heard of Barnikey's being short before. Don't they get an inventory list from the school?"

Harry thought he might know what had gone wrong, but he hadn't told his friends about the Triwizard Tournament, and bringing it up now

seemed a good way to get yelled at. Instead, he watched Snape watching the German man at the counter, still arguing with the clerk, who was becoming more and more flustered as several people had abandoned their selections and just left.

“Bloody hell, Harry, I hope all these books are for all four years of the class,” Draco said, drawing his attention back to the book shelves. It didn't take Harry long to see what the Slytherin meant. 'Celtic Culture' took up an entire book shelf, not because of its popularity, but because of the sheer number of books the course required. Looking at his supply list, he grimaced, and wondered if he had made the right choice. Even Hermione looked surprised, until she started reading the titles.

“Oh... well, I think I get it. When they say they called it Celtic Magic and Culture, they weren't kidding. There's two books on the actually magic, but there's five books dedicated just to the culture aspect. Language, history, art, philosophy and religion, law and social order. They're being very thorough.”

“Yeah, that's one way to put it,” Harry grouched. His list required all seven books, but at least Draco hadn't been wrong about the books being for all four years. The only other Celtic books he'd have to buy over the next couple of years were more advanced language books. None of the books were small or used, and Harry grimaced at the thought of his student loan as he eyed their prices. He wondered if Voldemort would cover the cost as his 'teacher', or if he wasn't going to have to be more frugal with his summer earnings.

They got the rest of their books and headed towards the line. A manager had finally come out and was now on the receiving end of the German man's tirade, but at least the harried clerk could now attend the other customers. This still left Harry plenty of time and proximity to overhear what the problem was.

“Vat is going on here? Vat kind of établissement doesn't have enougs books to sell? Is my money not good enoug for you? Is sat it? Herr Barnikey von't akzept money from a forener?”

And on and on the man went, the manager unable to break in with his repeated 'Sir, please's and 'Of course not's. Snape was still just watching, and Harry asked his friends to hold his spot in line while he spoke with him.

"You're not going to stop him?" Harry asked. Snape rolled his eyes.

"Why should I? It's the manager's fault for not ordering enough books. I know for a fact that we sent him the correct inventory. He must have thought there was error."

"Maybe it is his fault, but that guy isn't making anything better for himself or anyone else by carrying on like that."

"That man' is your new Dark Arts and Defense teacher for the year, Professor Oblitz. He's Durmstang's Dark Arts teacher and was the World Dueling Champion in '83 and '87. I recommend not crossing him. Get back in line, Potter."

At the mention of Harry's name, Oblitz suddenly went very quiet, and slowly turned around. Snape met his regard with deceptive calm, but Harry knew better. He could smell the rising magic coming off of the potion's master, an earthy smell like decaying leaves in fall. Neither man moved for a moment, but Harry felt uneasy. He had seen werewolves act this way before in their beast forms, and it was never a good sign. A tight, unpleasant smile came across Oblitz's face, and his pale blue eyes found Harry, but quickly returned to Snape.

"I hadn't realized a fellow professor was here or else I would have greeted you sooner. Good morning, sir. You must be Professor Snape."

"Indeed, I am," he said, equally unpleasant. "It's a pleasure to finally meet you in person, Professor Oblitz. Though it seems I've interrupted you at a bad time."

"They are short at last sixteen books my students require. It seems someone has made a mistake." Something about the way it was said, made the statement sound very much like an accusation. And that accusation was that the 'someone' was Snape or else someone else at Hogwarts. Harry felt himself bristle. Perhaps Snape sensed it,

because he placed a firm hand on his shoulder, though he didn't look away from the German.

“Not to worry, Professor. Mr. Potter, what do you think might be done to solve this dilemma?”

Harry was startled from his anger. Snape did this sort of thing in dueling club all the time, interrupting matches or coming up unannounced, disrupting ones mindset and forcing it to think and work differently without a moment's notice. It took only a few seconds of fumbling for Harry to remember he'd already known what the solution was.

“Ah... the store has a guarantee. If it doesn't have a book, it'll order the book for you and deliver it to you without charging the delivery fee within five business days. I'm sure the manager would be happy to do it for you,” he said, and then added under his breath, “... if you'd let him.”

“Yes, yes!” the nearly forgotten manager said, looking massively relieved.

“There now. No problem the strong mind of a fourteen year-old couldn't solve, isn't that right, Mr. Potter?” Snape said, still keeping his eyes locked ahead of him. Harry looked cautiously between the now vaguely superior potions professor and the stiffly furious dark arts professor.

“I'm going to go check out my books now.”

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Ginny was weeding the garden, while Abe went about chasing knarls and sling shotting them over the wall nearby when she spotted their visitor. The Burrow was a small and out of the way place, and company was rare and usually during holidays and weekend afternoons. Being an ordinary Tuesday morning, Ginny decided that man riding towards them was strange enough that she should forewarn her mother and aunt.

"Mum, Auntie Sue, there's someone coming," she said from the doorway, knowing better than to enter while still covered in dirt. She was lucky the both of them were making jams that day, instead of out back in the orchard. The Burrow had originally been an orchard farm that had gone into disrepair after Segundus Weasley left it to his town bred nephew, Arthur Weasley, but Molly and Suzanne had grown up on a farm, and with so little work to be found in town, had made work and money for themselves right at home. They did a lot of the labor themselves, but hired some squib families to help them out during the growing season. They normally would have been out in the orchards with their hired hands, but a large order for Walapple Jam* had kept them indoors for the day.

"Who is it, Gin?" Mrs. Weasley asked, but Ginny just shrugged and went back out. "Stay here, Sue. I'll check it out."

Ginny and Abe were both at the garden gate, watching the rider cantering towards them. It didn't take them long to notice he had bright red hair.

"Bill!" Ginny called, and ran out of the yard to meet him, and Abe followed after her. William Primus Weasley pulled his horse up short, and hopped down to meet them, throwing open his arms so they could jump right into them. Molly Weasley, never one to miss an opportunity with one of her 'lost boys', wasn't far behind.

"Bill, Heaven's Blessing, what are you doing here?! And my word, what are you wearing in your ear?" she exclaimed happily, wrapping him up in a hug. He laughed and fingered the pearly white bauble hanging from his ear.

"It's a dragon tooth. Charlie sent it to me. The ladies love it."

"Wicked," Ginny said, and Abe nodded his agreement.

"Told you so."

Molly Weasley sighed, the Procter family had taken care of her son for the short time before his graduation, and though she didn't doubt

they were good people, she thought they'd given him a bit too much leeway as a teenager. She never would have let him leave the house thinking teeth were a fashion accessory or that men should ever wear earrings, unless they happened to be pirates. No point crying over spilt potions, she supposed.

"What are you doing here, Bill? Aren't you suppose to be in Ireland?"

"Boss pulled me back early. Government contract, and he said he wanted the best he had on it. Abe, could you go tie up Picakatte before she wanders off?"

They made their way back into the house (sans Abe who went to do as requested), spelling themselves clean as they stepped inside. Sue smiled as she spotted the eldest Weasley brother and kissed him on the cheek. It took her a moment to realize Molly looked upset.

"A government contract? You said you didn't involve yourself with the Court. You said they only wanted curse breakers so they could steal other peoples' property."

"Yeah, I meant that, but this is something else entirely. I'm going to Hogwarts."

"Hogwarts?!" Ginny said excitedly. "Are you going to be a teacher?"

Bill bulked at the very notion. "No! No! Nothing like that. It's for a some big project they've got going. I can't talk about it, yet. It's all hush-hush, but the gist of it is I'm there for safety."

"Are you helping with the expansions on the castle?" Molly asked, immediately relieved. She hated what he did for a living, even if it was honest work, but this sounded like it might be safer than his other jobs.

"Er... sort of. I really can't talk about it. I just thought I'd let you know I'd be around for a while, and might actually be able to stick around for Christmas for once... and thought I might ask to bum a room for a few weeks?"

Molly smiled. "I'll be happy to have another of my boys home for a change... as long as you take out that awful earring."

[illegible]

One year, three months, and twelve days after his 'murder', Tom landed on roof of the tallest tower in Hogwarts, took a long look around at the surrounding country and decided it was time to get to work.

[illegible]

August 28th was circled in red on Fleur's bedroom calendar. Behind it was a trail of red 'x's that ran from the 27th all the way back to the 1st. The picture on the calendar was of an Irish Blue* swimming across a lake; the sky, lake, and dragon barely discernible from each other. Fleur thought it very appropriate that morning, but standing on the perfectly manicured lawn of the Beauxbaton's she wasn't really in much of a mood to enjoy the subtle irony.

The entire school had shown up to see them off, along with everyone's parents, the media, and even the royal family. With all the hugs and goodbyes and photographs and speeches, it all felt suddenly very permanent. Which was ridiculous.

It was only nine months, and she'd be back.

Madam Maxime had promised.

[illegible]

Viktor, as had become the norm at Durmstang, was the first of his classmates to enter the ship atop the perpetually frozen lake of Durmstang valley, but even he had to wait out in the frigid wind for nearly hour. Ambassador Schwartzman had been the first person to board, followed by Headmaster Minz, a slew of other officials, and by

the time he and his classmates had been given the go ahead, they were half frozen.

His classmates, used to the constant cold, laughed it off with jokes that they might actually have a pleasant weather for once in Scotland. Viktor didn't say anything, but let them have their fun. Pleasant weather was about the only good thing he imagined he'd find at Hogwarts.

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"Where the bloody hell are we?" Draco muttered looking around what should have been the Hogsmeade platform. All of the students looked equally confused, and some rather alarmed, but their teachers were all there to greet them and start ordering them to follow. Harry, Hermione, Draco, Clyde, Ron, and Ginny stayed close to one another, as they had since the trip had begun (mostly to crowd out hangers on and 'fans' from trying to invade their compartment and their personal space), pulling their luggage behind them and wondering where they were.

"I think we're actually in Hogsmeade," Clyde said, "There's Zonko's Joke Shop and the Three Broom Sticks is over there. There's just... more."

And indeed, there was 'more'. Townhouses, grocery stores, an owl post station, a livery, what looked to be a large garden park, and several other things that all ended up making Hogsmeade nearly five times its original size.

"Do you suppose they're ahead of schedule for starting up the university?" Hermione asked. "Maybe it's for all the new students and professors."

"Um... actually, you're sort of right and sort of not," Harry started. He wasn't supposed to talk about it per Snape's instructions, but now that they were actually at school, it seemed kind of silly to keep it secret any longer. "Have any of you ever heard of the Triwizard Tournament?"

Hermione and Draco, as Harry predicted they would, yelled at him for the entire ride up to the castle, and would have kept on going if everyone else hadn't gotten bored of listening to them and asked them what the Triwizard Tournament actually was.

Ron smirked. “Sounds like fun if its got the walking library up in arms.”

"I've never met a French person before," Ginny said, interested in meeting people from places she considered 'exotic'. "Do you think any are from Paris? Are they going to wear their own uniforms or will they have to wear ours? Are they going to get sorted like us or have dorms for themselves?"

The Great Hall was noisier than usual, even for the Welcoming Feast, everyone gossiping and wondering about the newly expanded Hogsmeade. Harry and company all looked around for the new exchange students, but it seemed none had arrived yet. The only even slightly unusual thing was the presence of the Dark Lord, Professor Oblitz, and an unknown woman at the teacher's table, and even that wasn't that unusual. The evening proceeded in the completely usual way as well, with the Sorting of the first years and the welcoming of the new teachers. It wasn't until it was time for the school year announcements to be made, that the ball finally dropped. Voldemort took the podium.

“Hogwarts, for the first time in many, many years, is opening its doors for the sake of international outreach and education...” and went on to explain what was actually happen, what it would mean for the students, for Britain, encouraged them all to be hospitable to their guests and set a good example, and of course ended with a threat of what would happen if they did not. “... including the rest of your immediate family and any pets you might happen to have.”

The utter silence that followed assured the Dark Lord that the message had been understood. Even Oblitz looked appropriately stunned. Voldemort let his expression soften into something less terrifying, and gestured towards the door.

“I know you are all hungry, but I would like you to walk down to the North 2nd Floor corridor so that you might witness the arrival of the Durmstang and Beauxbaton students.”

No one, of course, disobeyed, and within minutes everyone was crowding around the windows and waiting for them to arrive. While they were waiting, Harry caught sight of an unmistakable figure out on the lawns.

“Hey, I think I know him.”

“Who?” Hermione said, looking where he was pointing. “That man? Is he really as big as he looks?”

“Almost ten ft. tall. I've seen him carry a full grown horse like it was house cat.”

Draco looked utterly horrified. “Where do you meet these people, Potter?”

“Hey, look I see something!” someone cried nearby, “In the sky, between the two mountains.”

“It's a bird you nitwit,” someone else shouted.

"No it isn't!" Hermione shouted, "Look it turned sideways! It's a carriage and horses!"

There were gasps and 'oohs' as the carriage drew closer and closer, and grew large and larger, until it finally it landed beside the lake. The horses were so large they made even Hagrid look a bit small, but the half giant still managed to wrestle them to a standstill. The carriage was opulently decorated in gold leaf and an emblem was carved into the carriage door. Several attendants, dressed to match the carriage, hopped down to open the door and pull out a stair case, and then assist the several girls that climbed out. And women. And one GIANT woman. Then a handful of boys and men.

"Whoah... is that lady even going to fit through the front door?"

There were several snickers, but it didn't last long before they were distracted yet again.

"Look at the lake! It's boiling!"

"It's not boiling, it's freezing!"

It seemed to be doing both, bubbling madly before settling into a solid sheet of white. The ice spread to about twice the size of the quidditch pitch before it stopped at the very edge of the shore. There was an enormous cracking sound, and the still ice exploded upwards as a great ship burst from its surface, coated with ice and seaweed.

"I'll give them this," Draco said, "Foreigners can certainly put on a show."

Harry just nodded his head in agreement.

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Fleur was happy to have landed, although she could have done without the crowd of students gawking at them all like a flock of simpletons. She could also have done without the realization that 'castle' and 'palace' were not the same thing, for though Hogwarts

was magnificent architectural achievement (a thousand years ago!), it in no way compared to the splendor of Beauxbatons.

She was an adventurer, however, and wouldn't let her consternation show over something as minor as the quality of the rugs, or how little light there was, or how plain the decorations were... no, she'd just smile sweetly, and demonstrate how cultured people looked and behaved, because clearly these people needed it.

They briefly saw the Durmstang students, who looked even more brutish than the Hogwarts ones, but luckily didn't have to talk to them as they were escorted to their dormitory by a teacher whose name she thought sounded like the gargling sound one makes before spitting out mouthwash*. At least the dorm was fairly nice. The room was open and airy, with enormous windows looking out over the lake. They'd made a definite attempt with the Baroque style furniture, the white washed walls, and the abundance of elegant purple, but the whole affect was sort of ruined by the abundance of pewter goats inlaid into the doorway and the fire place.

Oh, what she sacrificed for her country.

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Viktor wasn't entirely sure what to make of Hogwarts at first glance. It was just as magnificent as Dumbledore had described, and even the reign of a tyrant did nothing to diminish its magnificence both inside and out. The children who had looked out at him when he arrived didn't look any different than those back home, perhaps they even looked a bit friendlier. He wondered, perhaps if the young had been mostly spared the corruption of the Dark Lord. Sheep didn't need to be, and preferably weren't, wicked in nature after all.

He wasn't given much time to think about it before he and his classmates were escorted to their rooms to freshen up before dinner. He took one step into the common room and got a rather curious surprise. Jophery, his closest friend, came in right behind him and let out a startled laugh.

“They have sent uz to live inside a giant pumpkin, mein Freund. Zat or they like to zelebrate Halloween early here. I've never seen so much orange in my live.”

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1. Wallaple is like an apple, only the core has a nut similar to a walnut. Both nut and pulp are edible, and most recipes include both parts of the fruit.

2. Dragon. I mention Harry seeing one in the first book.

3. McGonagall.... gargle gargle... :)

Extra special thanks to Swanpride for her help with the German accents! Otherwise I would have insulted several countries in the course of writing this chapter. :)

Book IV:

Chapter 6: The Peaceful Invasion

As the foreign students and dignitaries were exploring their living quarters for the next nine months, the Order of the Phoenix was gathered yet again, this time at a muggle ski resort that was closed for the season. The lodge house wasn't air conditioned, but opening the windows allowed in fresh cool air and soothing nature sounds. The accommodations were much finer than usual, but no one was in the mood to appreciate it.

Johan still stubbornly kept watch from the shadows, ignoring everyone, including Gilfred and his incessant jokes at his expense. Gilfred, Timmons, Fredric, and Phoebe occupied themselves with a card game, but no one was particularly enthusiastic about losing or winning. Tonks paced in the background, too agitated to sit still. And through it all, Dumbledore sat in an over stuffed chair, drinking his tea and seemingly lost in thought.

"They should be there by now," Tonks muttered. "Why haven't we been notified?"

"I have no doubt you are right," Dumbledore agreed, "But since we are not using our own spies for this mission, I'm afraid we're rather at the bottom of the 'those who must be notified' list. Still, I suspect it won't be that much longer."

"You said that an hour ago."

The old man chuckled. "My dear, when you reach my age, an hour ago isn't very much time at all."

She was ready to snap something at him, but a loud 'RINGGGG' interrupted her. Several people jumped in fright, and everyone turned to the source of the noise. The plain black telephone resting beside Dumbledore's cup of tea stopped for a moment, then let out yet another 'RINGGGG' and scared poor Fredric all over again.

"Well, here you go, my dear," the elderly wizard said. He coughed into his hand, and picked up the phone before its third ring. When he spoke again, it was with the chipper tone of twenty-something-year old female receptionist. "Guten Abend, Alstasenbergs Ski Resort, mein Name ist Alba Dumbeldoff, was kann ich für sie tun?"

There was talking on the other line, which no one else could hear, but went on for nearly five minutes uninterrupted. At last, Dumbledore smiled.

"Ja, danke und auf Wiederhören."

He hung up the phone.

"What did they say?" Tonks asked excitedly.

"They said... oh, excuse me," the wizard chirped femininely, then coughed into his hand again and began speaking normally, "They said everyone arrived safely and are being treated with the utmost courtesy. No one appears to suspect a thing. A secure communications network has already been set up and tested in Hogsmeade."

"And Viktor?" Gilfred asked. "Any word on him?"

"It's still a bit early to be receiving any reports from his end. I am told the Dark Lord himself will be at the Welcoming Feast. It will be our young friend's first real test."

"And if he fails?"

"I have the utmost confidence in him, and so should you."

"He'll be fine," Johan said, not looking away from the window. "Stop looking for trouble where there isn't any. You can freak out when something actually goes wrong, otherwise you're just making a nuisance of yourself."

"Jonny, that isn't the way to talk to a lady," Gilfred admonished, and of course was ignored.

Tonks backed off anyway, stalking out of the room before she did or said something she'd regret later. She hated this plan. Had from the moment she'd been told about it. She'd tried everything to convince Viktor it was a bad idea, but his only response to all her pleas and bargains and threats had been 'If you'd been in my shoes while you were at school, you would have gone in a heart beat'. Infuriatingly true, and not the least bit comforting.

She'd had a death wish when she'd been at school.

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Their arrival at the Great Hall was rather ridiculous in Viktor's opinion, what with the marching and spell work, but the Hogwarts students and staff seemed suitably impressed by it. He thought he looked a lot less ridiculous after watching the Beauxbatons students flutter in like butterflies. He felt distinct pity for those few male students who accompanied the female majority. The Great Hall was large, but still crowded, especially now that the usual four long tables was supplemented with two smaller tables at the end, yet they managed to fit into their seats comfortably.

At least the Durmstang students did. To his left, at the Beauxbatons table, the other students were trying not to look uncomfortable in their wooden seats, and doing a very poor job of it. He looked down the row of elegant, attractive, and weak looking people and couldn't imagine a single one of them being a champion of anything.

"Poor babies," Jophery snickered in German so they wouldn't hear, "How long do you think it will be before one of them starts crying?"

Viktor ignored the remark. They might not look impressive, but their curriculum was as exacting as Durmstang's, if not their physical location. It would be foolish to underestimate them before they had been tested.

Speaking of which...

He turned towards the teacher's table. Madam Maxime, as large as she was, stood out first, but he found others who were more interesting. He recognized Headmaster Minz and Professor Oblitz by sight, but there were others he recognized from photographs and secret files and newspaper articles. Headmistress Bellatrix LeStrange, Death Eater and psychopath. Professor Severus Snape, Death Eater, potion's genius, and assassin. Professor Bonita Toure, Dark Wizard fanatic. Professor Minerva McGonagall... cat lover. He was certain he'd been thoroughly briefed on her, but the only thing he could remember was Dumbledore's offhand remark about 'poor dear Minny'.

And the King of them all, the Dark Lord Voldemort, sat right in the middle, looking completely out of place by his sheer normalcy. From what Viktor had heard, the Dark Lord should have been in his sixties, have red eyes and fangs, and probably resembled a vampire. The Dark Lord in person look in his late twenties, smiled a bit darkly, and had a tan that suggested he spent a lot of time outdoors. Although he did have red eyes. For a long time, Viktor was convinced it was someone else. Even after the man... dictator... monster... raised his goblet and made a toast as their host.

"Welcome, my brothers and sisters, in both magic and nobility. I have extended my hand to your countries in friendship, and now you have graciously reached back in return as young ambassadors. The people of Britain, myself first among them, are honored by your presence. May this be the first step to the reunion of our great nations, and the rebirth of peace."

There was thunderous applause, and everyone lifted their glasses, regardless of what they had, and drank deep. Viktor brought his own goblet to his lips, pretended to drink and then set it aside for the rest of the feast. The Dark Lord lingered only a few minutes after that, then disappeared, leaving Viktor torn between confusion and anger. Should he have just cut through all the spying bullshit and just set the creature on fire?

"Charming fellow," Jophery said, as he watched his friend watch his enemy. "De kind of guy mader vould have vanted my zister to marry... ezept for the whole laying vaste to an entire country ting. Aldough I don't see how being a banker is much better."

He gave his friend an irritated look, but of course Jophery didn't notice.

“Oohhh... look, I tink that's the 'protégé'. Poor guy... or maybe not. Apparently, British girls dig the whole 'the Dark Lord is my Pimp' ting he's got going for him.”

Viktor, of course, couldn't help but look. Harold James Potter looked as nondescript as his mentor, and even less threatening. He had glasses for Merlin's sake. He was talking with a small cluster of people, who must have been his friends, and two of them must have been the girls Jophery was talking about. One of them was a little pixie of girl, red-haired and freckled and chucking a dinner roll at a pair of boisterous twins, who had to have been related to her somehow. The second...

Was the most captivating creature Viktor had ever seen in his entire life.

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“I've got to go, guys,” Hermione said, getting up from the table. “I need to talk with McGunny before taking up my prefect duties. He's probably going to call an emergency meeting later, so I might not see you for the rest of the night.”

They all said their 'good nights', but once she was out of sight, Harry surveyed the room to see if anyone was looking towards him and quietly made his own retreat.

“I'll meet you all in the Common Room later. There's someone I want to talk to.”

He didn't stick around to listen to their questions, and slipped out relatively unnoticed. Once he was clear of the Great Hall, he made a light sprint down the empty corridors to the main entry. There were House Elves sorting out the luggage, popping in and out of existence in front of him. Several of them squeaked in panic when they saw him,

quite adamant in their belief that a House Elf should be neither seen nor heard unless ordered to be so.

“Shhh... It's alright. You're not in trouble,” he assured them. “I just need to step outside for a few minutes. Will you make sure no one locks me out?”

“Oh!” one of them clapped, “Yes! Yes! We will do this for the Monster Slayer! It would be great honor! It is the least we could do!”

The other elves started bobbing their bald little heads.

It took Harry several confused blinks before he realized they were talking about the Basilisk or possibly the 'acrumantula', since he had no idea how much they really knew about the incident in his second year. He figured it was more than most.

“Um... thanks.”

“We is being thanked!” it gasped. “You are too kind, Monster Slayer, sir!”

More happy head bobbing, and Harry was starting to get weirded out.

“Er, you're welcome... bye.”

He slipped out the door, and found it still light outside. The sun had just set over the mountains, but it would be over an hour before true night set in, and he went in search of his friend. As large as the castle grounds were, it wasn't hard to find someone nearly twice as tall as a normal man and furry as a bear. All he had to do was follow the sound of whinnying horses the size of small airplanes to the quidditch pitch and after that it was simple. He found Hagrid rubbing down a horse, staring off into space dreamily. The rest of the animals were eating up the pitch or snout deep barrels of a suspicious amber liquid.

“Hagrid!” he called. The half giant turned his shaggy head towards him and let out a great laugh.

“Arry! Wha' ya doin 'ere? Why ain't you at the feast with the res' o the fine folk?” he said with a wink, then laughed. “They crowd you out? Best keep a bit 'o space. These ladies don' like being crowded themselves.”

Harry wisely did as he was told, and stayed close to the door way. It was too small for any of them to squeeze through, but he couldn't help but wonder what kept them from just flying away?

“I was just wondering what you were doing here.”

“I sent you a note,” Hagrid said, and looked a bit sheepish. “I suppose you were too busy to reply.”

“Hagrid, I would have been happy to have gotten a letter from you. It probably didn't make it past the wards. Most of my mail doesn't.”

“Ya mean ya ne'er got it?”

“I would have written you back if I had. I'm here right now, aren't I?”

Hagrid seemed to think about that, then grinned. “Ya are at that. And I'll be hope'n to see more of you. I missed you back at the bestiary. I enjoyed our lunches together.”

“Me too, Hagrid. But what are you doing here to begin with?”

“Stable hand,” he said, looking rather proud of it. “For the tourney. I'm gonna help take care of the big animals, like these pretty girls.”

He patted the horse's rump affectionately, and she stopped his foot with equal enthusiasm. He barely even flinched.

“My boss didn't want ta let me go, but I told 'im to stick it in his ear... or somethin' like that, anyway. Perhaps it'll make'm appreciate me more when I'm not around. See how he does tak'n care of three headed dogs and bandywols and tubberdewiggins.”

“Harry frowned. “Are they mistreating you, Hagrid?”

The half giant waved it off. "Nah. 'Course not. Things 'ave jus been a bit tight. All these university brains coming up, want'n bigger paychecks for reading so much its pushed their wits clean out of their heads."

They talked about work and life and interesting animals they had met and their plans for the school year, but after a while Hagrid seemed to get distracted. He was ready to say something several times, but then hesitated and started talking about something else. At last, Harry decided to help him out.

"Is something bothering you?"

Hagrid's eyes widen in surprise, and he fidgeted a bit before saying, "No, nothin's bother'n me. I'm happy as could be!"

"Mmm... well, then... was there something you wanted to ask me?"

"Ask you? I... well, maybe... um... maybe later? I feel a bit out o' sorts bout it."

"Sure. I might be busy this weekend, but I should find some time during the week."

"Aye, that'd work fine. I'll put on some tea and-"

"Potter!"

Professor Snape appeared out of the shadows on the other side of the pitch walls, scowling in annoyance. Harry flinched. He had thought no one would notice his absence with all the festivities and extra students, but apparently he had been overly optimistic.

"Um... hi."

"Shut up, Potter. The Headmistress wants a word with you."

A feeling of dread settled over him. It had been a while since he had to deal with the woman, and the fact that he was starting the school year in her office didn't bode well for the rest of the year. He didn't get

to dwell on it for long, for Snape grabbed him by the collar of his robe and physically dragged him back towards the castle. Harry managed a quick goodbye gesture towards a dumbfounded Hagrid, and spent the rest of his trip back inside trying not to lose his balance.

"Professor, please let go!"

"And have you take a detour with a boat ride across the lake?"

"I was just visiting a friend! I wasn't aware I had an appointment!"

"Five points from Gryffindor for wandering out of the castle without permission and another five points for back talk. Keep it up, the night is young."

Harry grimaced but wisely shut up. The professor was in a bad... worse mood than usual, but the night had carried on long and it didn't appear as if it was going to be ending any time soon. The irritated man finally let him go when they reached the first set of stairs, and by the time they reached the gargoyle guarding the headmistress' office, both had composed themselves into strangely similar expressions of cool reserve.

"Wormwood," Snape muttered, and the staircase opened before them. They climbed the stairs, and Harry took a moment to be darkly pleased at the empty case that should have housed the Sword of Gryffindor. The moment was brief. He couldn't spare any of his attention while in Lestrangle's presence.

The headmistress was sitting behind her desk, looking pleased with herself. This was rather alarming for Harry, and it became even more so when he noticed that Natalie was sitting in one of the chairs.

"How good of you to join us," Lestrangle said, smiling darkly. "I was starting to worry that something might have happened to you."

"I'm touched by your concern," Harry said evenly, "I apologize if I inconvenienced you."

"No, no. Ms. Cypher and I were just enjoying a little heart to heart. Witch to witch."

"That's terrifying," he tried, then realized what he said, "... I mean, terrific."

Natalie's stoic expression cracked for just an instant. Lestrangle pretended she hadn't noticed.

"Yes, well, have a seat, Mr. Potter. You've taken up enough of my valuable time. Are you staying, Professor?"

"I am."

"Suit yourself. Mr. Potter, Ms. Cypher, it has come to my attention that you both are fluent in German and French, respectively-"

Harry looked to Natalie, who ignored him, and wondered how he could have missed that.

"- and have an abundance of free time this year. Therefore, I thought it would be wise to apply your talents to the benefit of the school. I am enlisting you as school liaisons to our foreign students. You will assist them in navigating the school, sorting out their schedules, helping them through their studies, and generally making them feel comfortable and welcome here at Hogwarts."

"You're turning us into servants?" Natalie said, indignantly. The headmistress smiled cruelly.

"Of course not. Servants have the option of quitting." The headmistress snapped her fingers, and a large folder fell on both their laps. "These are their students files. Familiarize yourselves with them tonight. You will be leading them on a tour of the castle tomorrow morning at 9 o'clock sharp, and you would do well to know what interests them. I will be quite cross if one of them should get into trouble because you neglected to mention something or they forgot because they were too bored to listen."

"Honestly, wouldn't an older student be better for this? Most of these people are six and seventh years. There has to be-"

"Forget it, Natalie," Harry said, not looking up from the file he was now leafing through. "This was an order from higher up. There's no point in arguing with the person who can't do anything about it."

His ex-girlfriend glared at him.

"Then who should I take my argument to, Oh Wise One?"

"Lord Voldemort, unless you actually have a sense of self preservation, then I'd just take the job. Like you said, they're sixth and seventh years. After we show them around, do you really think they'll come to us if they need help with something?"

She didn't look any happier, but she was Slytherin enough to know when to keep her mouth shut. If he was right, she'd be wasting her breath.

"Well, you seem to have the gist of it," Lestrangle said, looking annoyed now, which meant Harry had probably been spot on. "You should leave now."

The two fourth years and the potion's master didn't need to be told twice, and left quickly. Once out of the office, Natalie turned to Harry.

"How did you know it was Voldemort who ordered it?"

"Because she'd have had to ask and then justify to him why she wanted me to lead around a bunch of people from a country that tried to have me killed... plus it explains why I got that job at the embassy. Practice," he explained. This was the first time she'd talked to him since last year, and he hoped this meant she was ready to forgive him, if only as a fellow victim. He was soon disappointed.

"So it's your fault I'm stuck showing around those French snobs? It figures."

She stomped off. Harry looked after her helplessly. He found himself looking towards Snape for some sort of clue of what he should do, but the man just arched his brow in a wordless 'your asking me'?

“Well, bollocks,” he muttered.

Snape smirked and strode after her, but not before leaving him with, “And another five points for foul language.”

And really, he should have seen that coming.

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Voldemort was enjoying a considerably better, or at least more productive, evening in Hogsmeade with the foreign dignitaries. Most were far too self important to cram themselves into the Great Hall with hundreds of children, regardless of the occasion, and had opted to throw a little soirée of their own. The garden park that had been cultivated over the summer was decorated in canopies of of white silk and paper lanterns floated about in strategic randomness, giving the evening a warm and elegant feel. There was a lot of crystal champagne glasses, hors d'oeuvres made of strange cheeses, and laughing at things that weren't funny. Journalists and photographers circles the room, asking for quotes and pictures, and got them.

By tomorrow morning, the evening's events would be on the front page of every newspaper from Britain to Japan. He was feeling quite pleased with himself, which made it easier to smile through the French ambassador's asinine story about her cousin's attempt to learn Elvish (which was impossible for even a wizard since it required two sets of voice boxes and the ability to hear three decibels above the range of hearing of a dog) and ignore her husbands extremely poor English.

“But jokes aside,” Ambassador Prideux, her accent nearly undetectable, “I thinks its wonderful what you've managed to accomplish within the last five years. The British economy is stronger than it's been in a hundred years, even with the embargo, and your social reforms have been remarkably effective. His Majesty is quite

interested in your Community Service Obligation system in particular.”

“I am flattered,” he lied easily, but couldn't help teasing her a bit. “If he's impressed with the CSO program, perhaps he'd also be interested in our Wizarding Youth Reclamation Agency. I have to say, that is the one I'm most proud of.”

Ambassador Prideux's smile froze, and her gaze suddenly became evasive. Inside, Voldemort cackled in delight. He'd thrown her into a frying pan with only a fire to escape to. Whatever her personal feelings, she couldn't voice her approval for WYRA and go against her country's popular (or at least more public) opinion, nor could she object to it before Britain's ruler in the middle of a peace mission.

“Ah, yes... well, it's certainly a unique idea,” she fumbled, trying to maintain her sophisticated demeanor.

He spared her further embarrassment, more for his own benefit than hers, and continued, “Yes, but I understand it's not for everyone. Britain was facing a critically low population in her magical communities after all, which I understand isn't the case for most of Europe. Hopefully, programs like WYRA will no longer be essential in a few decades.”

Lies. Everything he said, utter lies, but she smiled in relief and not a small bit of admiration. He wondered how she would look at him when his army marched on Paris, and she realized the truth. Would she be afraid of him then or would her admiration only grow? Women were strange and unpredictable creatures.

Schwartzmann was easier to read, but only because Voldemort understood his motivations. The man had maintained the isolationist policy in Germany because that was what the German Minister of Magic wanted, and the ambassador liked his job. Now that the Minister was facing a re-election, his scramble to gain some political clout fell to his studious lackey. Schwartzmann was a spineless worm, bending and creeping through the political muck, and holding no strong opinions about anything. At least he appeared to have the

common sense to be afraid of him, and the will power not to let it show. The man had been discreetly avoiding him all night.

He'd get his claws into the man sooner or later, but for now he could afford to be generous.

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"Can you believe it? Why didn't they tell us!"

"Did you see their uniforms? Why can't we have uniforms like that?"

"I heard the pretty girl's name was Delacour. Fleur Delacour. I mean, wow, even her name is pretty."

"Whose classes are they going to be in? Maybe they'll have their own teachers? There were a couple of people at the teacher's table I didn't recognize."

"Merlin, that woman was huge!"

"Mom and dad are going to flip!"

"ALRIGHT, QUIET!"

The Hogwarts' Herald newsroom fell into an immediate hush, their eyes finding their leader immediately. Horace McGunny ran a tight ship, and this wasn't the first (although it might be the biggest) major event that he had led them through. Composed and serious, he glared out at them with the nerve of a four star general.

"Alright, listen up, we've got some major work to get done. I want the first emergency issue out by Saturday night."

There were some groans, but he ignored them and continued.

"It won't be a full issue, but it's important we get out the general information. Professor Toure had the courtesy to inform me of events in advance, and I've gathered most of the information we'll need.

Tournament rules, schedule, history, etc as well as the list of the exchange students and professors. I'll need four volunteers to help me format and print what I've got, while the rest of you to get started on next Saturday's full issue. Volunteers raise your hands."

Three people raised their hands. He turned to Ron Weasley, trying to avoid his notice behind a seventh year photographer.

"Weasley, you're with us."

"Why me?" he grouched, "Why don't you pick Granger? She's the one who skipped out."

"Granger is performing prefect duties, and will be busy most of the weekend. You on the other hand, still owe me two articles. Besides, everyone else will be busy interviewing the new students, and you don't have the tact for that."

Several people snickered, but stopped when he glared at them.

"Alright, people, assignments are on the board. If you get an idea for an article, you know where to find me. I'll see you all tomorrow, 9 A.M. sharp."

The reporters and photographers and editors scrambled towards the news board, where scraps of paper were dangling, listing jobs and interview and photo assignments. It wasn't their usual system, which involved McGunny selecting a person that best fit a job after painstaking consideration, but in situations like these when they needed to get things done fast, it worked.

McGunny went to his desk, waiting for people with ideas and Granger. She showed up in time for the board to empty, and half the staff had already left. She approached his desk a bit sheepishly.

"Hey, sorry I'm late."

"No need to apologize. I saved you an assignment, and it's a good one."

He handed her a piece of paper that he had saved from the bulletin board melee before hand. There was a name, a picture, and few general facts. It hadn't originally been his intention to assign it to her, but something he had witnessed in the Great Hall had given him the idea.

"His name is Viktor Krum. Bulgarian. He got into Durmstang on a quidditch scholarship, but he's playing professionally now. Don't let that fool you though. He's not just a dumb jock. He was top of his class three years in a row, and is active in a lot of social causes. Muggleborn and squib rights seem to be his favorites. Out of everyone, I think he's got the best shot at being the Durmstang champion."

She scanned the sheet curiously, and that expression didn't change when she looked back to him.

"Why are you giving this to me? Wouldn't O'Connelly or Cokesbury be better suited?"

He shook his head.

"I need someone who is fair, objective, and sensitive. I know you can appreciate how important it is that we don't insult the Durmstang champion."

"Oh... yes, I can understand that, but are you sure? I mean..."

He sighed in annoyance. "Granger, just have the rough draft to me by Thursday."

"Okay." She ducked out of the news room quickly, and he rolled his eyes. He hoped she didn't end up reciprocating Krum's obvious crush. It was bad enough that he couldn't get anything about Potter out of her, it would be even worse if she clammed up over the likely Durmstang champion. He'd have to play it by ear. In the mean time, he had his own story he wanted to work on that had nothing to do with Durmstang, Beauxbatons, or the Triwizard tournament.

It involved the subject of his recent curiosity and the many weird events that seemed to revolve around him, not the least of which were the deaths of a student and a teacher and the release of werewolves upon the entirety of Britain.

Oh, yes, he was going to get some answers out of Harold James Potter if he had to tie him to a chair and pour Verisaterum down his throat.

Book IV:

Chapter 7: The Foreign Occupation

Harry did in fact see Hermione before she got to bed, and after they related their individual assignments, they decided a little cooperation might be beneficial. Harry let her look through his file notes on Krum and offered to see if he couldn't set up a meeting between them, and Hermione made him an outline for a tour around Hogwarts and tips on what might interest or confuse them. He made a copy of it and had it magically sent to Natalie with an apology note for getting her dragged into Voldemort's weird political games. Even if it wasn't his fault.

He wasn't sure what to make of his situation in general. He would have preferred being consulted first, but if asked to be a liaison he didn't think he would have said no. While the situation put him in a politically delicate situation, he couldn't help but admit that he was curious. What was the wizarding world like outside of Britain? How did they run things without a dictator?

Saturday morning, he woke up early with those questions running through his head, and unable to sleep he took Inana out of her basket and took a walk beside the lake. The Durmstang ship floated eerily in the distance, a strange mist rising up where ever it drifted, and Harry decided at some point he was definitely going to paint it. He let Inana loose to hunt, and managed to chase down a breakfast of his own back at the castle, before heading to the Durmstang Common Room.

He met with a bit of trouble along the way. He was on the second floor of the new wing (looking surprisingly ancient considering it had been destroyed and rebuilt last Christmas after Moody's attack), and on his way down to the first when a very beautiful, and very irritated girl stopped him in the hall.

"You zere!" she called, stalking towards him as if he were a criminal preparing to flee. He had to admit he was increasingly tempted to run away the closer she got. "Where are you going? Our dormitory is down zis way! 'Onestly, 'ow can you show us around a castle when you don't even know where you are going?"

He started to explain, but she grabbed his wrist suddenly to tug him along. An incredible shock ran between them, and she dropped his wrist and pulled away. There was a moment of dumbfounded incomprehension as they stared soundlessly at each other, followed by a moment of inexplicable embarrassment. Whatever had passed between them had been magic of some sort, but not the kind typically practiced from books. Now that he had a moment, he could smell magic coming off of her, similar to what he felt around werewolves, but the animal was all wrong.

He wondered what she was.

Then realizing he might have just magically violated her on accident, thought it better not to ask.

“Sorry,” he said, “I think you've got the wrong person. I'm the Durmstang guide.”

Her awkwardness quickly vanished, and she let out an annoyed sigh.

“Then I will not bother you further. We shall entertain ourselvez. Away with you.”

She made a dismissive gesture that Harry found rather insulting, but decided to ignore. He really did need to get going if he didn't want to be late. The Durmstang dormitories were easy to find. There were no portraits to conceal the entrances' whereabouts, and the doors themselves had been left open. There were only three girls amongst the twenty-something Durmstang students (but whether that was because only three girls had decided to come or there was just a disproportionate number of boys to girls at Durmstrang or both Harry didn't know) and all of them were lingering at the doorway to their separate rooms.

“Guten Morgen,” he greeted politely.

They smiled back a bit shyly, and managed their own 'good mornings' with varying levels of success.

"Good morning!" came a considerably more enthusiastic and masculine greeting from the boy's dormitory. The voice's owner, a boy with wild blond hair and a mouth meant for laughing, came out and Harry felt an automatic compulsion to like him. There was something about the openness of his expression that reminded Harry of the werewolves. "Hey, Viktor, everyone! He's here!"

He turned back to the Gryffindor and gestured for him to come in. Harry did, took one look around, and winced. It looked like the inside of a pumpkin! The boy laughed.

"I'm glad we weren't the only ones who noticed. It's really not that bad. Our dorms back home aren't decorated in anything except black or gray. This is actually a rather cheerful change of pace."

"Sorry, I've never been in here before. They only finished re-constructing this part of the castle over the summer."

"Re-constructing?"

"It got blown up."

The boy laughed again, until he realized Harry was serious. "No shit? Hey, Viktor, you hear that?"

"I heard it, Jophery. I'm sure the Beauxbaton's students are wondering what you're shouting about."

Harry's first impression of Viktor Krum was that he was Jophery's opposite in every way. Where Jophery was amiable and boisterous, Krum looked as inviting as Snape in a dark alley. Having read the professional quidditch player's file, he couldn't help but feel a bit of nervousness as he approached. This was Durmstang's most likely champion, and if Harry got on his bad side, he couldn't be certain of the consequences. And judging by the way all the other boys seemed to be looking towards Krum for instruction on what to do next, it would also determine how he got along with everyone else as well.

"Good morning," he tried experimentally.

Krum glowered at him for a long moment, measuring him with his dark eyes, before finally speaking.

“Good morning. We go now?”

Well, that wasn't too horrible.

“Um... yeah, if everyone is ready.”

A quick glance around the room showed everyone was. Harry led the boys out into the hall where the girls joined them. It suddenly became very apparent to the Gryffindor that his job sucked. Every single one of the Durmstang students, boys and girls both, were not only older, but also taller than him. It gave him the very bad impression that they were stalking him rather than following him, and he had to brutally crush his instinct to run away very quickly. He knew the school inside and out, he could bolt into a secret passageway and they'd never find him. Not the best impression to leave them with, however.

“Um... okay, my name is Harry Potter, I'll be your guide, if you have any questions or need any help with something, just ask me. I guess we can start the tour right here...”

Hermione had gone over everything he should say, and more importantly what he shouldn't say, when showing them all around. The 'shouldn't's involved everyone who had died or been injured by typical Hogwarts weirdness in the last couple of years, and anything about himself (which mostly fell into the same category). With Krum standing beside him at the front of the crowd, looking at him with his dark measuring gaze, he thought perhaps the g-rated tour wasn't going to cut it.

“Alright, this part of the castle was destroyed last Christmas by an escaped prisoner. Former Ministry of Magic Auror Alastor Moody murdered a construction worker, assumed his identity, and planted bombs all over the school intending to blow it all up when the students returned from winter break. Luckily, he was discovered before then. Professor Vesper Larousse and Professor Severus Snape managed to stop him from destroying the school, but Professor Larousse was killed. This entire corridor was collapsed

during the battle except for a section of the tower that we're heading towards now, which is named in her honor."

There was a startled silence amongst the students as they made their way to the tower, but once they reached the stairs Krum, whose expression hadn't changed, broke it.

"We have heard of this Alastor Moody, but not the story you speak of. What I remember hearing was that Moody was killed while trying to assassinate a student."

He was being challenged, Harry realized quickly. Challenged to be honest and confess his involvement in the matter. The only problem was that he wasn't sure what would happen if he did or didn't. If he admitted he was there, it would expose a weakness, a memory of things that still haunted his dreams some nights. If he lied or dismissed the matter, they wouldn't trust him. Of course, if he lied he wouldn't be worthy of their trust, so that wasn't unreasonable. What they'd do if they didn't trust him was anyone's guess.

He stopped on the tower stairs before a plaque.

IN HONOR OF

PROFESSOR VESPER LAROUSSE

WHO DIED PROTECTING THE SCHOOL AND ITS STUDENTS

FROM THE TERRORIST ALASTOR MOODY

Dec. 25, 19XX

"I was there when it happened," Harry said, pointedly looking at the plaque. "The school was evacuated before Moody knew we were on to him, but there were still people I cared about left behind. I went back for them and Moody found us. We all would have died if it weren't for her and Professor Snape. I don't know everything you've heard, and I don't really care if you believe me, but that's the truth."

He turned away and walked up the stairs without looking back at them, not wanting them to see his face until he could regain control of his emotions. Sadness was only part of it. He resented them for bringing it up. No one said anything while he struggled with it. He finally regained control of his voice.

"If you look out the window, you can see Hogsmeade a few miles out. It's normally not that big, but they have some interesting stores and pubs. There is a Hogsmeade weekend scheduled once a month..."

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The tour went much easier after that. Krum started asking questions once they reached the moving staircases, which weren't exactly friendly but didn't challenge him any further. Eventually everyone else started to become curious and started asking questions as well. The Durmstang students seemed rather stoic by nature, but even they couldn't help express a bit of curiosity at all the wonder that was Hogwarts. It was a long tour, there was a lot to see after all, but the last of it Harry spent outside.

The Durmstang students soon had to strip off the outer layers of their uniforms due to the heat, but no one complained or asked to go inside. Here, several of the students remarked that the weather was remarkably pleasant compared to their school, which Harry learned was founded by a wizard prince, who slew an ice demon, and was consequently plagued by winter where ever he went. Unable to live in populated cities or anywhere near farms, the man had moved into the mountains and created a school. This was very interesting to Harry, who decided to ask Voldemort about demons the next time they met. It wouldn't do to kill one and have say, a flood follow you around... or droughts or any number of other natural disasters or phenomena.

At last, it was half past noon and Harry led everyone inside for lunch. He waved at his friends, but ended up sitting with his group to answer questions. The Beauxbatons students were at the adjoining table, looking exhausted and extremely nervous (particularly when they noticed him looking at them), and back at the Slytherin table, Natalie

was looking smug. He wondered exactly what she had told them during her tour. Some how he didn't think it was what had been on the outline he'd sent her.

"You have a very interesting school," Krum said idly, assembling a rather impressive butterbrot* out of ingredients Harry hadn't seen since he was eight. "There must be a lot of interesting people who study here."

As it turned out, Krum wasn't really Snapish at all. With Snape you could always tell that he hated you. With Krum you couldn't tell if he hated you, liked you, and or even realized you were there unless he said something.

"Oh, yeah, we've got all sorts of different people. I mean, the only real requirement to get into the school is a higher than average magical level, and that can show up anywhere and in anyone. Rich, poor, pureblood, muggleborn, athletes, geniuses, anarchists, socialites... and at least a few people who aren't entirely human. I think this one kid in Ravenclaw is part wood elf."

"Muggleborns? I thought muggleborns were not permitted to attend Hogwarts," Jophery said, looking surprised. Krum kicked him under the chair.

"No, they're allowed, My best friend is a muggleborn. You just have to take this really boring class the summer before you attend and pass an exam, and then they let you in. Actually, I met a lot of my friends in that class."

"Why would you be in that class? You're not a muggleborn," Jophery pointed out. Krum kicked him again, this time harder. Harry shrugged, pretending not to notice that they seemed to know certain things about him. He wasn't surprised. They must have heard about him in the newspapers or been told (warned) about him by someone like Schwartzmann, just as they likely had been warned about Voldemort and the headmistress and how he had been informed about them.

"I didn't know I was a wizard until I was ten, and I never knew about my parents being magical until I started at Hogwarts. They raised me

in Germany as muggles, and after they died, I was raised by my mom's muggle sister in Surrey who never said anything about it. So they stuck me in the class once I'd tested with a high magical aptitude. Good thing too, since I couldn't tell the difference between a ward and owlry before that."

"Hmm..." Krum said, looking at him directly for the first time, "Tell me, have you..."

Whatever he was going to ask faded on his tongue, and Harry looked over at him to see what had happened. Krum's gaze wasn't on him, but caught on something else. He turned to see and found Hermione heading towards them with Colin Creevey at her heels. She gave them all her most charming smile, before turning to Harry.

"Hi, Harry."

"Hey, Hermione," he said, then turned to the other students. "This is Hermione Granger of Malfoy. She's with the school newspaper."

"Hello. I was wondering if we could get a picture."

Krum blinked in surprise, and came back to himself quickly.

"Ah, yes."

Harry moved out of the way and let Colin take their picture. He was vaguely amused to note that it must not have been the custom where ever they were from to smile in a picture, as they all glared fiercely. Just out of hearing range, Hermione asked him how it was going.

"It's going alright. They're not as scary as they pretend to be."

"And did you ask Krum yet?"

"Not yet. I still haven't figured out if he's planning my demise or is just disgruntled about his dorm room's color scheme."

She rolled her eyes. "Quit joking around. I'll be in the library for most of the afternoon if you want me."

"Studying before we've even had a class yet?"

"There's a reason I'm the head of our grade and you're not."

"Yeah, probably having to do with an elaborate plot by Voldemort that will end in the conquering of Europe."

"Just so you know, I've always wanted to own Belgium," she said, and sauntered off. A moment later, Colin scurried after her. He went back to the table to finish eating, and noticed Krum was still distracted. The only way Harry could tell because his expression had softened from stolid interrogator to vapid school girl. It was a frightening change.

"Are you alright?"

"Hm?" the older boy started, composing himself into something closer to a lost tourist but no where near recovered. "Yes, I am fine. Very fine. That girl just now, that Her-mon-e Granger, is that your girl? She's very lovely."

Harry choked on... absolutely nothing. It figured that something just had to go wrong today.

"No..." he admitted reluctantly, "...she's not my girl. She's just my friend, the one I mentioned before."

Jophery chuckled. "I wasn't aware a guy could be 'just friends' with a girl."

"It's not that hard. A lot like getting along with a sister, I suppose," he said reasonably, ignoring the implication the other was making. With some trepidation, he turned to Krum. "If you want to meet her, I can set up an interview for the Hogwart's Herald with her."

"Oh, can I get an 'interview' too?!" asked Jophery, looking around the great hall and landing on Angelina Johnson. "How about with her? She looks very... inquisitive." He made a gesture with his eyebrows that had Harry choking on absolutely nothing again.

"If I have to kick you again, my friend, it's going to be in the groin," Krum warned with a menacing glower. "And once will be enough."

"It was just an innocent suggestion," he said sulkily.

Harry shook his head and wondered if he shouldn't introduce Jophrey to the Weasley twins. Then realized it probably would result in an 'international incident', especially if Fred learned about the Angelina Johnson comment. Wars had probably been started over less.

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Tom wandered the school on silent wings, avoiding being seen but not particularly worried if he was. It would hardly be odd to see an owl, even outside of the Great Hall and the owlry, within the castle. He'd made a thorough exploration before the students had arrived to test the limitations of his current form, and found there were surprisingly few. The castle was designed to allow owls entry, and it still acknowledged Tom as one of its students.

He'd originally taken up residence in the owlry, but soon decided it was impractical, since the other birds there were scared of him and their avoidance of him would draw more attention than his avoidance of them. Now he lived in the Room of Requirement, and haunted the corridors of the schools at his leisure.

He'd spent most of the morning following around the Beauxbaton's students and the Cypher girl, which had been one of the most hilarious experiences of his life.

"And this is were the last teacher died. Terrorist attack," Natalie said with all the plastic cheer of a nursery school teacher. "Luckily, they managed to find the rest of the magical explosives... at least they think they did. They said they were pretty sure they did. Just in case I wouldn't touch the walls if I were you..."

"When the weather is good, the lake is great for swimming and boating. Just watch out for the giant squid... and the grindylows... and the carnivorous lake weed..."

"No one is suppose to go into the Forbidden Forest, hence the name Forbidden, but every so often something wanders into the school. Did I tell you about the acumantula? No? Good thing Potter killed it, or we'd be over run with the things. They lay their eggs in their victims while they're still alive, you know... Poor Sweetey, she was so young..."

So on and so forth, until no one felt safe enough to look around a corner let alone open a door. The leader of the group, a part veela he was certain, had been game at first, but after awhile even she looked disturbed. Not enough that she was cowering, just enough to look like she was questioning what exactly she had gotten herself into.

Of the entire lot, there had only been a handful of boys, but they seemed to have been rich and well taken care of, which Tom was looking for in his next body. He still wasn't entirely certain he wanted to possess a foreigner, but the idea had certain benefits. One, he could get out of the country and safely away from Voldemort to begin planning a regime of his own. Two, he could eliminate his foreign enemies before they even knew he was amongst them, chief among them Dumbledore and his Order of the Perpetually Burning Peacock. Three, if he could somehow take Harry with him, that would solve the problem of insuring the boy's safety and allow him the opportunity to reveal his elder counterpart's misdeeds against him. There was still the problem of being out of the loop in Voldemort's plans of course, and that was one of the reasons he hesitated. Possessing one of Voldemort's lackeys had benefits of its own, and if he had to choose among them it would definitely be Snape. He had both the Dark Lord's ear and authority over Harry. Snape would be tricky, however, having both a strong will and being an accomplished occlumens.

He had time to make up his mind. Opportunities would more than likely present themselves, and he still hadn't examined the Durmstang boys.

He just had to be patient.

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Viktor returned to his rooms, more than a little conflicted about the day's events. He wasn't really surprised that Voldemort would send his protégé to guide (spy on) them, but he had to say he was surprised by the guy himself.

Harry Potter was a nice kid.

Not a miniature Dark Lord, not an evil incarnated into younger body, or even just an arrogant prick. He was just an ordinary sort of kid. A little nervous speaking in front of strangers, but obviously proud of his school. Perhaps a little adventurous. He seemed to know quite a bit about surrounding countryside and the secret passages and rooms in the school. A little simple with his German, but then he hadn't really had a reason to speak in six years. Nothing that gave him the impression that the kid was hiding anything or faking.

There were reports that Potter could speak to snakes, killed a monster, and commanded werewolves, but Viktor hadn't seen any evidence of it and was growing increasingly skeptical. He seemed kind of small to be doing those sorts of things.

He'd even set up an interview with his best friend, who he had been convinced was his girlfriend by how closely they had sat together during the Welcoming Feast. Apparently, Potter just happened to have friends who were girls. Which was kind of odd to Viktor. At Durmstang, there weren't very many girls, so the few that were there tended to get a boyfriend and avoid the other boys, unless they were related somehow. As annoying as Jophery's comments had been, he realized he had been thinking along the same lines. It was just one thing among hundreds that was different between Durmstang and Hogwarts, and he was starting to feel the culture shock.

He really needed Dumbledore's encouragement and insight right now. The man had tried to warn him that it would be difficult, not just because of the mission, but because of the many distractions that would present themselves. Viktor hadn't listened, convinced he had

the discipline to see things through, and he still believed that, it was just...

He hadn't expected the people to be nice. Or normal. Or in Hermione's case... beautiful.

What had he gotten himself into?

"Hey, Viktor, I know we're living in the Room of Eternal Halloween, but must you act like a vampire? You're brooding is bringing me down," Jophery chided. "Are you homesick or love sick or just plain sick? I thought their sausage looked a little questionable at lunch."

"I'm fine. Just thinking about things. This place... isn't what I expected."

His friend looked a bit more sympathetic to that. They had both been raised with the belief that Britain belonged to the devil and assumed that meant it was inhabited by his demons and everywhere you went was thunderstorms and lightning and dark shadowy places. And Voldemort... He didn't seem particularly dangerous or evil, but of course they hadn't gotten very close. He looked very much like a movie star. Potter looked like his somewhat more awkward baby brother who you see occasionally dragged into photos by happenstance. At least the Headmistress and the Potions' Professor looked appropriately evil. It was so much easier when they looked like they wanted to kill you.

"Don't worry about it. We just arrived. We'll figure things out as we go. Nine months is a long time to pretend to be anything. If things aren't on the up and up, they'll slip up. Otherwise, hey, the situation isn't as bad as we thought. That's a good thing, Viktor. I think you came in expecting the worst, but it's a not bad thing if that's not what you find. Yeah?"

Viktor gave him a small smile. There were reasons he was friends with Jophery, despite how annoying he could be and normally was. He was a simple guy. He viewed things in simple terms. It was pretty hard to find a situation in which you could confuse or manipulate him.

He was glad to have him here.

“Especially when it comes to the girls. British witches are cute. They actually pluck their eyebrows here.”

And at the same time...

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Monday morning, Harry woke early with the rest of his dorm mates for their first day of classes. He couldn't have been happier. As well as things had gone this weekend with the Durmstang students, he was feeling rather put upon by Sunday night. He had wanted to hang out with his friends and settle into the dorm with everyone else, but instead found himself at the beck and call of people just a little too old and little too different for him to feel completely relaxed around. He liked them for the most part, but they weren't really his friends.

With classes starting, he hoped this would mean they would find students in their own classes to help them through the day, and he could focus on his own endeavors.

“Good morning,” Harry said, settling in beside Hermione at the breakfast table. She looked as if she had been there for hours already, reading her History of Magic text for their first period class. Clyde stumbled into a nearby seat, and looked like he wouldn't be awake until after that class was finished. Of course, both instances were fairly typical for both of them.

“Good morning,” she replied cheerfully.

“Geerrr meehhhh...” Clyde... said.

Ginny came up behind him and slapped him upside the head.

“I didn't know you'd taken Trollish over the summer,” she quipped, and he just glared at her nastily. “Hey Hermione, hey Harry.”

“Hey, Ginny, did you get your books in time?”

"I did, but I heard some of the sixth and seventh year girls complain that they didn't. They're supposed to get them by the end of the week though, so hopefully the teachers will cut them some slack."

"Hmm, maybe I should write an article about that," Hermione said thoughtfully, "... as a warning not to try and get your school supplies last minute. By sixth year, they really ought to know better."

"If they've never had a problem by the time their sixth years, it shouldn't really be a common problem," Ginny pointed out, and headed over towards the rest of her yearmates.

"She got you there. Besides, you have your interview on Krum," he reminded her. "4 o'clock in the library."

"I know, I know. Thanks by the way."

"That's what friends are for... just don't tell Draco about this. I think he might turn me into newt if he found out I set you up with a guy."

She rolled her eyes. "You didn't 'set me up'. This isn't a date. It's an interview. A perfectly professional interview."

"Mmm... well that's a relief... just don't tell Draco about it."

The day was long, as it usually was for the first day of classes, and rather boring. Most of the foreign students were fifth years or older, so they saw only two or three of them at their core classes. They had History of Magic, Herbology, and just before lunch Dark Arts and Defense. Professor Oblitz was not as bad as Professor McNair, but he wasn't nearly as fun as Larousse had been either. He was rather like Professor Snape, except he cussed when he grew impatient (which didn't take long), and he didn't seem to trust turning his back to the students. Also like Snape, he didn't dither about on the first day, just handed out a syllabus and started teaching like they'd been doing it for months.

"Der are many dark creatures that inhabit forests, and dey have killed many people, magical and non-magical alike, but perhaps the most sinister of dese creatures are the vones dat make demselves

comfortable around people and der settlements...” he lectured from behind his podium. On a table beside him was a large box-shaped object covered in a tarp, which he finally removed. The box was made of glass, and inside was what looked like the skin of some sort of large black animal, but it moved around as if there was something still beneath it.

“Dis is a lethifold, perhaps the most infamous of the 'domesticated' monsters. Originally from tropical Africa, it made its way into South America, the Caribbean, and parts of da Mediterranean on slave ships during da last five hundred years, although recent efforts to remove dem have been met with some success. Dese creatures are most closely related to snakes, but only about as much, as say, a dragon would be. Most importantly, dey feed only on humans, often infants, although dey are capable of eating fully grown men. Dey come upon der victim while dey are sleeping, smother dem, and den eat dem whole.”

There was a collective shiver across the classroom as they looked at the shapeless thing. They couldn't see any teeth, but neither could they see a head or any part of the thing that might actually be vulnerable to attack. Harry was rather reminded of the day he'd inadvertently attacked his cousin with his bed sheets, which looking back was pretty funny... or had been until now. It really didn't sound like a pleasant way to die... if there was such a thing.

“Lethifolds are fire resistant, but will burn under extreme temperatures. However, as dey tend to be found in villages and hovels, it is generally a bad idea to set dem on fire. Most experts agree dat a Patronus Charm is by far da most effective defense and offense against dem, but is difficult to master. The Patronus Charm is a deterrent for many dark creatures, so I expect all of you to be able to create one by midterm. I suggest you start practicing now. The first person to master it will earn twenty points for der House. For now, I expect a two foot essay on da Patronus Charm and da creatures it can be used against, due Friday. Dismissed.”

There was a unified groan. No one liked essays on the first day of class, particularly two foot long ones. Hermione was, naturally, ecstatic. Of course, she hadn't noticed the weird way Oblitz had been

watching Harry the entire class period, even if he hadn't said anything to him. Harry had gotten the distinct impression that the German professor was daring him to perform the Patronus Charm first.

This of course, made Harry want to rise to the challenge... and then not to. He wasn't sure what would happen if he did succeed after all. What was Oblitz looking for? Confirmation that he was a powerful wizard? That he was as evil as the Dark Lord?

He decided to ask for some advice before he did anything rash. Luckily, he had Potions just after lunch.

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"I need advice," Harry said after potions class. It had been a fairly typical class, except for the fact that their first assignment was a two and a half foot essay on potions that didn't require boiling (Harry suspected Snape was now in direct competition with Oblitz which sort of suited his own purposes just fine). Everyone had left quickly, except for Harry, and in a bad mood, except of course for Hermione.

Snape didn't even bother looking away from the board he was currently writing on for the next period. "You have a Head of House, Mr. Potter, and despite what you may have heard, it isn't me."

"It's political," Harry tried.

Snape just snorted.

"It's about Professor Oblitz," he tried again.

This time he got a glance, and no sarcastic sounds. He took that as a sign to continue.

"He's having the class learn the Patronus Charm, and set a challenge to give twenty points to whoever gets it first."

Now Snape gave him a full out glower. "Are you asking my permission to show off?"

"No! I just... I get this weird feeling he was challenging me to do it."

"What gave your inflated ego that impression?"

"He was looking at me when he said it."

Snape considered, then seemed to dismiss it, then reconsidered it again.

"Play dumb...er. Wait until my goddaughter and Draco get it first, then pretend they taught you how. If this is in fact a ... test, it's one to test your potential. This could be simple curiosity on Oblitz's part, but it could still be used by those hostile towards you. A measure of your strengths and weaknesses."

Harry nodded. He had been more worried about Dumbledore sending another assassin, but Snape's assessment seemed more likely. And ironically more optimistic.

"This advice applies to your new foreign friends, as well. Don't lie directly, but avoid demonstrating any of your... unusual... talents. If the political situation changes, I don't want them taking information that might be used against us with them to our enemies. Is that understood?"

Well, that was more disturbing. The other students didn't strike him as spies... but then again if you could tell a person was a spy they must be pretty lousy at their job. But still, they were just kids like him... which thinking about it like that made the possibility of international intrigue seem more plausible.

"Yes, sir."

"Then go, before people start implying weird things... like we get along."

"Or I'm a masochist."

Snape lifted a curious brow.

"Who taught you that word?"

"... You did."

Curiosity turned to annoyance.

"... Go."

He left.

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1. A butterbrot (at least as I understand it) is German equivalent of a sandwich, except they're not really the same thing. Different sort of bread, different types of ingredients (although sandwiches are pretty versatile so perhaps they really are alike).

Book IV

Chapter 8: The Knighted

As far as Natalie was concerned the weekend had been a marvelous success. She'd terrorized half the foreign population of Hogwarts, insured there would be no foolish mischief making in the interim, and still fulfilled her obligations and all without Harry's silly little list of suggestions, which probably hadn't been written by Harry to begin with. It smacked of Encyclopedia Hermionia.

Snape hadn't been as pleased, but it was hard to please Snape anyways so she didn't feel particularly contrite.

She was still stuck with the Beauxbaton's students for lunch though, which was enough to make her a tad annoyed. Not like it mattered much, since Draco had run off with the Gryffindorks and the Great Red Prat for lunch out by the lake, and it wasn't any fun sitting at the Slytherin table if she couldn't make Pansy Parkinson jealous at the same time, but she still would have liked options.

"Ze English food is zo bland. Does no one believe in zpices 'ere?" Delacour complained. Natalie wanted to ask if she wanted some cheese with her whine, but thought that might be too clever for the other girl to understand. She was starting to doubt the promotion of peace with France. The more time she spent with them, the more she thought they really needed to get conquered before their brains turned into goo.

"Oh, yes, we used to use a lot of spices, but it took too much effort to sort out which spices had been replaced with poisons and we had to stop. I heard one year it was so bad the school lost half the house elves that worked in the kitchen," she said tiredly.

Delacour glared at her, and pointedly took a large bite of her fish. Not so stupid, after all, it seemed. Smart enough to know Natalie was teasing, at least.

"Do you not 'ave friends of your own, Natalie, or were they all killed in the last orc invasion?"

Much better. “No, no, they are around. They're enjoying the weather while they can. Showing off their summer tattoos and such.”

Delacour didn't seem to know whether she was having them on with that, which Natalie only partially was. She'd heard of Harry's tattoo from Draco, right before she'd told him to shut up, which he had done, but not before she found herself dying of curiosity about what it looked like. If she leaked the info to the press, would they manage to get a picture?

“Your British wit is so charming,” her French nemesis said offhandedly, grimacing at her left over meal, “I suppose what comes out of your mouth is a result of what you've been shoving into it.”

“If so, you'll be quite witty come May. You might actually have something interesting to say by then,” she said dismissively, taking a sip from her cup.

“Et tu peux le tatouer sur ton cul cet été.”

Natalie choked on her tea.

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Harry was the last to arrive at Double Celtic Magic and Culture, but he didn't see anyway it could be helped. First, he'd had to go back to his room, empty out all of his morning classes' textbooks, and replace them with his Celtic ones, which filled his bag so much he barely had room for his parchment or quills. Secondly, he had gotten lost. 'In the willow grove' was printed where his class should have been. It wasn't quite specific enough for him.

He did managed to find it though, if only because he'd spotted someone who actually seemed to know where they were going.

The willow grove was exactly that, and nothing more, nestled between the edge of the Forbidden Forest and a small brook that ran into the lake. There were only ten students, aging from fourth to

seventh, sitting on blankets in the spaces between the trees around a man only slightly elevated on a low stool. They had all removed their school robes and their shoes, and looked more like children at story time than serious students. The teacher was a patient looking man with white hair and had just a few strands of red in his beard, and welcomed him with a gesture of his hand. Out of everyone, Harry only recognized two of the students as fourth years, one a Slytherin and the other a Hufflepuff.

“Tagaimid,” the teacher said, and gave Harry a terrible start. His hand went instinctively to the mark on his chest, but there was not so much as a tingle of magic from it. The teacher gave him a curious look. “It means 'welcome in'. Have a seat. Make yourself comfortable.”

“I am Professor Brennan,” he said, his voice just barely hinting at an Irish accent, “But you can just call me, Teacher.”

There were no syllabuses, note taking, essay assignments, or really much of anything resembling a class with the exception that they were all learning. The older students did have assignments over the summer, but they weren't written down, and entailed translating a fable in Gaelic into English and then explaining what it was about right there. There were a lot of Fae involved, which Harry wasn't entirely sure involved witches and wizards or sort of fairy race he couldn't identify or both. Brennan listened through the entire story and explanation, and corrected nothing until the end. He never suggested their interpretations were wrong, only asked other students what else they might have thought it meant, and made references to things they might not have known while making their interpretations and asked how it might have changed their ideas.

Harry didn't understand half of it, but enjoyed listening anyway. Every so often someone said something that just sent a shiver down his spine, like the teacher's greeting had. Amongst the willows, two hours passed quickly, punctuated every so often by laughing when someone's story turned silly or was mistranslated into nonsense. By the end of it, though it was hot and his friends were waiting for him at the castle, he didn't want to leave.

"Very good," the teacher said at last, "You have given even me something to think about. Friday there should be rain, so leave your books and wear boots if you have them. The ground should be nice and soft for a little bone hunting. Review chapter twelve in volume one of Celtic Magic and chapter 3 in Art and History."

Harry and the two other fourth years were confused by that, but the other students seemed to know what was going on and either grinned or groaned

"My youngest pupils, if you wouldn't stay for a moment, I have something special for you."

Harry and the others remained behind as the older students gathered up their things and left, watching as the man pulled out a small bag from under his stool.

"I want you to put your hand in the bag and feel around. When you find something that feels right, take it out. This isn't a test and you're not on the clock. Take as long as you need. Mr. Potter, you will go last."

Harry was shocked, and strangely hurt. Had he done something wrong?

The Slytherin girl stuck her hand inside, and a few seconds later pulled out a dark purple crystal. The Hufflepuff boy took only a little longer and pulled out a large feather, reddish brown with black markings on it. Both looked very surprised. Brennan held out the bag to him, his congenially expression not changing a bit. Harry wasn't certain what was going on.

His hand found its way into the bag anyway, and there found neither stones or feathers but what seemed like marbles, glassy and smooth. He gave the teacher a questioning look.

"Keep going," the man encouraged. "Feel around, touch them individually until you find the one you like."

Uncertainly, he did as instructing, feeling each little marble. He wasn't sure what he meant by 'one you like', because they all felt exactly the same to him. The longer he kept searching the more convinced he was that he was being teased. His patience running out, he shoved his hand into the very bottom of the bag... and stopped. There was something odd about the bottom. It was cooler. No, not just cooler, it was cold! His fingers wiggled around, searching out the source of the chill, until at last they found a marble that felt as if it had been made of ice. He pulled it out.

In his hand was not a marble or even a piece of ice. It was a stone the size of a Snitch, dark gray with two thin lines running in a perfectly straight parallel. It was a river rock.

"Ah, I wouldn't have guessed water for you, young man. You struck me as more of an air person. That's the way it goes sometimes," Brennan laughed gently, then turned to the rest of them. "You young lady," he said, pointing to the Slytherin girl. "Have a crystal formed inside of a geode. Do you know what a geode is? It's a hollow volcanic rock in which crystals form under extreme heat. Your affinity to it suggest your spiritual element is fire."

He turned to the Hufflepuff boy. "You hold the broad feather of an Himalayan eagle, which spends more of its life riding the wind than settling on the ground. They'll even sleep while flying. Your spiritual element is air."

And finally he landed on Harry.

"This stone was pulled from a sacred spring in Ireland, flowing in one shape or another from the sea at the northern most point of the country to the sea at the southern end. This stone was pushed over hundreds of miles, over thousands of years from one end of the country to the other by the gentle, persistent force of that spring. It's been worn smooth and almost perfectly round during that time by that very same force. It is extremely powerful."

The other two looked skeptical. To them it only looked like a regular rock. They'd seen prettier ones in their gardens, but Harry could feel it, as cold in his hand as the spring water must have been for

thousands of years. Harry could just imagine what this simple rock must have gone through. How many creatures had drunk from its waters? How many eras had come and gone? Floods? Wars? Summers and winters?

“These items are keystones. They have an affinity to your magic which allows them to be excellent storage devices. You can pour your extra magic into them and they'll hold it for you until you want it, say, for a very powerful spell, or in case you're in a situation where you must cast spells repeatedly without rest.”

“So we can keep them?” the Slytherin girl asked, as if getting something for nothing was always a trick.

“Yes, they belong to you. They'd be useless to me, and almost everyone else. Even other people whose element is fire, probably won't be able to use your particular keystone as well as you can. There are different types of fires, after all, just as there are different types of water and air and most particularly earth. These ones are simply the ones that suit you all best from what I have. You might find keystones of your own that work even better one day.”

“Do you have a keystone, Professor, I mean, Teacher?”

The man smiled and reached into his pocket, pulling out what looked to be a stone but... not.

“What is it?” the girl asked.

“It's petrified wood, my Pupil. Wood so old, it's become fossilized into stone. This too is a powerful keystone.”

“Can we touch it?” the girl asked.

“You may.”

They each reached out to touch it. Harry only brushed it lightly with his finger tips. He could feel the magic inside, pulsating against his fingertips like a heart. It seemed disrespectful to fondle it too much,

but the others didn't seem to notice. The man put it back into his pocket.

"Now, as much as I enjoy your company, I recommend returning to the castle and start reading the introductions in all seven of your text books, as well as chapter 1 in Celtic Magic Volume 1 on keystones. There won't be any written tests, but I guarantee I'll know who has been keeping up on their homework and who hasn't. I'll see you all on Friday."

There was some grumbling, although not too much since they didn't actually have write essays for once. They gathered up their things and made their way back to the castle. Harry lingered behind the others. Still having one more question for his teacher before he left.

"Why did you tell me to wait last?"

Brennan's expression remained as gentle as ever. "Walk with me."

Instead of heading back towards the castle, they moved further into the grove until they were walking along the spring and towards the lake.

"You are different from my other pupils, at least from those two. Understand, I don't mean that in a bad way, but you will be treated differently and held to different expectations."

"Why? How am I different?"

"Because you are a pagan, and they are not."

"How did you-"

"I could tell the moment I saw you, but I knew before then. Professor Snape had a talk with me before the school year started..." Harry wondered exactly what they had talked about, how insulting Snape had managed to be, and if he should be angry or not. "... And I'm rather glad he did. I would have completely underestimated you otherwise."

"I don't understand. What difference does it make if I'm pagan or not? I'm not really a Druid, and I don't know anymore about it than anyone else."

"That's not true," Brennan said, staring pointedly at him. "You have achieved what Druids spend most of their lives hoping to achieve. You've tapped into the very essence of the Earth, drawn on Her power, and become a tool for Her will. You have reached the very core of a Druid's way of life. She has blessed you for this."

"I didn't intend for this to happen," he insisted, "I didn't want anything from Her, but it just sort of... the Dark Lord just sort of... I don't know how I got here."

Brennan remained quiet for a while, as they reached the lake and there stopped. They stared out over the lake together, taking in the mountains and the water and the sky that seemed as if it could go on forever.

"I don't know how you got here either, and I don't know why," the man said at last, "But perhaps in your journey for knowledge you will find the answers you seek. All beings are created with a purpose, both in their life and their death, and I believe your purpose is larger than most. As your Teacher, I will help you if I can."

"Thank you."

"It seems we've gotten off topic, however. To answer your first question, I made you wait last so that you wouldn't inadvertently influence the other pupils choices in keystones. Being blessed by the Earth, your magic is more easily absorbed by different types of keystones, even those not of your element. If you had gone first, you would have... I suppose 'corrupted' is the best word I can think of... corrupted the other keystones and they may have selected different ones than they should have."

"Then the other keystones-"

"Do not worry, I can cleanse them of your magic easily enough."

Harry sighed. Now what? He had a million and one questions and wasn't sure where to start, or even if he should. They could talk here all day and night, and he still wouldn't have half the answers he was looking for. Professor Brennan patted him on the shoulder sympathetically.

"Don't let it bother you. Go enjoy the rest of your day. Talk to your friends. Start your homework assignments. The dynamics of life are best sorted out by living it, not talking about it."

Accepting that was difficult, but he did need some time to sort himself out and he could try that back at the castle. Standing by the lake gave him the impression of standing at the edge of the world, and he needed somewhere less overwhelming to think.

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When Viktor had thought of his first real meeting with Hermione, he had to admit, he had pictured something a little more romantic. Down by the lake, alone in one of the towers, or perhaps in one of the myriad of mysterious rooms that flourished within Hogwarts' walls. Honestly, he'd have been happy to have been anywhere with a window. He could even have lived without the window if it meant going without supervision, as well.

"So, what do you think of Hogwarts so far? Do you miss your own school?" Hermione asked, sitting across from him. Between them, a Quik-quotes-quill danced across a sheet of parchment. At the other end of the classroom, Professor Snape graded papers, smirking evilly. Every so often, he'd look up from his paper to check on them, and some how manage to look even less pleasant.

Viktor cleared his throat.

"Dis is a very interested school, and everyone has been very kind. I vill miss my friends and teachers at Durmstang, but I am glad I got to come. I like seeing different places," he said carefully, feeling stupider with every word. He's sounded like such a dork!

"Have you traveled to many places?" she asked, looking genuinely interested.

"Yes. I have gone all over Europe. I travel a lot playing for da Bulgarian Quidditch team, but I don't get to stay anywere very long and my manager doesn't let me explore much. It is dangerous being alone in a rival's city. Players get hurt if dey are not careful."

Hermione had her back to the professor, but Viktor had a perfect view of the meaningful look Professor Snape gave him.

"You sound like you are familiar with competition and danger," she continued, oblivious. "Do you think these experiences will give you some advantage in being chosen as Durmstang's champion?"

"Ah... yes, maybe. Dere is no vay to know for sure dat I'll get picked."

"What will you do if you get picked?"

"Celebrate."

"And if you don't get picked?"

"Celebrate. Ve have all planned a party for da night of the drawing. Ve'll all have fun, who ever vins."

She laughed softly at that, and he felt inordinately pleased with himself. And then she got up, and he realized it was over already. They'd only talked for fifteen minutes, probably less!

"I think this will be enough for now," she said. "At least, until after the drawing. If you're chosen, would you mind letting me interview you again?"

He blinked stupidly for a moment, and then nodded. He was even more surprised when she took his hand shook it.

"Thanks for the interview, Viktor. I really appreciate it. It's a really great thing you're doing, coming all the way to Britain to expand your education. I hope I get the chance to do the same thing one day."

She left him baffled and more than a little flabbergasted. Damn, she was fast! He hadn't had a single opportunity to ask her a question, like if she had a boyfriend or if she'd like to go out with him. He hadn't even gotten to flirt! Not with the great bat lingering in the corner. Why had they had their interview here to begin with? As if to read his mind (perfectly plausible, Dumbledore had warned him that Snape was a legilimens), the man spoke up.

"If you're entertaining any ideas about my goddaughter, I suggest you stop right now. Remember, in my class, I don't need to ask for volunteers to test potions."

Well, that's just fabulous.

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September passed at a snails pace for Harry, though his days were packed. He was used to his days being busy, but this year things were not only busy, but... different. Unpredictable. His classes had more homework on harder topics (which happened every year), except for his Celtic class, which really felt like more of a club than a class and was taking up more and more of his free time. Celtic class only met twice a week officially, but most of them ended up back at the grove about twice a week outside of class, as well. At least those of them who were Druids (and just pagan in Harry's case) which was all of them except for the fourth year Hufflepuff, Corey Watts (the fourth year Slytherin had quit after two weeks, complaining of boredom, but everyone else thought she had just gotten overwhelmed) and a sixth year Ravenclaw girl who was curious, but still resolutely Christian. Depending on the weather, the time of day, and their Teacher's willingness to help, the Druid students would gather around to perform the religious aspects of their faith. Shrine building, sacrifices of small animals and food, and sometimes just planting trees. Nothing as extreme as Harry had experiences, and luckily nothing that involved getting naked or being out after dark (which was good since he'd never told anyone about the werewolf ritual or any of the rituals he'd performed with Voldemort, and he thought it might be difficult to explain his few magical eccentricities).

His friends were curious about what he was doing, but he didn't feel comfortable talking about it with them. Once he'd seen Draco and Ron trying to follow him to the grove, but they soon lost track of him. He watched from the trees as they searched the grounds, but the place seemed to be shielded from them. It would explain why Harry had never even heard of the willow grove, let alone found it, before. In fact, most of Hogwarts didn't seem aware of the Druids at all, and Harry wondered if there wasn't some sort of enchantment going on. He had to admit, it did make life easier without people knowing their 'uncivilized' customs.

More than just the practicing of rites, Harry found himself talking with Teacher Brennan. He was the only person aside from Voldemort, who seemed to know what it truly meant to be a pagan and it helped ease his mind just to talk with someone who could give sound advice and was actually sane and morally conscientious. Besides, the man had this entire Grandfather-you-wish-you'd-had kind of thing going for him.

He still spent part of his Saturdays with the Durmstang students, making sure they were all taken care of, but like he had suspected they didn't come to him very often after the first week. Except for Krum and Jophery, whom Harry liked but didn't really trust since Oblitz was still trying to test his abilities during class. They were testing him too, he thought, but not for his magical potential.

"What do you want to do when you leave school?" was the first, seemingly innocent question during a Saturday breakfast. Harry had said he didn't know. Go to college again probably. Maybe art school.

"Do you miss your relatives? Even though they are muggles?"

"No," Harry had said bluntly, and then shut down the conversation by escaping to the loo. Meaningful conversations among toilets was a taboo their culture luckily shared. Thinking back, he probably should have elaborated. Krum had probably really been asking whether he hated muggles or not.

Jophery hadn't been as subtle. "So... Ever kill anyone?"

Harry asked if he was volunteering for the novel experience, which made the other boy grin. He didn't ask again, though.

Their morality testing turned out to be harder to avoid than Oblitz's, magical ones, but he was adaptable. Mentioning Hermione tended to distract Krum effectively, and turning a question into a joke worked best against Jophery.

Krum liked to get his friends together and play quidditch on the weekends, and play against whoever was brave enough to join them. Harry occasionally did, but he wasn't quite up to speed with Krum (or really the guy was just a bully on broom and Harry didn't fancy getting knocked off. He assumed this was typical professional competitiveness, or at least hoped it wasn't personal, cause yikes)Jophery insisted he was more than qualified to play professionally. He didn't feel too flattered though, since you could never be certain when the older boy was serious or not.

There were six new rookies in Dueling Club, and since Harry's former rookies still tended to turn to him rather than Ron, he was more than a little busy getting them up to par and getting enough practice himself to actually qualify him to do so. Snape had to complicate the matter of course, and introduce the basics of sword fighting... which was a lot harder than Harry had thought it would be. He'd handled a sword before, but his opponents hadn't had swords themselves and that made a big difference. Ron had found a new way in which he hoped to wail on him. Draco could soundly wail on everyone, having had private lessons since he was nine.

He wasn't the only one with unusual activities this year either. Hermione was dating Krum. She insisted she was just tutoring him in his English or getting an interview or some other feeble excuse, but no one believed her for a second. Draco had turned into the quidditch captain from hell, and despite there being no matches, had rounded up all of his teammates and insisted that they practice over the lake (the pitch had been taken over by giant flying horses and even Draco wasn't going to push his luck), which was amusing because as fiercely as Draco had everyone playing, it wasn't uncommon for a player to fall off their broom and into the water. Despite this, the

young Malfoy refused to play or let any of his players play against Krum during the weekend matches, insisting it was 'aiding the enemy'. Ginny had made friends with the youngest of the Beauxbaton's girls, and was often cloistered away with her, drawing fashion designs and making plans to visit strange and exotic places. Clyde had become even more popular, and was chasing down girls by the handful despite how Hermione and Ginny glared at him all the time. Even Hagrid was making new 'friends', with perhaps the only other person in the world he actually had to look up at. Madam Maxim made quite a sight herself, giggling like a school girl when she thought no one was watching.

"I swear, if you manage to actually perform a Patronus," Hermione groused, "It's going to come out as a naked girl and you'll be expelled for lewdness."

"Ha!" Clyde smirked, "You're just mad because it you didn't make a Patronus first. Spoil sport."

Harry, Hermione, Clyde, Draco, and unfortunately Ron, were gathered in an empty classroom, practicing their Patronus charms. No one had gotten the charm, except...

"Harry, stop showing off!" Draco snapped, glaring at the Gryffindor as he directed his Patronus around the room with frightening ease. "It's distracting!"

Harry's Patronus stopped its prancing and turned its antlered head towards its Master as if waiting for permission. He made a gesture with his wand and the stag vanished. The spell had come quickly and easily to Harry, like many of the oldest spells they taught at Hogwarts, and he wasn't the least bit surprised to learn that it was a spell developed by Celts and that it had spread quickly across Europe. He was surprised to learn that the Patronus he had summoned was his father's.

Not a copy, not a similar one, but the exact same one. He had shown the Patronus to Hagrid, partially to find out exactly what kind of deer it was and partially to show off (since he couldn't show it off in class due to Snape's warning), and the half giant had burst into tears.

Teacher Brennan had informed him later it wasn't uncommon for Druids to inherit the corporal familiars from parents or earlier ancestors. It's original name had been Familiae Patronus, meaning 'Family Protector', but after the spell's fall into disuse, it merely became the Patronus. It was also said that every so often a person who died became one of these protector spirits, and they were feared by even the most powerful of Dark Creatures.

Harry was satisfied with the stag.

"This sucks," Ron muttered, "I'm getting dinner."

"Yeah, me too," Draco agreed and left with Clyde following happily after them. Hermione glared at them in annoyance, and tried to cast the spell again. The tip of her wand barely glowed.

"You might as well let it go," Harry said. "You're not going to find your 'happy' place glaring like that."

She gave him an annoyed look, but he just smirked. It wasn't often when he could say he had one upped Hermione.

"Come on. They're drawing from the Goblet of Fire today. If you want to get a good spot to watch from, we'll have to eat early and arrive early, right?"

There was some hesitation, but in the end she was as eager to leave behind this particular charm as everyone else. They ate dinner quickly, made a brief stop at the Durmstang table to wish Krum luck, and went down to the gallery to wait. Over the next hour the crowd around the Goblet of Fire grew until every resident of Hogwarts, from the youngest to the oldest (and that included ghosts), and not a few others, was huddled around it. When Lord Voldemort strode into the room, however, they still managed to find enough space to move out of his way.

Behind the Dark Lord the Headmaster and Headmistresses followed, and they were not there for even a minute before the Goblet flared and spat out its first piece of paper. It fluttered around like a confused moth until Voldemort snatched it out of the air. He read it.

“For Beauxbaton Academy the champion shall be Fleur Delacour,” he stated and handed the strip to Madame Maxime. There was a delighted murmur among the Beauxbaton's students, but Fleur herself didn't look as if she had ever doubted it would say anything different.

The Goblet spat out yet another fluttering scrap, and Voldemort read this as well.

“For the Durmstang Institute the champion shall be Viktor Krum.”

There were no surprises there, but everyone looked quite happy nonetheless. The third paper fluttered out from the Goblet and Hogwarts held its breath. The other school's champions had been fairly obvious, even to outsiders, but Hogwarts was another matter altogether. There were hundreds of students to choose from, and there was a raging debate (and not a few bets) about who would be chosen. Most of the votes were divided between Cedric Diggory of Hufflepuff and Doris Whitmore of Ravenclaw, even though half the Slytherins insisted it would be someone from their house.

“For Hogwarts,” the Dark Lord read, “the champion shall be Cedric Diggory.”

Applause ripped through the crowd, along with shouts of congratulations. Harry just sighed in relief and turned to Hermione.

“Thank Merlin.”

She grinned at him. “You're getting paranoid, Harry.”

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Cedric could hardly believe it. His entire House was cheering and patting him on the shoulder and congratulating him, and he still couldn't believe it.

It was just...wow.

This sort of thing never happened to Hufflepuffs. Gryffindors had adventures. Slytherins had glory. Ravenclaws earned prestige. Hufflepuffs... just didn't.

Until now.

Until his name had been called.

Holy crap, there was no way he was graduating a virgin after this.

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"I'm really starting to hate that guy," Draco muttered, shuffling his vegetables around his plate with his fork. "I don't get what people see in him."

"Says the guy who hangs out with Ron Weasley," Natalie said, rolling her eyes.

"Hey! We're not talking about my friends here. We're talking about that Krum guy."

She shrugged. She didn't have much opinion on him as she never saw him around. Draco, however, had fostered an undying hatred for the Durmstang Champion, the origin of which seemed to be from all the attention Hermione was giving him and her growing respect for his 'causes'. Draco was the jealous sort after all, and didn't like his place in Hermione's affection and admiration usurped.

"What about Krum?" she asked, resigned to his inevitable rant.

"He's up to something, I know it. He's got a sneaky look about him."

She rolled her eyes.

"Don't even start Draco. At least you don't have to babysit the guy. I swear that Delacour girl can't go a day without complaining to me about something."

Draco smirked.

“Liar. You like her.”

“Like her? She's a spoiled little harlot.”

“See? Kindred spirit. She's your idol.”

“Ugh. Now you've ruined my appetite. Thanks a lot you twat,” she muttered, threw down her own fork and stalked off. He grinned as she went. It wasn't often that he could outwit Natalie, but it was always worth the effort.

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“Ve do not have house elves in our country. The vood elves tink of dem as abominations, and have svorn to kill anyone who creates von. You do not have dat problem here?” Viktor asked Hermione quietly. Even though they had already erected a silencing charm, it felt wrong to speak too loudly in a library.

They were having a discussion when they really should have been studying, but like so many times before they found a distraction in each other. Viktor was more convinced than ever that he had found an angel, for not only was Hermione beautiful, she was also kind and very clever. The only fault he could find in her, was her insistence to keep things 'proper', which meant very little privacy and absolutely no flirting. Even now, they were holding their time together in a library, and though no one could hear them, he was very aware of her adoptive brother glaring holes into the back of his head at another table along with his redheaded friend. What precisely did they think he was going to do to her? Potter was there too, but looked embarrassed by the other boys' behavior and was pointedly ignoring everyone.

“There isn't a significant number of wood elves in Britain to cause that kind of problem. We only have a few scattered colonies in Ireland and

Northern Scotland, and they avoid witches and wizards. There's...history between our races," she said, looking regretful of it.

Truthfully, there was history between Europe's wizarding populations and the elves (wood, water, and mountain all), but the elves fared better on the continent than in Britain. More resources available to them, supposedly. In any event, it was generally agreed it was a lot easier (and cheaper) to go to war with trolls and orcs (and other wizards) than it was to war with elves, and a truce had been upheld between their races for two hundred years running now. Which didn't mean there wasn't a lot of bad blood between them. Viktor decided against mentioning it, as mentions of war seemed to sadden her.

"Dat is too bad. It might sound unfair, but if I had to choose between da friendship of an elf and da blind loyalty of a house elf, I would definitely choose da-"

A paper plane landed on the table in front of him. He picked it up and it unfolded itself to reveal a message.

"What is it, Viktor? Is everything okay?"

"Hm? Oh, yes. Every ting is fine. It seems I forgot my book in Dark Arts. I am sorry, but might ve hold dis conversation for another time?"

"Yes, of course. I understand."

Feeling a little daring, he took her hand and kissed it. She blushed , but didn't pull away.

"It has been a delightful conversation, as always."

He strode away ignoring the glares the Slytherin boys were sending his way, and left. He followed the route that was gradually becoming familiar to him to the Dark Arts classroom, passing familiar portraits and tapestries and students. It made him uneasy how quickly he was becoming comfortable in the castle, and he was finding it increasingly difficult to remember that he was on a mission and had to remain constantly alert and aware of his surroundings and potential spies-

He spun around quickly, scanning the hall behind him for just those sorts of dangers, but there was no one there. Just his imagination then.

Professor Oblitz was waiting for him in the Dark Arts classroom. The room was empty of students, everyone having left for the day, and the teacher was sitting in his chair, reading something or other.

“Sie wollten mich sprechen, Herr Oblitz?”

“Ja, es ist Zeit, dass wir reden.”

The teacher scanned the room, then raised up the privacy wards, and Viktor felt a sudden thrill. This had to do with 'the Mission'. The mission he was helping to carry out.

“Is this about the second phase?”

Oblitz shook his head distracted. “No, you needn't concern yourself with that. You'll be busy with the challenge. This has nothing to do with that, but it may prove important in the long run.”

“Tell me what you need, and I will do it.”

The man gave a satisfied smile, which was a nasty look for him, and made Viktor regret his words. There was no telling what Oblitz would want. He had never trusted the man at school, though he'd been completely professional if a bit harsh, and didn't know what had made him think he should do so now.

“It's about the Potter boy. Do you know anything about him?”

Unease coiled itself inside of him. He did not like where this conversation was heading.

“A few things,” he said, uncertainly.

“Anything unusual?”

"Of course. We have all heard the rumors, but I haven't seen anything to verify them. It seems to be hype mostly."

"Have you ever seen him talk to snakes?"

Viktor snorted. That was one rumor he didn't believe for a moment no matter how often it was repeated.

"No."

"Me neither, but I have seen his familiar. It is a cobra, Krum. A King Cobra. Now tell me that isn't a bit concerning?"

Here Viktor had to hesitate. He'd never seen Potter's snake familiar, although he had heard about the snake. He'd assumed it was just part of the rumor. The white owl had seemed more likely.

"Many people have snakes for familiars. Most of the Slytherins do. I don't see your point."

"Yes, but those people don't have venomous snakes as familiars. The only other person who has something similar is the Dark Lord himself."

"I still don't see your point. What are you asking me to do? Find out if he's a parseltongue? What if he is? That's hardly a crime, in and of itself."

Oblitz's expression darkened.

"He is the next in line to rule Britain if anything happens to the Dark Lord. It is imperative that we know as much about him as we can before the war begins. There's no telling what role he'll play in the coming war-

"If he plays a role at all and only if there is a war."

"Do not be naïve. Of course there will be a war. What do you think that creature is building an army for? Do you think he's just showing off?"

Of course not, but the way Oblitz said it. It just sounded like warmongering to him. Like he was looking to start the fight, rather than just prepare for it.

“He's just a kid. Fourteen. The war- if it even happens- will probably be over before he's old enough to fight, let alone lead. It's pointless to plot against him. The head of the Malfoy family is much more likely. More than that it's... it's cruel.”

Oblitz glared daggers, but Viktor held his own. He had nothing to fear from this man. He was the school champion, so he couldn't be harmed without people finding out why, and next year he would graduate and be out of the man's reach forever. Besides, he'd had practice duels with Oblitz before. If push came to shove, he could hold his own.

“You said you would do what I tell you.”

“An admittedly stupid thing to say.”

“If I tell the Minister about this-”

“Did the Minister order Potter to be spied on?”

“ ... ”

“I am sorry, sir, I'll keep an eye on him, but actively spying on one kid puts the true mission at greater risk than is justifiable. I must decline, and will instruct my classmates to do the same,” he said evenly, and walked away.

“Krum! Get back here, Krum! I'm not done-”

The door slammed shut, breaking the privacy charms.

“-WITH YOU!”

He could feel himself smirking. That was damn satisfying. Movement caught the corner of his eye, and he drew his wand. He heard a

ruffling of wings, and lit his wand with a 'lumos'. Shiny nocturnal eyes blinked down at him, followed by a ruffling of feathers.

“Hoo-hoooo.”

Viktor sighed. It was just an owl.

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Ron held his breath from behind the suit of armor, sending out a silent prayer that Krum hadn't heard him. He was positive that for a moment, the guy must have. What would he say? What excuse could he give? Would the meathead even wait for an excuse or just blast him into pieces? But no, Krum left after quickly checking the area with a Lighting Charm.

Chump.

What the hell was he up to? Coming all the way down here for a 'book' that he clearly wasn't carrying now. He had lied to Hermione. Very, very suspicious. He half expected a girl to follow Krum out of the room (and wouldn't that shock Princess Hermione to know her Prince was a louse?), but all he'd heard was Professor Oblitz cursing. Once Krum was gone, he left the area quickly. He wanted to get caught by the surly DA&D teacher even less than he wanted to be caught by Krum.

Still, it was suspicious. What were they talking about? The next challenge? Were they cheating?

He knew the best way to find out. McGunny was good at this sort of thing, after all. Plus, it might get him out of the trouble for blowing his last two articles. Yeah. This could be fun.

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1. For those who are wondering, she said “And you can tattoo it across your ass over the summer”

Book IV:

Chapter 9:

Fleur looked across the lake at Hogwarts and thought, sulkily, it looked rather pretty at a distance. In a rugged sort of way. After a month, she thought she would get use to the differences, and lately she had been doing a good job at not making comparisons between home and here. She still felt the differences though. She felt out of alignment with her surroundings, unable to find the proper flow of things.

She found herself envying the Durmstang students, who flaunted their adaptability with careless confidence. Their champion was already going out with a Hogwarts girl, who was cute and clever, but really too young and naïve to be dating someone Viktor's age in her opinion. Fleur had her own fair share of boys making offers, barely a day went by when someone wouldn't ask her on a date or at least try to, but they were either completely unappealing or reminded her painfully of Clotaire. Besides, she knew exactly what they wanted and it wasn't her conversation. She could smell it coming off of them.

Natalie was... a bitch. Sometimes she was a fun bitch, but a bitch all the same. There were a few people she might like to make friends with. Krum, maybe. He was pretty interesting, but the only girl he had eyes for was Granger. He was also a rival champion and she knew better than to make things complicated by becoming friends. The same applied to Diggory, who was just as cute as a button. Potter had sounded like he'd be interesting, but having seen him in person she felt disappointed. He was just so young. He didn't look capable of doing half the things she'd heard he had done, and when she'd asked Natalie the girl had just snorted and rolled her eyes. Of course, that could have meant anything.

Classes were dull, but she'd always found that true even at Beauxbaton's, but at least she'd had enough extra-curricular activities to take up her time and interest. Right now, the only thing she had to look forward to was the first challenge, which wasn't for another two weeks. Madam Maxime hadn't been able to give her any clues about

the first challenge, except that it had been designed by Lord Voldemort himself.

And wasn't he a surprise. He was supposed to be in his sixties, but damn, he looked fine. Smelled interesting too. Like earthy things, burning leaves, and masculinity. She had only talked to him in person once, right after the Goblet of Fire had announced them as the champions, when he had been congratulating them. He had kissed her hand, looked at her with those piercing red eyes and wicked smile, and said, "Such beauty and grace hiding fierceness and power, you are a true Athena. I look forward to seeing your divinity unleashed."

Athena was the goddess of wisdom and war.

She was also the ancestor of the veela. Cursed ancestor, but ancestor nonetheless.

He'd read about her. Spied on her or something. Not unreasonable given the situation, but it sent a thrill of intrigue down her spine. But he was gone now, and she hadn't seen him since. He was suppose to be at the next challenge though. A Master of Ceremonies as it were. She wondered what he'd do if she won the next challenge? If she won the tournament?

It left her as excited as she'd first felt when Madam Maxime had told her about the tournament and invited her to enter.

Then she thought of home. Thought of Beauxbaton's and it's endless gardens and lawns, the cries of peacocks wandering the grounds, dinners served on different china patterns every day, warm breezes through the bedroom windows at night, masquerades, and sneaking over the gates for an adventure in Paris whenever the days became too stifling. She thought of roaming the city with Gabrielle during Christmas time, feeling like a little girl caught up in her little sister's enthusiasm, and mama and papa acting like newly weds, testaments to fact that true love existed and was forever.

"Such a sad look for such a pretty girl."

She spun around, her wand in her hand. A man, a young man, was standing behind her, some strange object mounted on a tripod resting over his shoulder. His hair was orange, a color that seemed to be equated with the Weasley Family in Hogwarts, but she couldn't be certain. There had to be other orange haired wizards and witches in Scotland, after all.

She lowered her wand, but didn't put it away. She was aware, as any young woman alone with a strange man is aware, that he was bigger and stronger than her. He lifted a brow at her, smiled, and shook his head.

"Don't mind me, miss. I'm too busy with my job to attempt any canoodling, even with someone as pretty as you. Besides, I'm a gentleman."

Fleur didn't know what 'canoodling' meant, but she could guess. She hid her discomfort with indignation. "Az if I would canoodle with you! Gentlemen do not zneek up on young ladies."

His grin only widen, and he even had the audacity to laugh at her.

"Ah, you're one of the Frenchies."

Now, she was honestly indignant.

"I am French, not a Frenchie, and you are rude."

"I've been called a lot of things, but rude usually isn't one of them. Let's call it a cultural misunderstanding, shall we? My name is William Weasley, by the way, but everyone calls me Bill."

She wasn't interested. Not even a little. Nope.

"I am Fleur Delacour, and you may call me Miss Delacour or, preferably, you could not call me at all."

He frowned. "Now who's being rude? Or are only Frenchies allowed to get away with it?"

"Well, I never!" She started to stalk away, purposely knocking him in the shoulder as she passed to prove he didn't intimidate her. It was harder than she thought. He had very muscular arms.

"Well, maybe you should!" he called after her.

She gave him the finger without looking back.

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"Have you had any problems between your house and the foreigners? I know Slytherins can be a bit territorial," Voldemort asked, not looking up from his notes. On the other side of his desk, Snape sipped his tea, looking the picture of dignified reserve, as he had for the last twenty minutes.

"Nothing too outrageous. The French students tend to irritate a lot of the girls with their complaining, but they've taken to avoiding each other rather than antagonizing. There is some worrisome behavior between Draco and young Mr. Krum, but given the situation with Ms. Granger, that might be for the best. A scandal involving a fight between two boys will be a lot less troublesome than a scandal involving a seventeen year old foreigner taking advantage of Commander Malfoy's fourteen year old daughter."

Voldemort looked up at him. "What are the chances of that occurring?"

"I don't honestly see Krum as the type to force himself on anyone, and my goddaughter is pragmatic enough not to be seduced. Even if my estimations are wrong for the both of them, she's under a Chastity Contract. She's not getting anything more than a kiss until she's legally married. Rumors do happen, however. A protective older brother standing between them should waylay those. He's her designated chaperon in my absence."

That made Voldemort smile.

"Does Lucius know about this?"

"I honestly don't know. I am not going to mention it to him. He tends to be unreasonable when it comes to my goddaughter."

"He is her father."

"No, he isn't."

Voldemort felt a sting of curiosity. It was a very rare occasion that Snape would contradict him so bluntly. It was also rare to see him display any sort of protectiveness for someone. He'd seen the vaguest hints of it when his godchildren were younger, and only once or twice in regards to Potter. He'd almost convinced himself such incidences had never happened.

"I'll trust your judgment in this matter then, and leave you with a reminder that it wouldn't be worth Lucius' anger to take too many liberties in Miss Granger's upbringing, even if you are her godfather."

Snape hesitated, but nodded. "Thank you, Master. Will that be all?"

"Yes. I'm sorry I can't stay longer, but you understand the schedule I'm keeping. I have one more appointment and then I'll be going."

The potions master nodded, and left. Ten minutes later, Brennan entered the office.

"Fáilte*," he said to the teacher. "It has been a while, old friend."

The man gave him a less than friendly look. "Friend, is it? If knowing exactly who you are and actively not pursuing your death qualifies me as your friend, then I suppose you can call me that."

Voldemort smirked. He'd known Brennan since he was just a boy, apprenticed to a teacher of his own and in love with the world. Now Brennan was the teacher, and though still in love with the world, he was cautious in his affections. The war hadn't been any kinder to the Druids than it had any other sort of witch or wizard. It had been a miserable time for the Irish in general.

"You should be more cautious. You never know when I won't be in the mood to tolerate your insufferable self-righteousness. I should feel bad if I killed you in a fit of pique."

Brennan just scowled.

"What do you want?"

"How is my apprentice?"

"Harry? He's magnificent. As if you didn't know. I've never seen anyone so sensitive to the flow of magic. If he had half an idea of what he was doing, he'd be the next Merlin, but his mind doesn't work like that. His element is water, after all. He needs his boundaries defined for him or he flounders. What did you do to him?"

"What do you think I did?" he laughed.

"You're the devil. You'll eat his soul given half the chance."

"That's a strange thing for a pagan to say..."

"There are many devils that the Druids fear. What did you do?"

The Dark Lord leaned further back into his chair. So Brennan truly thought he had done something to Harry? Well, he suppose he had. He'd been the one to introduce the old magics to the boy, to pull him slowly away from the 'safe' magics, and finally he help the boy sell his soul. Perhaps he really was the devil. What a titillating thought.

"Surprisingly little. He is an open and welcoming spirit. The Earth wanted him already. I think She intended me to make him Hers from the beginning. An angel to stand beside her devil."

"A balance?"

"She is all about balance."

"He's a child."

"So was I once. Won't you help me?"

"Help you? Help you what? Turn him into another one of you?"

"Of course not. There can only be one of me, but I see so much potential for him. He can fulfill the roles I can't... do as easily. I am a conqueror, he is a defender. I lead by the lash, he leads by example. He might yet become my equal, but we shall never be the same."

Brennan said nothing for a long moment, taking in what was said and what wasn't.

"And you are all right with that? Having an equal with different ideas about how the world should be? You are too conceited to lend that much trust. If you've come for assistance in binding that boy to you, I tell you I'd rather die."

Voldemort's amused expression vanished.

"That can so easily be arranged. I do not need the aid of a feeble old man to bind Harry to me. I have not even entertained the idea of such a corruption of spirit. He'd be driven insane and I want him whole. That's what I need you for. You are the only one he can turn to when I'm not here. The only guiding hand."

"I don't need to be threatened to do that. He is my pupil, my responsibility. I will not allow him to come to harm."

"But will you allow him to grow? It takes almost thirty years as a disciple to become a fully fledged priest. I want you to speed the process along."

Brennan looked horrified. "He hasn't even accepted being a Druid, only a pagan, and you want me to make him a priest? No. He'll make that decision for himself when he's an adult."

"It's the Earth's decision."

"You are not the Earth. However much she favors you, she doesn't obey your whims."

This was starting to give the Dark Lord a headache, and he rubbed his temple. He didn't want to argue with Brennan or get into metaphysical or moral arguments. Especially not if the man was going to intentionally misinterpret him at every turn.

"Fine. Suit yourself. Waste his potential. Bind his hands with your fear. He'll break free of your restrictions soon enough. Go. Plant a tree or something before I turn you into a woodpecker."

Brennan didn't dignify him with a reply and angrily stalked out. Voldemort sighed.

And to think he'd been such a sweet kid.

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The First Challenge was held on a Friday. Classes and clubs were all canceled so everyone could attend. The Hogsmeade weekend would be the next day. The only classes anyone seemed to have homework in was Potions and DA&D.

It felt like Christmas to Harry, albeit a warm Christmas with a lot of pumpkins turning up in odd places. He'd been working non-stop, with barely enough time to spare any of his friends a hello, let alone sit down and enjoy their company. He had even started dreaming about classes in his sleep, and woke up one morning convinced he had already taken all his quizzes for the week.

"For someone who flies so fast, you walk really slow," Draco groused, trying to hurry without actually looking like it. Malfoys did not hurry for anything or anyone, after all.

"It's fine, Draco. What's the rush? No one is going to steal your seat."

It was just past 8 o'clock in the morning and the tournament started at nine, but already people were heading out to snag the best seats. Most of the other students and teachers were heading for the newly constructed stands on top of the lake. Harry, Hermione, Draco, all the

Weasley siblings, and a few others had found an even better vantage point. Ginny's eldest brother, Bill, was part of the Safety Team who would be standing by in case something went wrong, and had set up a floating platform opposite the stands and closer to the action. He'd invited them to take advantage of the view.

"Tell me who's brilliant idea it was to spend the tournament sitting next to the Weasley twins?" Draco groused.

"Your's," Hermione said, Colin following behind her once again with camera already out and ready. "Well, actually I accepted Ginny's invitation and you just sort of invited yourself along."

"Pfft. Like I can leave you unprotected with that lot?"

Harry and Hermione both rolled their eyes. They reached the edge of the lake, and after a precarious hike through a swampy edge, came to rocky beach. Fred and George were already there, helping Bill and Percy set up the floating platform, which was easily as big a classroom, from atop broomsticks until it was safe enough to land on. Ron and Ginny were loading two rowboats with chairs, blankets, and other things and charming them to float out to the platform. Harry and his friends quickly went to helping them, and Angelina Johnson and Penelope Clearwater turned up just as everything was ready.

They squeezed into couches and overstuffed chairs they'd transfigured from wooden benches, but only after a rather ridiculous game of musical chairs, in which Angelina squeezed herself in between Harry and her boyfriend, Fred, only to realize she was next to George, so Harry got up and sat next to Hermione, but Draco order him to move over so he could sit next to her, which left him next to Ron, who got up... and by the end of it all Harry was sitting on the orange shag rug (George's idea, along with ottoman that wouldn't let you put your feet on it) between Ginny and Colin, his bare feet hovering inches above the water.

All the while across the lake, people gathered in the stands like ants on a sugar mound, and an obstacle course started to take shape as workers set up a variety of barriers. Everyone had their own telescopes (a Charms project Flitwick had been thoughtful enough to

assign, and little more than charmed paper cylinders a child might make to play pirates), but Harry simply charmed his glasses to give him eagle vision. He could make out strange sigles painted onto the grass along the shore where the challenge would start, and waiting at the shore were large golden keys, the course must have continued under water, for there were strange glowing lines beneath the water that gradually faded as the lake deepened. The course continued right up to the spectator stands, where empty spaces had been left for champions to pass through. Three broomsticks were chained to the platform, waiting for riders, and way out at the middle of the lake was a single platform on which three flags, each bearing one of the school's crest flapped in the wind. On the neighboring shore there were still more stands where the flags would have to be set, but if there were any more obstacles Harry couldn't make them out.

He felt uneasy. There was a lot of space between each relay, and a lot could go wrong... he shoved the thought aside. This was just a game. A dangerous game, but there were people like Bill all around the lake prepared to jump in if anything happened.

"Hey, Harry," Hermione said, pulling attention, "Do you know what those symbols on the ground by the lake are?"

Harry took a closer look. He didn't recognize them, but their shapes suggested they stored magic for some purpose.

"No... not really. They're not like any runes I've ever seen."

She looked disappointed. "McGunny said this challenge was designed by Voldemort himself. I thought he might have shown you something like it."

Harry didn't say anything to that. He was uncomfortably aware that everyone was now looking at him expectantly.

"What?"

Fred grinned. "Nothing, you're just so damn cute."

Everyone burst out laughing, including Harry, until Ron interrupted.

“Will you all shut up? I think it's starting.”

At the lake shore, the three champions appeared.

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Voldemort surveyed lake. Finding everything met with his approval so far. The course had been perfectly laid, the stands completely filled, the safety team all in their places, security was nearly as thick as the spectators, and the champions appeared right on time. His Death Eaters, those still living and loyal, sat at his left as honored veterans and to his right the teachers and foreign officials as honored guests.

Lucius was seated directly beside him, looking as menacing and superior as a general should. He wasn't entirely happy to be there, Voldemort knew, as he had been diligently organizing his army and training them for a war he felt was quickly approaching. Lucius was pragmatic, however, and had accepted an invitation to meet some of his future enemies up close.

“You should relax a little, Lucius,” the Dark Lord suggested, “There will be no battles for you to fight today.”

“Yes, Master,” Malfoy Sr. agreed but didn't lighten up. He hadn't forgotten about Moody or the explosion that had nearly killed his son. Where was Draco anyway?

The Dark Lord stood as the champions took their positions at the starting line. He grinned darkly to himself and stood to address the crowd.

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From the back of the viewing box, Oblitz glanced around, crammed with Death Eaters and political giants, the greatest among them the Dark Lord himself, and felt almost giddy with anticipation. He had to

wait for the perfect moment, however, which arrived when the Dark Lord rose to address the spectators.

“Welcome-”

Every eye was turned to the creature, unwillingly captivated by his handsome face, his seductive tone, his charming vaguely archaic turn of phrase as he talked of the five elements of the world. Water, air, fire, earth, and...

“Spirit... the element with allows all living things to persist against the forces of Nature and bend it to their benefit. The source of all magic. Here today, we test these young champion's spirit in a battle...”

Oblitz stopped listening, without moving his head, he scanned the other spectators and found them all suitably distracted. From his sleeve, he pulled out a box. It wasn't a particularly interesting box. Indeed, it was like thousands of other match boxes a wizard might carry around for lighting a pipe or candle or oven, but it wasn't matches inside. He slid it open with one hand and discreetly dropped it under his seat.

Hundreds of tiny black bodies with six tiny legs scurried away from their prison as fast as they could, starved and thirsty, they sought out their sustenance and found it readily available. Dozens of giant, warm bodies all around them, and they scurried to beat their competition. As tiny as they were, they didn't share.

They found their way to every available body, but for a dozen who reeked of pesticide, crawling and hopping their way upwards, stopping only to fight off other invaders. Their own kind weren't the only danger though, as they soon found out.

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Snape slapped his leg, crushing the little insect ruthlessly, scowling down at the bloody smear.

"I thought the frosts would have gotten the last of you little buggers," he muttered, then turned his attention back to the champions.

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Cedric looked out across the field, flat and faded green with stark white lines scribbled across it, then over at his fellow champions, and weighed his odds. Krum would definitely be a challenge. He had seen him practicing in the Dueling Hall and knew his focus and magical strength were impeccable, and on a broom Cedric admitted the other boy was superior. Fleur was a mystery. He had her in a few of his classes and had never seen her struggle with a spell, but he had never seen her battle anyone either. She certainly looked confident.

But he felt confident too. He was the captain of the Senior Dueling team and the Hufflepuff Quidditch team, top of all his classes, and just generally good at magic. He had been chosen to represent his school and country today, and he wasn't going to embarrass either with anything less than first place.

Fleur smirked at him, before looking out across the field. "I know I'm cute, but you are going to need to focus if you don't want to fall too far behind."

"I just wanted to get a good look now, since I won't be able to see you're pretty face once the race starts. I don't intend to be looking back," he teased.

Viktor scowled and didn't bother looking at either of them. From the lake, they could just barely make out Voldemort's speech, but it didn't last long before he pointed his wand in the air. There was a loud crack, and they all sprinted onto the field. They had no sooner touched it than it rolled beneath them, knocking all of them to the ground. There was moment of confusion, and another subterranean wave rose and fell beneath them. Across the field, the earth undulated like the surface of the ocean during a storm, the golden keys, their first goal, remained the only immobile thing, hanging stoically from wooden stakes.

Determined, they all rose to their feet again, struggling to keep their balance and pulled out their wands.

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“Wow.”

Harry wasn't sure who said it, but it was definitely the feeling of everyone watching. From their vantage point they could see the entire field, and the champions dipping in and out of sight as hills rose and fell around them. Once they'd found their footing, the champions were really something.

There was an announcer on the other side of the lake, but they didn't need to listen to follow what was happening. Colin's camera flashed continually as he followed their progress.

“That first earth wave caught them all by surprise, but they're on their feet-”

Delacour was waving her wand around, which didn't affect the moving ground, but left her weightless and agile. She hoped from the crest of one hill to the other without pause, swift and graceful as a deer. Viktor's method was more brutal, blasting apart the ground when ever it rose up and storming over it before it dipped beneath his feet. Cedric had cast a Incorporeal Spell on himself, and simply ran straight through the solid ground, but while it was quick it was disorienting too, and the momentary blindness he experience when he passed through a hill kept him from following a perfectly straight path.

The field was only two hundred feet, but it took them all nearly fifteen minutes to cross it. They managed to reach their keys in roughly the same time, sprinted towards the lake, and quickly disappeared beneath the water. The crowd all waited for several minutes, but nothing seemed to happen. The announcer was starting to struggle with things to fill the silence with.

“What do you think they're doing down there?” Ginny asked, curiously.

"Don't know," said George. "Might be taking bath. That last bit probably left them sweaty."

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Natalie hadn't lied. There really was carnivorous lake weed, and it seemed quite intent on dragging Fleur to the lake floor. She shouted a muted curse and flung out her wand, shredding it to pieces, and broke free. From behind her bubble of air, she could see Viktor and Cedric had gained a lead, each partially transformed into different aquatic beasts, and contemplated propelling herself forward with a spell but decided against it. She had spent too much magic on the Earth Obstacle, and she had no idea what the other three obstacles involved. Instead, she swam naturally, and was glad she had, because the two boys ran into the grindylows first.

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Tom cocked his head to the side curiously, watching the tiny black insects leap onto the oblivious spectators, and crawl up their bodies. He wondered if they were poisonous. He hoped so. Killing off all of his elder counterpart's minions right in front of him would be a marvelous treat to watch. Perhaps if he was really lucky Voldemort would die too. He'd have to keep his feathers crossed.

It wasn't like he had expected something like this to happen. He'd only come by to watch the competition, do a little recon on Krum, Snape, Voldemort, anyone else who caught his fancy. Perhaps check on Harry. He hadn't risked seeing the boy up close, just as he hadn't risked getting too close to Voldemort. They weren't like other wizards. There was a chance they'd sense there was something off about him.

So he'd perched himself at the back of the viewing box, and no one had noticed him. Not even Oblitz, who was directly in front of him, thought to look behind him before he released his bit of six-legged mischief.

He really did hope people would start keeling over soon. That'd be an absolute riot!

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Viktor broke to the surface first, struggling for air as his gills receded and he regained use of his lungs. He hated that transformation for a number of reasons, but it had proved useful today. Swimming clumsily for the last couple of feet to the stands where the brooms rested, he finally pulled himself out of the water. He cast a drying spell on himself quickly, hating to waste the magic, but knowing he couldn't let the cool autumn air rob him of anymore of his body heat.

An explosive splash, and he spun around, expecting an attack. Fleur landed on her feet beside him, her faced twisted into something monstrous, as she seized a grindylow still gripping tenaciously to her leg. It screeched in pain as she drove her clawed fingers into its back and released her, escaping into the dark water. An imperious shake of her hair, now come undone, and she looked her usual beautiful self again. She lifted a regal brow at him.

“What?”

Cedric finally appeared, dragging himself out of the water in time to see the other were already using their keys to unlock their broomsticks. He struggled to do the same, but he'd been bitten on the foot and had a heavy limp. He barely remembered to dry himself off before he took flight, but once he was in the air he felt much more at ease.

And then a giant tentacle shot out of the water and nearly knocked him off his broom.

“Oh, that was a close one for Diggory!” The announcer shouted, rising above the growing din of the crowds.

Another tentacle shot out, this time aiming for Viktor, who easily rolled out of its way and then rose up as yet another slimy appendage reached for him. Fleur had already shot up out of reach with

surprising speed, too far up to be a likely target, and the others followed her example.

“And they're safely out of reach! But they're not going to get their flags if they don't get down there. Yikes, it's going to take some pretty spectacular flying to get past all of those arms!”

Viktor dip sharply twice, but the tentacles followed him, appearing everywhere at once and barely escaped both times. Cedric and Fleur each tried a variety of curses and hexes, with limited success. The squid was too large and too fast. Attempting to levitate the flags to them, didn't work either.

“I have an idea!” Fleur called out to the others, “But I'll need your help.”

Both boys looked reluctant.

“Are we even allowed to help each other?” Cedric asked, skeptically. She rolled her eyes at him.

“We're not helping each other, we're helping ourselves. We need to freeze the surface of the lake! If we do that, it won't be able to move its arms or even see us, but I can't do it on my own. It's the only way any of us are going to get what we want.”

Viktor scowled even more darkly, but nodded, and Cedric shrugged. She was right after all, they couldn't do this alone. They spread out to form a rough triangle around the squid, and pointed their wands down at the water.

“Congalcio!”

Light sprang from their wands like lightening, and where ever the light touched ice bloomed like a flower, from the surface and started to spread across the water, hardening it into a solid sheet. The squid didn't seem to notice at first, continuing to swing its arms madly, smashing through the thinnest layers with ease. But slowly the ice started to thicken and harden, and the wiggly appendages started to slow, uncertain of their movements as the ice started to block the

view in front of its bulbous eyes. They kept at it until the squid was barely moving at all.

“And look at that, all three champions working together! It's man against beast this time around, but how long with this truce last?! There is still one more obstacle left before the finish li- AND KRUM IS GOING FOR IT!”

Viktor broke off first, streaking towards his flag, and Cedric followed half a second behind.

“No! It's not safe yet!” Fleur cried, chasing after them anyway, but she was too late. Viktor's hand was already wrapped around the staff of his flag, pulling it free. The ice exploded beneath him, flinging him aside and straight into the Hogwart's flag. Boy, broom, and flags all landed on the edge of the ice circle. A part of it breaking off and dipped briefly beneath the surface before bobbing up again, leaving Viktor sopping wet. Cedric had managed to pull back in time to avoid being knocked from his broom, and in a quick low-flying sweep, snatched up his broken flag and sped towards the opposite shore. Viktor rolled over on to his broom, grabbed his flag, and kicked off into flight just as the ice beneath him was crushed beneath a tentacle.

The crowd burst out into wild cheers. The announcer shouting out with equal enthusiasm.

“That was FANTASTIC! Not half a second longer and they'd both have been goners! Delacour is the only one without a flag now. The pressure is on for her as the Hogwarts and Durmstang Champions widen their lead!”

Fleur was definitely feeling the pressure. Her flag now rested on ice, ice that was quickly being torn apart by nine blindly flying arms. She made two passes, but had to pull up both times when an arm passed too close. Frustrated, she made one last dive.

And then everything went black.

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There was a collective gasp, and everyone jumped to their feet.

"Oh my god," Hermione gasped, her eyes wide with horror. They'd seen the chunk of ice flung flying through the air strike Fleur by sheer luck, knocking her off the broom and sending her skidding across the ice. There was a streak of bright red to mark her passage.

"Shit," Bill cursed, sparing only a moment. "I think she's unconscious."

He ran to one of the waiting boats, throwing out everything inside it except for some blankets, a first aid kit, and a length of rope.

"We'll help," Fred said, "Just tell us what to do."

Bill turned a warning glare at them.

"You'll stay right where you are. I'll have enough to worry about just with her, I don't want to have to worry about pulling you all out of trouble as well."

"How are you even going to get to her?! Look, you're buddies aren't doing a very good job and they're on brooms!"

Sure enough, several safeties were already hovering over the squid, but like the school champions they couldn't get past the tentacles to get to Fleur, whose chuck of ice was starting to sink.

"I've got a ward up on this boat. The squid won't touch it! So stay out of it. You'll only be in the way," Bill snapped, jerked the rubber of the boat twice and it groaned once before speeding towards the other end of the lake. Its progress seemed painfully slow.

"What are those idiots doing?" Ron growled as he watched the safeties hover around uselessly. "They should at least try strengthening the ice underneath her! Fucking retards! She's going to drown."

"Shut up, Ron," Draco growled. "You're not helping."

"It'll be alright, Bill will get to her," Angelina said, mostly to Ginny who was ashen, staring helplessly as the situation became increasingly dire. Percy rested a comforting hand on her shoulder, but his expression was grim.

"Nonononono, oh no, oh no, no!" Penelope chanted to herself, watching as the ice finally gave way and Fleur sank beneath the water.

Harry who had been watching the entire thing without so much as blinking, reached behind himself and opened his hand.

"Up!"

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Bill was half way there, but already knew he'd be too late as he watched the girl disappear into the water. It would be another two or three minutes before he reached the spot she had been in, and he had no way of knowing where she was by then. And there were things in the lake. Normally, fairly harmless things, but they'd been intentionally aggravated for the sake of the tournament. There was no telling if he'd even be able to find a body let alone save her life, if the grindylows got to her first.

He clenched his teeth. This wasn't suppose to happen! It was just a damn-

Something shot passed him, hovering close to the water and disturbing surface, making his boat chop up and down dangerously. He struggled with the rudder, adjusting his speed and angling his boat into smoother water.

"What in Merlin's name?"

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Snape was torn between rushing down to the lake to help attempt a rescue and casting a Calming Spell on Madame Maxime, who was now shrieking hysterically and demanding someone do something, her tantrum causing the entire platform to shake dangerously. Voldemort was completely nonplussed by the situation, looking more curious than anything. Like everyone else, he was standing to get a better view, his hands resting on the railing, perfectly at ease. Next to him, Lucius looked far too amused than was appropriate. If Madame Maxime happened to notice, Snape suspected she'd stomp the aristocrat flat.

The announcer continued his monologue, now reporting the incompetent attempts of the safeties and insisting that Delacour was still somehow going to be rescued, but even he was starting to sound doubtful. At the other end of the lake, Diggory and Krum had stopped their race to the finish, instead watching the lake like everyone else for some sign of the Beauxbaton's champion.

"It's all right, Madam," Voldemort said at last. His tone was calm and level, and though he hadn't raised his voice, the Beauxbaton's headmistress heard him and fell quiet. "Help is on the way."

He pointed a little further out into the lake, but his finger moved steadily closer towards the rampaging squid. Snape found what he was pointing at and stiffened. Potter was flying across the lake at a speed he wasn't sure was possible on a broom and definitely faster than was safe, little more than a dark shadow. Really you couldn't see Harry's face, but Snape just knew.

The instant headache forming behind his eyes was a sure sign.

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Harry felt, more than saw where he was going and how fast. His magic extended out around his body and if he could have seen it's shape he'd have described it as falcon-like, wings bent close to his sides until the sprung out with a sharp flap for extra speed. His senses extended still further than that, glasses still charmed to see

perfectly at a distance, nose filled with the scent of lake water, squid, and magic.

He wasn't planning at this point. That girl didn't have time for a plan, only quick action, and he wasn't going to wait. Never mind that Snape would probably cane him for this, that he might be violating the tournament rules and cause an international incident, or that she might be dead already. He'd watched someone die right before his eyes once already, and he wasn't just going to let it happen again.

He was a hundred feet from the first tentacle, when he abruptly turned his broom on its side, nose pointed down and his right side facing the creature. It helped to slow his momentum, and the angle he kept lifted him higher above the lake rather than overshooting his target area altogether. By now the safeties had moved even further away, as the squid had taken the remaining chunks of ice and started hurling them at anything that moved.

"Who is this!? Who is this!?" shouted the announcer, "Flying in like a whirlwind, untouchable! I've never seen anything like it! Will this be Delacour's salvation?"

Harry dodged two head-sized chunks easily (they weren't nearly as quick as bludgers and only came from one direction), still not righting his boom. Pointed downwards made it more difficult to keep his hold, but at this angle he could look down at where the squids arms met its body and follow their movements more easily. He swayed to and fro, avoided being slapped out of the sky with as little wasted movement as possible, while he searched for any sign of Fleur.

Half a minute later of futile searching and dodging, and he couldn't wait any longer. He shot down, down, down...

"And he's going in! My god he's-"

The water swallowed all sound and most light and heat, and the force of the impact half robbed him of his senses. Taking a bellyflop to the face hurt. His broom continued to pull him deeper, though more slowly, the pressure pushing in on his fragile ear drums. He had to stop or risk bursting them, and took the time to prepare himself. He

charmed his glasses, which immediately turned into goggles and gave him a clearer view. It was still too dark to see far, and the most he could make out was the outline of the squid's enormous head. The horrible idea that Delacour might have been eaten flitted across his mind.

He didn't have time to spare on those thoughts. He didn't know any spells for breathing under water.

He cast a locating charm.

A white light snaked out of his wand and the twisted through the water, arching downwards, beyond the squid. He pointed his broom in that direction and willed it forward, letting it drag him far faster than he could swim on his own. He had to stop after only a short distance.

He needed air. Needed it BAD.

But so did she. She'd been down here for nearly five minutes already, long enough for her heart to have stopped. He couldn't help her if he lost consciousness, though. Merlin, he need help.

Please! If you're my element, why won't you help me?

Something grabbed him by his ankle and pulled.

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"Vat is he doing?" Viktor asked, simultaneously horrified and transfixed as he watched Harry disappear into the lake. In the distance, he thought he could hear Hermione scream the boy's name. Beside him, Cedric gave him a wane smile.

"What he can."

"He'll never find her in time. It's impossible."

"I know. He'll probably do it anyway. It's what he does."

Viktor turned back to him, searching his expression for arrogance or disgust, but found only a sort of fond expression.

“Vat does dat mean?”

“I’ll put it to you this way. If the Goblet of Fire didn’t have an age restriction on it, I guarantee it wouldn’t be me you’re up against.”

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Bony hands dragged him down, and he screamed on instinct, loosing the little air that remained in his lungs. He struggled and kicked, but the hands held firm and multiplied, seizing him by his arms and legs and head. Something squishy and plant-like was shoved into the back of his throat, forcing him to swallow it and more than a little water.

Immediately, the hands all pulled away, leaving him to flounder after their mysterious attack.

He swung his wand around threateningly, not entirely sure where to point or if he should even try. No sooner than his line of sight settled on something strangely hideous and beautiful at once, a spasm wracked his body, and he felt himself started to change. Skin grew between his fingers and toes, and along his neck he could feel the skin part. A feeling of relief came over him, like he was suddenly getting his first breath of air.

Gingerly, he touched his neck and felt three large slits there, opening and closing to let water in and out.

He had gills.

He had fucking gills!

Well, at least he wasn’t suffocating, and decided he should just be satisfied with that for the moment. He turned his attention back to his maybe-not-attackers, and their appearance suddenly made more sense. They were merpeople. Dozens of them, none of them under

six feet and most of them easily over seven, naked from the waist up and decorated with shark teeth.

They were a benevolent race, or at least not humanity's sworn enemies. He didn't know much about them, except that they'd been known to rescue people from drowning around Hogwarts every once in a while, were known for singing when fogs rolled in, and they didn't speak English.

"Thank you," he tried, although it sounded like nothing more than gurgles underwater. A male merperson with a scraggily beard nodded, and pointed in the direction he had been heading before he'd started drowning. Recalling Fleur, he recast the location charm and sent his broom racing in the right direction. Around him the merpeople followed, keeping up easily, their tails glinting silver in the light of his spell.

She wasn't far, just deep. She was resting lifelessly at the sandy bottom, eyes closed and mouth open, yellow hair floating around her. There were already merpeople surrounding her, but unable to get close, a large pack of grindylows snarling and clawing at anyone that came near. The only thing the merpeople had been able to do was keep the creatures distracted enough so they hadn't begun to feed on her. For this Harry was supremely grateful.

The stunning spell he hit them with knocked half of them away and sent the rest scurrying for their lives. He put his wand away, grabbed the girl by her wrist (which felt uncomfortably cold and limp), and pointed his broom upwards. They shot straight up, faster than even the merpeople could follow, the water growing lighter and brighter, and the oddest thought that this was what it must feel like to go to heaven flitted through his mind.

They broke the surface, and Harry took an automatic gulp of air, only to have it go straight into his stomach. Gills he reminded himself, pulling Fleur further out of the water so her mouth and nose were exposed to nothing air, while he dipped further down to submerged his gills. It made looking around harder.

He tried calling for help, but the only was a gurgling cough. Awkwardly, he pulled out his wand, and shot out a distress signal, one of only a dozen spells he could cast with wordlessly. A blaze of red streaked upward and exploded.

“Harry! Over here!”

Bill eased the boat up beside him, not even completely stopping before he half threw himself into the lake, pulling Fleur from Harry's grasp. He reached in to pull out Harry as well, but the boy swatted him away and pointed towards the girl. Bill took the hint and went back to her.

Harry couldn't see what he was doing, but there were spells involved and strange instruments, one that looked suspiciously like a miniature bellow, lots of yelling and cajoling and begging, and then finally Bill just beating her in the chest with his fist.

A minute dragged on and then another, and Harry grew increasingly distressed, more and more convinced that he had been too late, too slow. Another person he couldn't save.

And then there was a gasp and coughing and still more coughing.

“That a girl! That a girl!” Bill crowed, dragging her upright though she had no strength to sit up on her own. She continued to struggle for air, the blue around her lips fading to white and finally the faintest hint of pink. Harry could just barely make out her eyes, barely open, staring dazedly down at him. He smiled up at her, and laughed and cried his relief.

He had done it. Bill had done it!

Just barely.

Just enough.

She was alive.

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Cautiously, the BUG crawled its way up its prey's pants, up his cloak, detoured a little towards the back for safety, and continued up until it had reached the base of the neck. Thick black hair, the perfect hiding place, beckoned across the last and most vulnerable stretch of skin. The neck was sensitive, and if the BUG didn't step lightly, it would find itself the same bloody smear Snape's BUG had become.

There was a moment of hesitation before it risked a rushed hop, and then... SAFE!

Eagerly it traveled over its victim's scalp to the clean patch of skin behind the ear. Eager to feed and quench its thirst. The skin was warm beneath its feed and smelled delicious. He clamped down with savage little pincers, knowing its prey would feel nothing, and swallowed down the first droplet of blood.

And promptly dropped dead.

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1. Failte, I have been informed. Is the actual Gaelic term for 'welcome'. I will be going back and replacing Taigamid with this. Just an FYI.

2. The BUGs are what they sound like, in both contexts of the word (no, not the Voltswagon Beetle type of bug, the other two meanings of the word).

Book IV:

Chapter 10: The Knights and their Honor

The Infirmary was quiet, but for Madam Pomfrey talking softly to the mediwizard behind the privacy screen. Fleur honestly didn't know why they bothered. She knew exactly what had happened to her. She had been knocked unconscious and drowned. Underwater for eight minutes and forty-two seconds. Another minute and fifty-eight seconds to restart her heart.

There had been brain damage, the mediwizard said as quietly as he could, but the water was cold enough to minimize it and the potions should repair most of what little there was. She'd be able to speak, move, and remember just fine. There might be occasional headaches and nightmares. A small price to pay for life, they said.

Except that wasn't all she had paid.

She pulled her blankets over her head and curled into a tight ball, squeezing her eyes shut. This was too humiliating. Not only to be defeated, but to be rescued afterwards. In front of everyone. Her friends, classmates, admirers, the Brits, the Germans, the Dark Lord, and worst of all, Madam Maxime. The Headmistress would be so humiliated to have made a klutz like her their champion.

And tomorrow, the rest of the world would know about her failure, and sneer.

Is that what they teach kids at Beauxbatons? To fall off their brooms and drown?

What about her family? All those rumormongers and cold-hearted débutantes mocking her parents over the daughter they had taken such pride in. Those nasty kids at school waiting to tease her sweet Gabrielle, just waiting to pick a fight. She didn't know if she would ever be able to face them.

"Pardon moi," a new voice interrupted the mediwizard and nurse. "I was hoping I might see my student."

"Oh," Madam Pomfrey said, "I'm not sure now is a good time. She's still a bit upset."

"Please," Madam Maxime insisted gently, "All of my students are very upset. It would ease their hearts and minds to know how she is doing."

There was long silence, and finally the mediwizard spoke.

"Maybe she's right. A familiar face might do Miss Delacour some good."

Fleur tightened her hold around her blankets, willing the world away even more fiercely. She couldn't handle this now. She wasn't prepared for the condemnation. The last time anyone had scolded her, she had been twelve. There was a rustling sound as the privacy screen was pulled aside, followed the scraping sound of a chair and muttered Enlargement Charm.

There was a long silence.

"My dear, I do hope your jaunt through the lake hasn't convinced you to begin your life again as a turtle. I am an awful swimmer and should miss you terribly," the headmistress said gently.

Fleur pulled back a blanket, just enough to see the woman, her expression filled with confusion.

"You aren't mad?"

Madame Maxime looked honestly surprised.

"Mad? Why would I be mad? I am just relieved that you are all right. I thought I had lost you forever. I never would have forgiven myself if you..."

She sniffed loudly, and pulled a handkerchief (easily as large a baby blanket), and dabbed her eyes. Fleur felt herself get all teary eyed just watching her, now for more than just self pity.

"But I failed... I didn't even finish the challenge..."

The headmistress made a dismissive gesture.

"You did wonderfully. Wasn't it you who came up with the idea of freezing the lake, while those other two just hovered there scratching their heads like a pair of mountain trolls? Your plan would have worked too if they hadn't messed it all up by breaking off too soon. It was just bad luck that you got knocked in the head. The only mistake you made was trusting the other two were half as clever as you."

Fleur choked on her laugh, wiping her tears of relief away. Perhaps it was going to be okay? Madam Maxime's expression suddenly turned somber, and her heart clenched all over again.

"Fleur..." she began hesitantly, unsure of how to approach the subject. "About the competition... I'll understand if you want to drop out. I think after what you went through, anyone would second thoughts. None of us were prepared for how dangerous this tournament would really be."

Fleur blinked confusedly.

"You mean... I wasn't disqualified already? Even though I didn't finish the challenge?"

"Finish? No, you don't need to finish a challenge. In fact, you made forty points just getting as far as you did."

"I did? What about Krum and Diggory?"

"It took them ridiculously long to get past the fire challenge. I mean honestly! Diggory got sixty, but Krum got sixty-five for finishing first-barely."

Fleur remained silent for moment, processing all that was being said.

"So they're not too far ahead, do you think?"

Madam Maxime blinked, and then smile. "You are going to keep going?"

"I... Can I? Next time... next time I'll definitely do better. I promise. Please? I can't let it end here, like this."

"Of course, my dear. If this is what you want, I'll support you. You were our greatest hope and pride, and that hasn't changed."

"Oh, thank you! Thank you!"

She stumbled out of bed and leaped into her arms. Hands that were large enough to crush a horse's skull patted her gently.

"I'm just so relieved," Madam Maxime continued. "I thought for sure you were dead, and then after I didn't know if you would be the same. I was so frightened. I could kiss those boys for pulling you out of the lake! Now there are true chevaliers!"

Fleur pulled back, confused. She didn't honestly remembered much of what happened until after she was given some potions. They'd only given her a very brief explanation.

"Boys? What boys?"

"Well, that Potter boy was the one to fish you out, and I mean that literally. He partially transmuted himself into a fish or something, gills and such, but he got stuck. Took nearly an hour before he could get himself sorted out. Brave child, I'll give him that, but not much on plans."

Fleur thought she might remember something about Potter, looking up at her, smiling like a very wet puppy.

"Then there was the Weasley boy... well, he's not really boy. Billius Weasley. He's actually some sort of curse breaker, even though he's only... nineteen or something. Got you breathing again before the medi-wizard even reached you. You owe them both a very big thank you."

“Billius Weasley?”

“I know... they run rampant around this part of the country.”

That wasn't exactly what Fleur was thinking.

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Harry's much anticipated Friday was officially a bust. Aside from actually saving Fleur's life, which was really was the only redeeming event of the day, it was just one unpleasant thing after another. Alright, the flying part was actually pretty cool, looking back on it. He'd never flown that fast nor attempted to fly in that strange of a position, and it was also an interesting way to learn that a broom did work underwater. Being underwater (very cold water at that), nearly drowning, being forced to eat something very unpleasant, finding Fleur's lifeless body, and waiting for it to be resuscitated was pure misery. That hadn't been the end of it either.

He'd had to wait around in the lake for hour, unable to figure out how to get rid of his gills and unable to explain to the professors, who were trying to figure out what do, how he had gotten them. He had been very scared he'd be stuck with them forever, but luckily they had faded away before anyone had gotten any extreme ideas about how to fix it. There had been an unpleasant amount of flashbulbs, pointing, and murmuring through the whole ordeal.

The moment he was able, he'd climbed out of the lake, chilled to the bone and Snape had dragged him off. To the dungeons. Where it's cold. He had to wait for nearly ten minutes as the man sorted through his potion stores, ranting at him for being a reckless idiot (of course Snape's word choice was considerably more clever and insulting) while he felt his toes and fingers go numb. At least the Pepper-up potion warmed him up, it was the other three he'd had to drink that were just plain nasty.

The caning had been as unpleasant as he remembered. Worse. He'd gotten twenty whacks this time. And then another nasty potion to alleviate the bruises.

"You really are hopeless," Snape had muttered afterwards, running a hand through his hair and looking frustrated. "What is it with you and damsels in distress?"

Harry, who was tired, sore, and rather angry, glared at him rather than argued. Anything that came out of his mouth at that point would only have gotten him a detention.

Now, rather than having lunch and then a much deserved nap, he had been summoned to the Dark Lord's office. He seriously hoped Voldemort wasn't as peeved at him as Snape was. He didn't think he could take another punishment on top of everything else.

There were a lot of people lingering in the halls once they exited the dungeons. Students turned to them, looking as if they wanted to rush forward, but the glare their much feared potions professor gave them was enough to keep most of them away. Which was good, because even if the anti-bruising potion had helped, his back was sore and his temper short. He didn't think he could stand people manhandling or bumping against or questioning him.

They had to pass the castle entryway to get to the Dark Lord's private tower, and a mob of reporters was waiting just on the other side of the open doors, a row of severe looking Sentinels the only thing blocking their entrance. Flashbulbs and shouted questions went ignored, as he resolutely refused to look in their direction.

"Mr. Potter, how did you manage to rescue Miss Delacour?!"

"Mr. Potter, what made you decide to chase after her?!"

"Are you having a secret affair with the Beauxbaton's champion?!" That one nearly did have him spinning around, and it wasn't to answer the question.

The students had thinned out the closer they got to their destination, until there was only one left. McGunny was leaning against a wall, presumably waiting for them. He didn't have his notepad with him, and when they passed he didn't attempt to ask Harry any questions.

But there was a look. A questioning, slightly pleading look.

Harry stopped walking for just a second.

"I'll talk to you later," he said, reluctantly, then hurried to catch up with Snape. It wasn't that he wanted to go through an interview, but of all the reporters Harry knew (aside from Hermione of course), McGunny was the only one he found tolerable. He was as nosy as everyone else, but at least he was polite about it.

They entered Voldemort's office and found the man standing near a window, a glass of wine in hand and looking smug. Lucius Malfoy occupied a chair, looking arrogant as ever. Both men smirked upon seeing Harry. The young Gryffindor felt simultaneous relief and unease. They obviously weren't mad at him, but that sort of pleased expression usually spelled trouble of a different kind.

"And here's the man... boy... of the hour," Malfoy chuckled, raising his own wine glass in salute.

"Please don't encourage him. It sends a mixed message," Snape grouched and found a chair of his own. As tired as he was, Harry didn't sit down. He remained by the exit, silently stating he wanted to leave.

"I hope you weren't too hard on him, Severus," Voldemort chided. "A little parental discipline is a grand thing, but his spirit is something to admire."

Snape looked blankly at the Dark Lord for a moment, then turned to toward Harry and glared. Harry glowered right back, barely refraining from sticking out his tongue. Snape turned back to his master.

"As you can see he's still as stupidly unaware of his own mortality as ever."

The Dark Lord chuckled. The mutual annoyance the two caused each other was something he had always found amusing, and the fact that they didn't seem capable of leaving each other alone made it all doubly so.

"I thought it best we discuss what has just happened and what it means for us. Harry, you in particular should be made aware of your new position."

"New position?" the boy asked skeptically. The Dark Lord's amusement was becoming increasingly apparent. He looked as if at any moment he'd burst out laughing.

"Of course. You didn't think such acts of heroism would go unnoticed, did you?"

Not unpunished anyway, Harry thought testily, unconsciously rubbing his back.

"You performed beautifully," Voldemort said, "It was really quite magnificent to watch. Everyone thought so. So fast. So agile. So very, very brave. Rushing in to save the fair maiden from the horrible monster and certain death, risking life and limb without hesitation. And you succeeded. A miracle in and of itself."

"Yeah, well, maybe if everyone had actually tried to help her, a miracle wouldn't have been necessary," Harry muttered. Malfoy and Snape both sent him a warning glare, but Voldemort ignored the accusation.

"I admit even I was starting to worry. You were underwater for quite some time. I didn't think your education had advanced to self-transfiguration."

"It hasn't. I didn't transform myself. Some merpeople helped me out. They gave me some sort of... plant, I think. It wore off after awhile."

"Gillyweed," Snape said, thoughtfully.

"You got merpeople to help you?" the Dark Lord said, looking surprised for once. "Why didn't they rescue Delacour themselves? They're perfectly capable."

"They tried, but a pack of grindylows got to her first and weren't letting them get close. I had to knock them away with some spells before I could get to her."

"This just gets better and better," Voldemort said, looking utterly delighted. "You have no idea what this is going to do for Britain, Harry. You've done this country a great service."

Harry looked away, embarrassed. He hadn't felt particularly brave, and certainly hadn't been thinking about Britain when he rescued Fleur. Frankly, he didn't see how this was suppose to help Britain at all.

"Can you just spell it out for me? I'm too tired to figure out your political games, right now."

Voldemort sighed, somewhat disappointed with Harry's lack of enthusiasm. He couldn't really blame the boy. As much as the Dark Lord intended to benefit from Harry's foolish selflessness, the boy himself wasn't going to get much out of this. Nothing that he really wanted anyway.

"You're a hero."

"Yes, I got that. And?"

"Don't get sassy."

Harry bit his tongue and looked down, knowing he'd reached the limit of bad attitude Voldemort would tolerate from him right now.

"A hero is a much loved thing," Voldemort continued once he'd received proper contrition, "By everyone. British, French, German. You risked your life saving a girl you barely know, and you did it with class."

"I barely bumbled through it! I didn't even really save her. Bill got her breathing again. I just recovered her body."

“And Mr. Weasley will receive appropriate praise for his efforts on Ms. Delacour's behalf, but it was you who actually put yourself at risk and allowed him to help her. By Monday, every paper in Europe will know what you did. They will know that a British wizard is capable of bravery, compassion, and honor. The Europeans will feel awe... and uncertainty. You will shake the very foundation of their belief that Britain is a monster and her people are just waiting to strike at them. They will become curious about what you and this country are truly like, and that curiosity will drive them to investigate, and the more they learn, the less they'll fear, and the less they fear the sooner we can open up relations, and remove these foolish embargo and travel restrictions.”

Harry didn't say anything, just looked at him with complete disbelief. Finally, he shook his head.

“No way. It can't be that simple. This tournament was supposed to do what you're saying, and now you're telling me I'm going to do it? There's no way that's going to happen.”

Voldemort smirked.

“You're right, it isn't that simple and the tournament is...will... improve relations between our countries, but your actions will augment that process. Besides, a tournament is just a competition and once it's over, its influence is very limited. A person, however... that's a different animal altogether.”

Harry just stood there for a moment, not knowing what to say or how to react. He couldn't fathom doing any of the things Voldemort was talking about. Help Britain make friends with Europe? That was the job of ambassadors and politicians, not fourteen year old school boys. Feeling overwhelmed, he stumbled to an available chair and fell into it. He looked to the other men in the room, looking for some form of reassurance that this was just a bad joke.

Voldemort looked ready to laugh, but it wasn't at Harry. It was a giddy sort of expression when things went his way on a project he was already excited about. Malfoy was smug as ever, but he was looking at Harry differently. A strangely possessive way that made Harry

things he saw too rather than a person. Snape... refused to look at him. That was the most concerning thing he'd seen so far.

"I don't know what to do..." he said. "What do you want me to do? This is just... stupid."

Alright, 'stupid' wasn't the right word, but that's what he felt like at the moment.

"Do what you've always done. Keep them guessing," Voldemort said.

Harry didn't know what he meant and waited for an elaboration, which came from Malfoy.

"There isn't a lot known about you. The newspaper gleaned fascinating tidbits about you- your parents were originally rebels who fled to Germany, you can speak to snakes, you killed a monster, your future mother was killed by an insane terrorist... Even these things, no one knows the specifics of. You're a mystery people want to unravel. Now there's just a lot more people looking to do that."

"How does being mysterious help? Won't they get suspicious?"

"Only if you come off as intentionally hiding something. If you're going to avoid the press, use the excuse that you'd rather spend time with your friends or studying. Don't talk about anything unless someone asks you about it first. Give credit to other people when talking about your accomplishments. Humility is an excellent cover for secrecy."

Harry gave him a disbelieving look. "How would you know?"

Snape let out an amused snort. "Because even Lucius was gullible once."

Malfoy glared at his friend.

"Let's not get distracted," Voldemort interrupted before they started henpecking each other. "Lucius is correct. Humility is an excellent cover, and reduces suspicion. However, we must also promote you.

You are my protege. How you are perceived affects how I am perceived, good or bad, and I need all the positive regard I can get.”

“Promote me, how? How can I be humble and advertise myself at the same time?”

“You get invited to a lot of events with a lot of important people, and politely accept,” Snape said, looking tired at the prospect. As Potter's guardian, he knew he'd be dragged along.

“Just so,” Voldemort said. “You'll have time to practice this weekend. The Champions have all been invited to attend a dinner party in Hogsmeade on Sunday. I expect that you will be receiving an invitation.”

Harry let out a huff. Perhaps he should have just let Fleur drown? That immediately brought a surge of guilt. This wasn't Fleur's fault, and even if it had been she certainly didn't deserve death for inconveniencing him. Besides, maybe he could do some good. It wasn't like he didn't want peace between Britain and everyone else. If he could help, even a little, wasn't he duty bound to try?

Merlin, this was tiring.

He sighed and rubbed his eyes.

“Fine. Great. I'll do my best. Can I go? It's been a long day.”

Voldemort gestured towards the door. “You may go, but I want to speak with you tomorrow morning.”

“Yes, my Lord,” he agreed unenthusiastically and left. Malfoy glared at the door, then turned to Snape.

“He's awfully uppity for a pawn,” he said, clearly annoyed. He risked a glance at the Dark Lord. “You're rather lenient on him, my Lord.”

Voldemort smirked cruelly. “Why Lucius, are you suggesting I've gone soft?”

Malfoy quickly looked away. "No, absolutely not. I'm curious. I just assume there is a purpose behind your tolerance."

A quick save.

"You are right of course, there is a reason, but you won't like it."

"My Lord?"

"He deserves to be a bit uppity. You underestimate his importance, my friend. He's a knight, not a pawn, and my tolerance is born of appreciation. Unlike you, he doesn't actually get paid to serve me."

"My Lord, I-"

"Don't, Lucius. I'm not criticizing you. You've earned everything I've given you. I am merely answering your question."

"... Thank you, my Lord."

"You both may go. I have to discuss the serious lack of adequate safety officials during today's match with the tournament coordinator," he said darkly, his previous good humor evaporating. Both Death Eaters bowed and left, passing a very nervous man in the hall, who they suspected they would never see again. More than likely, nor would anyone else.

Malfoy clearly wasn't happy with being rebuked, however gently, and scowled fiercely.

"Do you think he deserves it, Severus?" he sneered. Snape watched him stoically from the corner of his eye.

"You're starting to sound like a jealous wife, Lucius. I suggest you stop now. It's tacky."

"Just answer the damn question."

"... Yes."

Malfoy looked clearly surprised by the answer, though Snape didn't know why. "Merlin, he's infected the both of you."

Potter Pox, flitted through Snape's mind, making the other man's words more funny than insulting. Symptoms include; headaches, insomnia, violent mood swings, and the urge to strangle Gryffindors.

"I didn't say I liked him, only that he deserved some leniency. He's given more of himself in the last four years than you will ever have to give in your entire life. He's reckless, ill-mannered, troublesome, and sometimes right out dumb, but he's earned everything he's been given. The Dark Lord isn't wrong about that."

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"I still say we're wasting opportunities here," Oblitz insisted. "If those BUGs can be used for spying, they definitely could have been used for something...more."

Schwartzmann gave him a bored look. Both men had sequestered themselves in the ambassador's temporary home, waiting out the horde of reporters that were lingering after the event. They'd been quarreling over whether the mission should extend beyond surveillance and into sabotage and assassination. Schwartzmann was getting very tired of repeating himself.

"Mr. Oblitz, as I've said before, it is not in Germany's intention to start a war, only to be prepared for it. Murdering Court officials and teachers at a school sporting event is hardly going to endear us to our allied nations. We received enough flack for what happened with Moody, and that wasn't even our doing."

"We don't need their help to defeat the Dark Lord."

"Spoken like a true warmonger. Believe me, the Minister knows exactly what our country's capabilities are, and if he doesn't want to fight against Voldemort's forces alone, there's a very good reason for it."

“Pft. You sound like Krum. The whole God damn country is filled with a bunch of pansies. Pansy champion, pansy minister, pansy ambassador. Fuck, fine, let the Snake destroy you. Deserve what you get, you cowards. Won't even handle Potter, and he's the most vulnerable and dangerous of the lot of them. Only Voldemort deserves it more.”

Schwartzmann rolled his eyes. Oblitz was a soldier before he was a teacher, and unfortunately he gave a bad name to the entire profession.

“You're an idiot. Potter deserves our pity, not our condemnation. God only knows what that monster has done to him already. If it's half as bad as I suspect, and these BUGs manage to prove it, I'll personally grant him sanctuary in Germany.”

Oblitz sneered but said nothing more. He wasn't going to get what he wanted yet, but when the Death Eaters came pounding at Germany's door, they'd be sorry. They'd all be sorry.

And he'd be right.

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Fleur was escorted to the dormitory in Hogsmeade by Professor Flitwick. She would have preferred to have gone with Madam Maxime, but with so many reporters around they'd both decided someone more discreet would be needed. He was also more familiar with the castle, and the best ways to sneak in and out of it. They waited until dark, when most of the reporters were gone and night hid their movements. There was a boat house built into the castle that lead straight out onto the lake, and while the inky black water made her distinctly uneasy, she was pleased to find she wasn't as scared as she thought she'd be.

This was the sort of adventure she remembered from Paris, sneaking out after hours for a secret rendezvous or just to explore the mysteries of the city, but what a interesting new twist! Far from home, surrounded not by city, but forests and lakes and mountains to meet

the man who had saved her life with the aid of a dwarf (part goblin? Gnome?), and risk of discovery held the potential for international scandal!

Flitwick, noticing her barely repressed excitement, smiled.

"You know, you could have just invited Bill to the castle in the morning, and talked to Harry first. You've had a difficult day as it is."

She smiled back him and shook her head. "It would be rude to make my rescuer come to me after all he has done. I must go to him and thank him in person, without the press turning it into an interrogation."

"And did you already talk to Harry?"

She shook her head ruefully. "I went to Gryffindor Tower to speak with him, but his friends said he was very tired and was sleeping. I'll talk to him tomorrow."

They pulled the boat up to the shore, Hogsmeade only few hundred feet away, lanterns hanging in the doorways of the shops and houses. She pulled up the cloak of her hood, and followed Flitwick to the east end of the village where a dormitory had been erected to house the tournament's work crews and engineers. There was a sign on the door reading 'Residents Only; No Journalists Allowed'.

"That's new," Flitwick remarked, before opening the door. At the check-in counter, a very bored receptionist looked up from his crossword, looking ready to shout at them but the words died on his lips. Flitwick smiled congenially, summoning a stool out of the air so he could look over the counter. "Good evening, sir. Would Mr. Weasley be in, per chance?"

The receptionist eyed them both suspiciously.

"Who wants to know?"

Fleur pulled back the hood of her cloak and looked down imperiously at him. There was a spark of recognition in the man's eyes.

“Oh... sorry. Thought you might be reporters. They been bothering Billy-boy all day. I'll get him for you.”

He scribbled a note and tossed it up in the air, where it folded itself into a paper plan and flew up a flight of stairs and down a hallway. A moment later, the eldest Weasley son appeared. It was strange feeling that came over Fleur. Logically, she knew he had saved her life and she should feel extremely grateful for that, but her last memory of him was from before then and the silly squabble she had admittedly started.

He paused on the stairs when he saw her, and smiled just a bit.

“Miss Delacour, I didn't expect you to be up and about so soon. I'd have thought Madam Pomfrey would have kept you strapped to the bed for three days, at least,” he said.

She smiled a bit at that. He was right, the medi-witch had been very reluctant to let her go, and it took a lot of crocodile tears and pleading to spend the night among her friends to convince her.

“It's best not to underestimate a Beauxbaton's champion,” she said.

“I believe that. Are all French witches this stubborn?”

“What do you think?” she challenged.

His expression turned sober.

“I think it would take a lot of stubbornness to claw your way out of a grave as deep as you were in. I'm sorry.”

“Sorry? For what? You saved my life.”

He shook his head. “We should have been prepared. I should have been more prepared. It was an obvious danger that someone could get knocked off their broom and into the lake, but no one was prepared to pull you out. We should have had men in the water already or attached tracking devices to all the champions or portkeys that we could activate if things went wrong. Merlin, we were so-”

She closed the distance between them, and placed her finger over his lips.

“Shhh... It's not your fault. I am here now because of what you did do, not because of what you didn't. Thank you for being there.”

He blinked at her, then suddenly turned red around the ears. He rubbed the back of his head, looking at his shoes in such a boyish way, Fleur wondered what she'd done to fluster the confident man so.

“Er... you're welcome. I'm just glad I could help.”

She sighed forlornly. “This really seems a feeble way to thank someone, now that I'm here. Would you like to have lunch with me tomorrow? My treat.”

He blinked in surprise. “I... yeah, I'd like that, but... won't you get in trouble?”

“Don't worry, tomorrow is a Hogsmeade weekend.”

“That's not what I... oh, forget it. Yes, I'd love to. Madame Puddifoot's, then? If you come at eleven, we can beat the crowds.”

“It's a date,” she agreed, pulled up the hood of her cloak and headed towards the door where Flitwick was pretending not to linger. She turned back to him at the entryway. He was looking bemused, and still just a tad bit pink in the ears. His little boy smile was so endearing, she couldn't help but add, “And Bill, it's Fleur to you.”

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McGunny left a note with Granger to give to Potter. He didn't want to get pushy, but he really wanted to talk to him as soon as possible. His Sunday deadline was only part of the reason, but the only one he left with Granger. She'd promised to give it to Harry, but not until he was awake, which probably wasn't going to be until morning.

She was right. He didn't receive a reply to his request until half past nine the next day.

He went to the dueling hall and found the boy just where he said he would be, eating breakfast on the stairs of the dueling platform. It didn't surprise McGunny that the kid was avoiding the Great Hall. It seemed his standard practice to avoid crowds for a few days after an event, and this was a significant one. Few people actually got to see a hero in action, and though McGunny had heard of and guessed at several of his exploits, even he had been left breathless seeing it in real life.

It was strange to see Potter doing something as menial as buttering toast after yesterday.

"Are you hungry?" the Gryffindor asked politely, when he saw him. "I can get the house elves to get you something."

"No, thank you. I've already eaten."

"Sorry I didn't get back to you sooner. Hermione said you were kind of in a rush because of the next issue."

"It's fine. You have to take care of yourself first, and my life is hardly in the balance."

"Mmm..." Potter took a bite of his toast and chewed in thoughtfully. McGunny was eager for answers, but push him. While the younger boy ate, he pulled out a notepad and self inking quill, trying to make it as casual as possible. He wanted the silences between them to be comfortable. It was important for what he wanted to ask of him.

"How do you feel?" he asked at last, a simple question to get things going. Potter shrugged.

"I feel like I normally do. Kind of disappointed that my weekend with my friends isn't going to work out like I hoped, but it's not a big deal. I heard Delacour is doing well, so I'm happy about that."

"What made you decide to rescue her in the first place?"

Potter gave him an embarrassed look. "When she slipped under the water... I just knew no one was going to get to her in time. I figured... I didn't figure anything. I just did it. Looking back on it, I think it was just impatience. The safeties had already taken too long. Bill could have gotten her, but his boat could only go so fast, so I just rushed in without thinking." Potter sighed and drank some of his juice, thinking about what he was going to say. "It was stupid and reckless, what I did, but it worked out. Barely. I could have drowned too. I nearly did."

They talked for nearly an hour about what the first challenge and his views on what had happened. With every word, McGunny felt his admiration for the boy grow, not only for what he had done but for his complete lack of pretentiousness. Potter clearly hadn't expected to succeed in saving Delacour, but he had kept trying on the very slim chance that he could. He had done something, because doing nothing hadn't been an option, and in the end he readily admitted that he played just one part in the girl's rescue. The merpeople and Bill Weasley were given more attention and praise than his own, fumbled efforts.

"After you got out of the lake, Professor Snape took you down into the dungeons. Why?"

Potter looked embarrassed here. "Made me drink a bunch of nasty potions, and lectured me for putting myself in danger. Professor McGonagall was worse. She made me write down twenty reasons why what I did was a bad idea before she let me go to bed... then posted them on the Common Room bulletin board. Merlin, she knows how to make you feel bad about something. Professor Snape can make you feel bad about nothing, but then you just sort of forget about it after ten minutes, but not her... and you're not going to print that part are you?"

McGunny smirked. "What will you give me if I don't?"

The panicked look Potter had made him burst out laughing. "I'm kidding! You can trust anything you say to me in confidence will remain between us."

Potter sighed. "Thanks. I appreciate that. I know a lot of reporters who... well, you know."

Here was McGunny's chance, the opening he had been waiting for. He took a deep breath.

"Yes, I understand why you would be hesitant to trust them, and I appreciate you putting as much faith in me as you have. I've always wanted to be a biographer more than a journalist, and trust is a lot more important to me than it is a lot of my colleagues."

Potter looked at him curiously.

"A biographer? Really? So you're going to go around and ask important people about their lives, and write books about them? How do you know when a person's life is interesting enough to write a book about?"

"Most people's lives are interesting enough to write books about," he explained. "Everyone has interesting moments in their lives. Good things and bad things and strange things happen all the time. The nice thing about books is you can edit all the boring stuff that happens in between. You don't have to be important to have a story worth sharing with others. Some of the best biographies out there are about normal people trying to get by in abnormal situations. With everything that's happened over the last decade, and everything that's happening now... I think there's going to be a lot of stories that need to be told. People are going to need to hear about others in situations as bad as them, and know that they can survive and get over it. That's the point of biographies, you know. It's not just about telling a person's story, it's about sharing an experience. Nothing inspires people more than a true story."

Potter didn't say anything for a long time, just watching him with those piercing green eyes. He looked like he wanted to believe him, so McGunny continued.

"You know... your story could do that."

The Gryffindor started. "My story?"

"Yes. Your story. You've had a lot of experiences I think people could benefit from hearing about."

Shaking his head, Potter said, "That probably isn't a good idea."

"Think about it," McGunny insisted, "There are a lot of people out there who need to believe that their lot in life can change for the better. Kids who are muggleborns or orphans or just don't see any future for themselves. Adults who need to remember how to be adventurous, curious, and compassionate. You came out of nowhere, and look at everything you've managed to accomplish. You could inspire a lot of people."

"Are you asking to write my story?" the Gryffindor asked, his expression disbelieving.

"I..." McGunny hesitated. He didn't want to throw out the idea until he was certain he had Potter sold on it, but he had caught on too quickly and there was no turning back now. "Yes... I wanted to ask you if I could... if you would... tell me your story. Can I be your biographer?"

Potter got up, shaking his head. "No, I'm sorry. I can't do that."

He panicked as he saw the younger boy starting to leave, and got up to chase after him.

"I know I haven't even graduated yet, but I know I could do this. I've sent in some of my articles to universities and newspapers and they've all said I did great work. I-"

The young boy turned back to him, his expression apologetic.

"It's not that. It's not personal. I think you're a great journalist and that you'll be an even better biographer, but I can't tell you everything you want to know... need to know. Too much of what I do involves the Dark Lord, and that's not something that I can or will share with the public. For your own sake, it's better you don't know."

McGunny stood there, sick with disappointment. Potter had turned him away. His reasons were honorable, but it still made him feel ill and somewhat betrayed. Hadn't he proven he could be trusted? Hadn't he shown he was on his side?

He couldn't give up. Not yet.

"Wait!"

Potter stopped at the door, looking back at him. "I'm not going to change my mind."

Not yet, McGunny mentally agreed, but eventually.

"It isn't about that. There's something I overheard, and wanted to warn you about."

Reluctant curiosity slipped across the Gryffindor's face, before it was ruthlessly suppressed. The Ravenclaw fought back a grin.

"Shouldn't you tell a teacher about it then?"

"It's not anything specific enough to report. Not really. I just overheard an argument between Oblitz and Krum a few days ago." Not true, but mentioning Weasley shot his credibility to hell and he did feel what the guy had told him something worth knowing. "We both know Oblitz has it out for you-"

"How did you-"

"I'm good at what I do, Potter. Very good. Krum... I think he'd be just as bad if it weren't for Granger. He's given you the benefit of the doubt because of her, and I think Oblitz got into an argument with him about it. You should probably try to keep some distance from the Durmstang group, if you can. I'm keeping an eye on them, but I don't know if they're up to something yet or not."

Potter nodded, clearly disturbed by the possibility that something might be going on, especially with Hermione's not-boyfriend.

"Thanks... I'll be careful, but I don't think..."

McGunny gave him a reassuring smile. It wouldn't do to freak the kid out. It would back fire on him fantastically if it turned out Oblitz had been pissed off at Krum for a lousy essay.

"You're probably right. Like I said, I'm just going to keep an eye on them. I'll keep you updated if I find out anything. You're their student liaison. It's only right."

"Yeah... thanks... I'm sorry, I couldn't give you what you wanted..."

"It's alright. I understand," he said casually, as if his plans for the year hadn't just been completely derailed. "You know where to find me if you change your mind."

The boy nodded, a bit more uncertain than he had been before, and finally left. McGunny let his smile drop. Things were not going well. He needed to do something to gain Potter's trust, and perhaps find a new approach to the biography business. Clearly, the boy didn't feel he could tell his story without putting them both in danger, so if McGunny wanted his story he was going have to assure him that it was going to be written in complete confidentiality and then find some sort of motivation for Potter to tell a story nobody else would ever hear (at least not until after they were both dead and therefore relatively safe).

Trust first though. Motivations and enticements could come later. Right now he needed to build a relationship of trust between them. They had the beginnings of a friendship, but with little in common and their difference in ages, it would be difficult to maintain a friendship without regular contact of some form. This was where Oblitz would come in handy. There was something clearly wrong with the man (and having read his file, a veritable manual on urban warfare, he could make a pretty good guess on what it was), and he had his sights set on Harry, which provided McGunny the excuse he needed to keep up regular contact. If he should actually happen to find something on the man, that was even better.

He'd have protected Potter (and possibly several other people on the off chance that there was a conspiracy going on), and if he was very lucky, he could convince him to give him the story as a personal favor.

If he was very, very, very lucky.

Book IV:

Chapter 11: Advisors

Harry had plans to meet his friends in Hogsmeade for lunch, but he had to swing by the Dark Lord's office first, like he said he would. He took a circuitous route to the man's private tower to avoid the other students, and was almost successful.

Almost.

He climbed out of a secret passageway hidden behind a tapestry and found himself face to face with Fleur Delacour sitting on a bench, waiting for him.

"I came by Gryffindor Tower earlier," she explained, "But your friends zed you 'ad already left."

"Oh... how did you know I'd be here?"

"You weren't in ze Great Hall for breakfast, zo when I azt Natalie, she zed you were probably 'aving breakfast with Lord Voldemort. I admit, I zought you would be coming from the other direction."

He smiled a bit. She smiled back. They had no idea what to say to each other.

"How are you feeling?" he tried, though she looked as beautiful as ever. In fact, she looked even better that she had. Before, she had seemed rather depressed and mopey, but today she practically glowing.

"I feel good. 'Ow about you? I heard you were stuck in ze lake for an 'our."

He shrugged. "Fine. Snape made be drink a bunch of potions so I wouldn't get sick. Can't have the hero sneezing into the camera lens. It sort of ruins the affect."

Her gaze dropped, and he realized how insensitive that was. It wasn't her fault his weekend was shot to hell. Not really.

"I'm sorry, that didn't come out how I meant."

She shook her head. "It is alright. It wasn't much fun for me either. I just wanted you to know, I appreciate what you did for me. I don't remember ze rescue myzself, but Madam Maxime zed you zaved my life."

Now he ducked his head, shyly. "Not really. I found you, but Bill got you breathing."

"Such a modest chevalier," she said, and leaned forward, kissing him on the cheek. He felt his ears burn, but it still felt... nice. Up close her skin was perfect, her touch soft, her scent was that of lilacs and lavender. "Zank you, 'Arry. I promise I'll find a way of repaying you zomeday."

"You don't have to," he said, still not quite able to look at her directly. Everyone had told him how beautiful she was, but he'd honestly been too busy to notice until now. She tapped him on the nose with her finger, cause him to look at her instinctively. Her smile was playful.

"It is a matter of 'onor. As one chevalier to another, you should understand."

He did. Honor was about behaving in a way that would allow you to respect yourself. At least, that was how Sirius and Remus had described it, and since he respected them, he trusted their judgment on the matter. In this case, that meant repaying those who had done right by you. He nodded.

She turned to go. "'Ave fun with your friends, 'Arry."

"See you later, Fleur."

They shared a knowing smile, turned away from each other, and walked in opposite directions.

“The press interview is at six-thirty, Sunday. Dinner starts at seven,” Voldemort said by way of greeting, as Harry stepped into the office. He blinked, looked around to make sure he hadn't walked in during the middle of a conversation with someone else, and then back at the Dark Lord.

The dark wizard rolled his eyes.

Harry made a 'blah' face. "Do I really need more clothes? I can't fit what I've got in my trunk anymore."

“You have grown since the last dinner parties, and I want you looking your best. What do you care anyway? I'm paying for them.”

“Are you sure it's not just being added to my student debt?”

“What is with you? You were full of snark yesterday too. You've been cynical and unpleasant since I came back. Did I do something to actually annoy you or has Snape's charm finally started to rub off on you?”

Harry let out a huff. "Sorry. I don't mean to take it out on you... well, maybe I do. You seem to be benefiting from my ruined weekend, so yes, that is kind of annoying."

The Dark Lord had the audacity to grin at that. "As long as you can curb the sarcasm tomorrow evening, I suppose I'll let it slide. We'll be seeing each other regularly this year, and I'd rather keep things pleasant."

Feeling silly for being such a grouch, the Gryffindor nodded in agreement. There wasn't any point to starting fights with the Dark Lord. The man was his guide through this political mire, and as long as he had his back, Harry knew he could get through it relatively unscathed. As long as no one tried to kill him, of course.

"You're right. Sorry."

Voldemort made a dismissive gesture and walked over to one of his bookcases. "I have something for you. I meant to give it to you yesterday, but it didn't seem appropriate after what had happened."

He pulled a medium sized tome from his collection, and handed it to his protégé. Harry studied it curiously. It was very old, with dark brown leather, and bronze fixtures turned black with age. There was no title on the book, but a abstract rendering of a very pregnant, naked woman was set in bronze on the cover. He ran his fingers over the image. It tingled with magic.

"Is that the Earth Goddess?" he asked, sensing the truth.

"One of her more popular representations, yes. This is The Book of a Thousand Gods. It holds the names and descriptions of exactly one thousand of the most powerful of the pagan gods in Britain, including Ireland and Iceland. At least the most powerful ones there were twelve hundred years ago."

Harry gave him a horrified look. "Don't tell me you expect me to learn all of them."

Voldemort burst out laughing. "Of course not. You're old enough to start thinking about what deities you are going to pay homage to. Gods whose knowledge and skills you desire, whose ideals you respect, and whose protection is the strongest. Skim through each deity. If you find one that interests you, write down their name, and I will try to find more materials on them for you."

It was difficult to know how to feel about the book. On one hand, it was going to play an important role in his life as a pagan, perhaps determining the path his magic would follow. On the other hand, it was a reminder that he didn't have the option of turning away from his current path. From what he had learned from Teacher Brennan and what Voldemort had implied, he was going to need some divine help if he didn't want to wake up one day to find an evil spirit feasting on his liver.

"Thanks."

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Viktor walked through Hogsmeade under a Notice-Me-Not charm, sticking to back alleys when he could. If anyone had actually noticed him, he would have said he was avoiding the reporters stalking the town, but truthfully he would have cast the spell on himself even if the reporters weren't there.

He needed to talk to Dumbledore, and he needed to do it alone.

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Tom circled the village like a buzzard, keeping track of his prey's every movement. Even under the anti-surveillance charm, he could follow the boy's movements easily. He wasn't going to let him get away.

It had taken him a while to make his decision, but Oblitz's little act of subterfuge had cinched it. The Germans were on the offense, and that meant the situation at Hogwarts had become a lot more

dangerous and unpredictable than he had originally thought. Opportunity was the bastard child of chaos, and he was feeling paternal.

If Durmstang was planning an attack, he wanted to be a part of it, and assure that his own goals were realized in the process. The first goal being to kill Voldemort and the second to secure Harry. Krum was perfectly positioned for both of these goals. Krum was a part of the German's plans, he was certain of that. If he managed to kill Voldemort, who was going to reprimand him? And when that dragon was finally woken, he was going to take Harry and escape to Germany. It wouldn't be hard to find an excuse.

Once in Europe, he would hunt down those most likely to oppose him, and kill them before they realized what he was doing. Dumbledore would be the first on his list, but he could think of at least a dozen others who would soon follow. Then he would use Krum's celebrity status as a means to gain supporters, and eventually take back Britain.

Harry would be safely tucked away in Durmstang or Beauxbatons for another three years, which gave Tom some time to figure out what to do with him. He was a clever boy with growing potential that he had no intention of hindering.

If he somehow missed his chance to kill the Dark Lord before leaving, well, he knew his secrets. He'd find a means to destroy him eventually, and if he couldn't do that from Europe he would simply abandon Viktor's body and find another in Britain.

His options were almost limitless.

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McGunny went down to Hogsmeade to sulk. He told his few staff members back at the castle that he wanted to get some interviews from the students about the tournament, but he didn't actually talk to anyone. Potter wasn't being cooperative, and he was admittedly depressed.

He needed somewhere to think, and gather his thoughts. Going somewhere new usually helped to inspire him, and as changed as Hogsmeade was this year, it qualified.

And inspiration came, by mere happenstance, by a door opening out of the corner of his eye just as he passed an alley. The door itself was not particularly interesting, looking as drab as most side doors did with trash bins and empty pallets lining either side of it, and he would have over looked it even being opened if it weren't for the sound of a glass bottle falling over and shattering drawing his attention. He pulled back behind a wall on instinct, and felt silly for it. He peeked back down the alley, hoping no one had seen his skittishness, and it looked empty of people at first glance.

But the door was open, and it was a cool day, and that just struck McGunny as kind of odd. He stared expectantly at the opening, thinking someone was going to step out, but after a few second of concentration he became aware that Viktor Krum was standing in plain sight.

Notice-Me-Not, McGunny realized, and was instantly intrigued. Now why would you need that particular charm, I wonder?

The Durmstang Champion made a quick look around to see if anyone had noticed him, but seeing no one, quickly ducked inside. McGunny made his own brief scan of the area, and followed after him.

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Tom mentally cursed when he spotted the school newspaper editor. The alleyway would have been the perfect place to strike, but he couldn't afford witnesses. Particularly, not busybody reporters. At the same time, he couldn't allow McGunny to uncover anything suspicious Krum might be doing and blow the boy's cover. There were still some things that needed to be done before Tom was ready to leave the country.

So when McGunny opened the door to follow Krum, Tom dove in after him, smashing the boy in the back and knocking him down the stairs. The Silencing Charm the Ravenclaw had cast to cover his entry, worked in Tom's favor, muting the slamming of the door behind them and the crash of McGunny's fall. The boy lay in a heap at the bottom of the stairs, and did not move.

Tom fluttered awkwardly in place for a moment, then landed beside him to see if he was alive. McGunny stilled breathed, but was unconscious, which was ever so convenient. A missing person would rouse just as much suspicion as a person with a story.

But now he couldn't turn back. He had to find Krum and take possession of his body before he found McGunny and panicked or McGunny woke up and ran to tell the nearest Sentinel what had happened.

He rotated his head, surveying the situation he had gotten himself into. A single light bulb illuminated the stairs, and gradually faded off into the surround gloom. They were in a large cellar, rows upon rows of shelves stacked with canned and jarred goods, dusty mason jars, boxes of nails, old toys, and empty baskets and layers of dust on the ground. Krum was nowhere in sight.

With a powerful flap of his wings, he took flight, breaking free of the magical silence and moving towards the other end of the cellar. He dropped onto the top corner of a shelf. There was yet another door, cracked open just a bit. A sign was hung on the door, reading 'Furnace', and a warm glow and heat emanating out of it seemed to correspond with that statement.

From inside, Tom could hear voices.

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"I'm sorry," Viktor said, staring into the furnace. It was a monstrously large thing, with an ugly leer, and the tendency to belch fire at him if he got too close. The entire room was boiling hot, and he was already

starting to sweat. "I just needed to talk to someone. I needed to regain my perspective."

From within the furnace's mouth, the pile of coals and embers glowed, forming a kindly face that you would have missed completely unless you were looking directly at it.

"It's quite alright, Viktor. I'm happy to hear from you, whatever the reason. How is Hogwarts treating you? Have you been learning any interesting things?" the elderly wizard asked conversationally. The boy nearly rolled his eyes, but settled for a snort.

"Hn. I guess you could say dat. I tink I'm learning too many dings, about dis place and dese people, and I don't know vat to do about it. I'm scared for dem. I feel like I'm dragging dem into a var dey don't deserve."

"Few people deserve war," Dumbledore said, "And I don't wish it even on those who do, but a battle is coming. One way or another, Voldemort will find a way, and I pity our enemies as much as our allies when that day comes, but for everyone's sake we cannot fail. We failed in the first war against him, and if we fail a second time there will be suffering on a level the world has never seen."

Viktor shook his head. "But dat isn't vat I see here," he said, his voice filled with despair. "I don't see suffering like you're talking about. Everyone here is looking forward to der future, and dat future doesn't factor in var. They just vant to be vith derr families, go to college, get jobs, fall in love. If everything is as bad as you say, vy isn't everyone here miserable?"

"Aahh..." Dumbledore said, his expression understanding. "You think because you haven't seen it, that it isn't there? That is didn't happen? You know better. You've met refugees before, you've heard their stories. Those children at your school are not cruel, but they are sheltered. Their magical ability has marked them as the elite of Voldemort's society, and they are coddled and protected and nurtured so that they, the most powerful and educated, may re-enforce the regime that they associate with the happiness of their

youth. Their good intentions, the preservation of a way of life they've become accustomed to, will be the downfall of hundreds, maybe thousands of others."

Viktor said nothing, feeling the truth of the elder wizards words. It was true. He had volunteered in the refugee camps, the ghettos, the slums where witches and wizards had fled with only their clothes on their back to escape death or worse to foreign countries unprepared to shelter them. He'd seen the cripples, the widows and orphans, the lone survivors, and each had their tale to tell. Tales of horror, murder, rape, torture, casual cruelty, and desperation. He had seen grown men weep, children curse the world, and women stripped of their kindness and trust.

And those were the survivors, if they could be called that.

He couldn't forget about them. Not now, not when he could help prevent Voldemort's sickness from spreading.

"I am not asking you to hate them," Dumbledore continued, "Though it will cause you much pain, an open heart is a blessing and I hope you can hold on to that till your dying day. I just want you to remember, what you see is not always truth, and what is truth is not always seen."

Viktor nodded.

"Yes, I tink I understand. Dank you."

"You are quite welcome, my boy. Now, tell me how the challenge went? I heard you won. Congratulations!"

The Durmstang Champion smiled just a bit and shook his head.

"Barely. I tink Delacour might have beaten me if it weren't for da accident. Did dey tell you about dat?"

"Yes, I have received extensive reports about what happened with the squid. I hope she is alright?"

"She seemed fine dis morning. She vas lucky Potter vas dere. He saved her life, but just barely."

"Yes, quite fortunate. I trust Potter got through it no worse for wear?"

"Dere vas some complication in actually getting him out of da lake, but he seems fine. I haven't seen or heard from him since den, though. Da kid is crazy. Brave, but crazy. I'm starting to believe some of da stories I've heard about him."

"Well, wouldn't that be something?" the old wizard chuckled.

"It vould certainly make for interesting conversa-"

There was a shift of air, the barest brush of cool air against his sweaty neck. Viktor ducked instinctively, his wand practically jumping into his hand, and rolled to the side. Something large flew over his head, and he rolled again.

"Stupify!"

The spell struck true, and there was panicked screech and flurry of feathers, before his target collapsed to the floor weakly. Viktor cast a Lighting Charm to get a better look at what he had hit.

"Viktor? Viktor? Are you all right?" Dumbledore called from the furnace.

"I'm fine. It vas just an owl."

"An owl, you say? Is anyone else there?"

Viktor peeked outside the furnace room, but saw no one and heard nothing. He cast a quick charm to light the room, but there was still no one in sight. He stepped back inside.

"No, I tink it vas just da bird. It must have been hunting mice down here."

"Did you see it when you came in?"

"No, I... wait... I think I've seen this owl before."

"Where? Does it belong to someone at the school?"

"I don't know. I don't think so. But I'm pretty sure I've seen it once before, outside the DA&D classroom."

The silence that followed left Viktor increasingly uneasy. Was this owl one that Dumbledore recognized? Some sort of spy or guardian?

"... I want you send it to me," Dumbledore said at last.

"What are you thinking?"

"I doubt it's anything, but we can't afford to be careless. I'll check it over. It should only take a day. Come back tomorrow night, after the dinner. Until then, be extra alert."

"Yes, sir. I'm sending it now."

Viktor pulled a small silver star from his pocket, and placed it on the owl's chest. The bird continued to lay sprawled on the ground, taloned feet groping futilely at the air. He tapped the star with his wand.

"Porticulus."

There was another panicky screech, cut off mid way through as the owl was portkeyed away to Dumbledore's waiting hands. Viktor swept the cellar for any surveillance spells or evidence that someone unauthorized had been down there, but found nothing.

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Ron glowered across Madame Pudifoot's at his brother and Fleur laughing over a meal they had barely touched, and wanting to punch one of them. He wasn't entirely sure which one.

"Will you stop that?" Ginny begged, looking mortified. "You're going to creep people out if you don't stop watching them like some sort of stalker."

He turned his glare on her, but she just smiled, completely immune.

"Much better. Hurry up, and eat your ice cream. We can't be late or we'll miss the Floo to Madam Malkin's."

"Merlin, you're a nag," he muttered. "As if I'm going to that hag's shop and watching you turn Potter into a queer."

"Dressing in nice clothes does not make someone queer!" Ginny said indignantly.

"Don't mind him," Draco said, sounding bored. "Something got his knickers in a twist. Jealous your brother got the girl?"

"Bloody hell, no! It's disgusting what they're doing. Contorting together like they're best friends. Fuck, it makes me sick."

Hermione gave him a shriveling stare. "I think you mean 'cavorting', and what are babbling about? I think they're cute."

"You would."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Well, it's not like you're any better. Ever since Viktor showed up, you've turned into such a--"

"If you value your life, I would be very careful how you end that sentence," Harry snapped. "Why shouldn't we get along with them? They're foreigners, not lepers."

"What the hell do leopards have to do with this, Potter? And it's nothing to do with them being foreigners. They're competition! Did you forget that in the middle of your hero routine? And you know what? Right now, Delacour is buttering up my stupid brother so she can pump him for information. Just watch, next challenge she's going

to blow everyone else out of the water, and all because she bats her eyes at him and turns his brains to mush.”

There were several eye rolls around the table. “God, Ron,” Clyde said, pointing his spoon at him accusingly, “She's just thanking Bill for saving her. If she weren't, then you'd be calling her an ungrateful so-and-so. You're just being nasty to be nasty.”

But Ron wouldn't be deterred.

“If she were just being grateful, then why the hell isn't she over here laughing at Potter's stupid jokes? He did more than Bill, but she hasn't even looked this way.”

“Oh, she already thanked me,” Harry said absently. “I got a kiss too.”

Everyone turned to him, eyes wide. “On the cheek! It was just on the cheek,” he promised, a little weirded out. It wasn't like she'd promised to have his babies or anything.

“Forget it,” Ron snarled, and got up. “You're all completely missing the point. I can't talk to you when you're all being this thick.”

He stormed off, leaving everyone else exasperated or annoyed.

“Well, honestly,” Hermione said, “What is his problem? Why did he come if he just wanted to gripe at us?”

“Because gripping to himself would label him a loon?” Harry offered.

“No,” Ginny sighed, “He just wanted free ice cream. You do realize he left without paying, don't you?”

“Oh, he's going to be paying for it,” Draco said, clearly annoyed. He'd have to foot the bill after all, since he'd been the one to invite the little ingrate. “Out of his hide when I catch up to him.”

At least the conversation turned more pleasant after that. They caught up on what everyone had been doing in the last month,

gossiped about what other people were doing, and what they all hoped to be doing. There wasn't much talk about what Harry had done the day before, for which he was grateful. After being scolded by Snape, McGonagal, and Hermione, he was sick of discussing it. The few times it was mentioned was in reference to the dinner party and his appointment at Madam Malkin's, which everyone agreed they should accompany him to.

He had originally invited Ginny as his 'fashion consultant', who had been utterly delighted and asked to bring her new French friend, Aimee Anatole. This in turned had resulted in Clyde inviting himself, saying they'd put Harry in a dress if someone wasn't there keep them in check. Hermione asked to come along simply because she didn't feel like wandering Hogsmeade alone, and Draco naturally decided to follow her. They'd all gone to get sweets before heading out, and somehow Ron had ended up there as well. Harry still wasn't sure how.

Ginny's friend, Aimee, a fourth year, was a petite little pixie, but carried herself like she was the biggest, most important person in the room. She greeted Ginny with a hug and a kiss to both cheeks, and even kissed Clyde's cheek when he teasingly asked for one too. Gushing over Harry like he was a puppy, she pushed him inside and hurried him towards the floo.

“Urry! Urry! We 'ave much to do!” she crooned. “Ginerva and I 'ave been waiting for zis chance, and we will not let it pass!”

Harry managed a surprised look at Ginny, who blinked at him innocently as if she had no idea what the other girl was talking about. They squeezed pass the other patrons, Harry smiling awkwardly as complete strangers patted him on the back and raised their drinks to him and shouted things at him like 'to a real bone fide hero' or 'way to go, Potter!' A Sentinel met them at the floo, gave Harry's friends an annoyed look, but let them through at his request.

The shop was empty but for another Sentinel, a tailor, and Madam Malkin herself.

“Welcome back, Mr. Potter!” the woman greeted enthusiastically, coming forward to shake his hand. “It is so good-”

Aimee was too impatient for formalities, however, and wasted no more time. Taking Ginny in one hand, Madam Malkin in another, she took them aside. She pulled out a little book from her robe pocket, enlarged it, and opened it to show the shop matron.

"We were thinking something like this. Clean lines and sharp angles, just a little bit of color, but nothing garish. Simple and classy, with a modern twist," Aimee said, pointing at the book.

Madam Malkin blinked at the girl, caught off guard by her authoritative behavior. She turned to Harry for some clue as to who or what she was. Harry gave her a sympathetic smile.

"Miss Anatole and Miss Weasley are my fashion advisors. I trust their judgment," he said, though really he only trusted Ginny's. He didn't know Aimee at all, and had to hope she had some sense, or at least that Ginny wouldn't let her get carried away.

The seamstress turned back to the picture.

"Yes, I think I can do this. Why don't you come this way and select the materials?"

The three disappeared into one of the shop back rooms, and Harry turned back to his friends, wondering if this had been such a good idea. Clyde was the first to say it.

"You're doomed."

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Clyde's dismal foretelling hadn't amounted to anything, luckily. There had been some tense moments when Ginny and Aimee had started bickering about accent colors and how sharp of an angle they wanted cut, but luckily Madam Malkin had enough experience to know what would work best and this tailor wasn't nearly as dodgey with a needle as his last one.

The outfit turned out well.

At least, he hoped it did. Everyone had said he looked great, even Clyde, but Harry was still feeling a little nervous as he got ready in front of the mirror in his dorm room. The clothes were different from his usual, even different from his old clothes, and he couldn't tell if they were too plain or too fine for the dinner tonight. He also thought they made him look short and skinny, younger than he would have liked. In other words very much like his skinny, little fourteen year-old self.

"You know, if you don't stop it, I'm going to have to agree with Ron. They turned you into a queer," Clyde said. He was laying on his bed, flipping through a quidditch magazine (or possibly porn, Harry was afraid to ask), while Harry struggled to feel comfortable.

"Oh, shut up. I just... I hate interviews. They all look at you and judge you, and you know what ever they think they'll write down and then thousands of other people are going to think the same thing. I don't want them thinking I look like a dork."

"You look fine."

"I look short."

Clyde burst out laughing. "You are short."

Harry stuck his tongue out at him. There really wasn't any point in delaying things at this point. Voldemort would be at the entrance soon, and he wasn't about ready to try to find something else to wear. He grabbed a cloak, and put it on, not wanting to attract any more attention than necessary and left.

The school champions were already there when he arrived, along with their headmistresses and headmaster. He hesitated when they all turned to him at once, looking at him as if they had never seen him before, or more likely that they were really seeing him for the first time. He squared his shoulders and kept moving forward.

"Good evening," he said, cautiously. Fleur came up to him, smiling cheerfully, and took the corners openings of his cloak and pulled them open. Harry bulked and immediately pulled them closed. "What are you doing?!"

"I just wanted to zee," Fleur laughed. "Aimee zed she dressed you up, but I can't zee anything under this."

He flushed with embarrassment, and frowned up at her, showing how completely unamused he was. "You can see it later."

"Leave him alone, Delacour. He isn't a toy," Viktor growled. Fleur gave him an amused look.

"You're an only child, aren't you?" she asked. His surprised look made her think she'd hit the nail on the head. "If you 'ad younger siblings, you'd understand."

Cedric, who did have younger siblings, chuckled behind his hand. The bickering was interrupted by the Dark Lord, arriving through a secret passageway. He scanned each of the gathered party briefly, before settling on Harry. He beckoned him to his side, and the boy did as instructed. Just as Fleur had done only a minute before, he pulled open Harry's cloak to see his outfit. What was it with people and his wardrobe, the Gryffindor mentally lamented.

"Good," Voldemort said, nodding his approval, before turning his attention to the others. "Is everyone ready?"

Everyone nodded their agreement, and the Dark Lord moved to the giant door, and pounded on it twice. The groan of the door as it was opened was immediately drowned out by the crowds of people outside and the tell-tale flash of lightbulbs. The Dark Lord took Lestranger's arm in his, and lead the way out into the crowd. Sentinels formed a barrier, keeping the reporters from rushing in, and pushed them out of the way as the party made their way to the waiting carriages.

"Mr. Krum, how does it feel to win the first challenge?!"

“Mr. Potter, what made you risk your life to save the Beauxbaton's champion?”

“How are you feeling after your brush with death, Miss Delacour?”

“Have there been any changes in regards to insuring the safety of the champions?”

No one bothered answering the reporters here, but Harry still felt claustrophobic with them crowded around so close, their questions dogging their every step. Beside him, Fleur squeezed his hand, and smiled at him. He felt himself smile back at her, but the flurry of flashes that followed had him flinching and turning away. They climbed into two separate carriages for the brief ride to Hogsmeade. There were reporters waiting for them there, as well, and also more Sentinels to keep them at bay. It all seemed very strange to Harry, who had seen such a thing before, but always outside government buildings or sporting events. It all seemed a bit excessive.

They stopped in front of a large house with a fenced yard. They exited the carriages, and ignored the flurry of questions hurled at them, until at last they reached the inside. An attendant took their cloaks and escorted them into the parlor, where other foreign dignitaries and several more reporters were waiting for them. Harry felt his stomach lurch as he spotted Rita Skeeter, standing out in her electric blue cocktail dress, a few inches too high in the skirt and a few inches too low on her breasts. Like a shark scenting blood, she found her intended target within moments, and stalked towards him with an exaggerated swing in her hips. Her camera man scurried after her.

Harry looked at his watch, and sighed. He only had to get through the next half hour. Voldemort patted him on the shoulder, trying for sympathetic, but naturally came off as amused. The Dark Lord left Harry on his own as he went to talk with a group of important looking people, Lestrage sticking close to him the entire time. He thought about looking for one of the other champions, but decided against it almost immediately. He wasn't going to hide behind them like a little kid. He had done all of this before, probably more often than Cedric

and Fleur combined, and Krum would lose respect for him if he showed such weakness. All he could do was brace himself.

“Harry, darling!” Skeeter exclaimed, “You look fabulous! What are you wearing? Baxter & Gimple? Picetti?”

What was it with people and his wardrobe? He floundered for a moment, thinking up a reply. Explaining where exactly his clothes came from seemed... embarrassing, but Ginny would be hurt if he didn't give her proper credit.

“Aimee & Ginerva,” he offered, as if it were a name that fell right in line with the ones she had just mentioned. It worked. Skeeter made an 'oh, of course!' expression, and moved along.

“Do you mind if we get a picture first, and then ask some questions?” she asked, batting her eyes coquettishly. He fought back a grimace, and nodded, hooking his thumbs in his pockets and leaning back a little to give a relaxed look, just like Ginny had shown him.

“Perfect! Now, then, down to business! There has been all sorts of theories floating around about why you went out to rescue the champion of a rival school-”

Harry held up his hand, not wanting to hear what any of those probably ridiculous and insulting theories entailed. “She's a rival, not an enemy. Why shouldn't I have helped her? If it had been Diggory, I would have done the same thing. I just couldn't stand there and let someone die right in front my eyes, or in front of all my friends and classmates. It's a horrible memory to have to live with.”

Skeeter leered, “So you don't think your decision to go risk your life was influenced in any way by the fact that Miss Delacour is part veela?”

He blinked stupidly for a moment, caught completely by surprise. He hadn't realized it before, but Skeeter's revelation made sense. Funny, he hadn't been as affected by her as the rest of house mates were.

"Of course not. Like I said, I would have done it for anyone," he said quickly, before she could latch onto his hesitation as surprise.

"Naturally," she agreed, her voice thick with condescension. "So have you considered how you will have her pay off her life debt?"

He felt his temper rising every second he had to stand near this nosy creature. He needed to get away from her fast, before someone got hurt.

"Miss Delacour... was rescued thanks to the help of several individuals, not just myself. The merpeople protected her from the grindylows and helped me find her, Bill Weasley got her breathing again, and the medi-wizards standing by made sure she would be okay. If I had been the only person trying to save her, she would have died. As far as I'm concerned, she doesn't owe me anything, and I didn't do what I did to get something from her. I helped her because I didn't want someone to die if I could prevent it. I don't know why you're having so much trouble grasping this. It's really a very simple concept."

He abruptly walked away, more quickly than she could follow, and looked for some sort of exit. He found one, or more accurately one found him, in the form Cedric coming up and pulling him aside into the foyer.

"Hey, Harry, can I talk to you for a minute?"

"Yeah, sure," he agreed, a little surprised. While they were on friendly terms, they didn't really hang out together. He wasn't sure what to expect "What is it?"

The Hufflepuff looked a little embarrassed, and fidgeted for a moment, before finally blurting it out.

"I know this is really sudden, but with what happened to Fleur during the challenge, I've been thinking a lot about what would happen if I got hurt and couldn't compete."

"Yeah... okay?"

"I... would you be my second?"

Harry looked at him blankly. "Second what?"

"You know, my second, the person who comes in and finishes for me if I can't. My backup."

"... ummmm.... no?"

Cedric looked honestly surprised. "No? Why not? You'd be perfect for the job!"

"Because I'm fourteen, and wouldn't qualify to compete? Because I've got enough to worry about with classes, club activities, friends, and these god awful social functions? Because I'm sane, and don't want to die by squid or something else equally weird?"

"... Alright, all perfectly good reasons, but this is just a precaution. The chances are-"

"Then it shouldn't matter who else you pick," Harry pointed out. "Just as long as it isn't me."

Cedric gave him a disappointed look. "Are you sure I can't change your mind?"

"Positive, but thanks for asking me first instead of assuming. I really hope you aren't hurt during the challenges."

The older smiled ruefully.

"Me too."

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The interviews went fairly well, by Viktor's estimation. All the champions and Harry had been henpecked by the press for thirty

minutes, but aside from varying levels of annoyance (Harry's being the most blatant as he made a point to flee everyone who stopped to talk to him within three minutes) they had all gotten through it relatively unscathed.

They had all gathered in the dinning room, which must have been modified to accommodate Madam Maxime, with the champions all sitting beside their headmaster or headmistress at one end, and the Dark Lord and other officials at the other. Harry had been placed to the left of Voldemort, which Viktor found rather interesting. The young Gryffindor was quiet for most of the evening, but polite, and friendly enough. Voldemort had whispered something into Harry's ear during the dinner at one point, and the boy had actually laughed.

It left Viktor feeling uneasy.

As had Ambassador Prideux's questions about him owning a cobra, and more importantly Harry's answer.

"I do not own, Inana," he had said, "She is a cobra, a 'Queen of the Nile', not a pet. We helped each other out of a bad situation, and became friends. When I am able and she is ready, I will send her home where she belongs. Until then, we enjoy each other's company. She has a very interesting view of the world."

More and more, he was starting to think of Harry as a victim of his own innocence. The boy obviously had no idea about the dangers that surrounded him, disguised as these dangers were as 'mentors' and 'friends'. At least, that's what Viktor hoped, because he liked the kid, and after seeing him fly to Fleur's rescue he even respected him quite a bit.

He would hate himself if it all turned out to just be an act.

Sneaking back to Hogsmeade after hours turned out to be incredibly simple. Jophery had figured it out within the first two weeks, and was more than happy to point him towards the boat house. The place was charmed so that only a Hogwart's boat could come or go, which was fine if you wanted to keep someone out, but not very helpful at keeping people in.

After that, it was a simple matter to sneak into town and into the secret cellar, and after midnight only a few Sentinels wandered the streets. He crept down the stairs, casting spells to make sure no one had come down since he left and to check for traps, but everything was as he left it. In the furnace room, the fire burned even hotter than it had during the day, leaving him feeling instantly over heated.

"Dumbledore?" he called uncertainly.

"I am here," came the reply from within the furnace. "How are things on your end, Viktor?"

He let out a sigh of relief. "Everything seems normal. Da dinner vent as expected. The Dark Lord didn't appear suspicious. Da owl?"

"Is completely normal. I checked it for enchantments, possession, animagical transfiguration, charms... nothing. It's a perfectly normal, rather cranky owl. If it was under any sort of spell, it's gone now. I'm going to send it back to you. If it belongs to someone, it's best we not risk them looking for it. I had it magically purged and sedated, so no one should be able to glean any information from it."

There was a muted pop, and the owl appeared in the middle of the floor. Viktor quickly picked it up and retrieved the silver star, slipping it into his pocket. He'd felt anxious all day without that portkey, even with his emergency one stashed in his boot.

"You best hurry back," Dumbledore said. "We both took far too many chances as it is. Tonks says 'stay safe'"

"Alright. Give my regards to da others."

Viktor hurried out as quickly as caution allowed, but even so, he missed the silent shadow that separated itself from the alley wall and watched him run back towards the lake.

Book IV:

Chapter 12: The Forbidden Land

There was a flood of articles about the first challenge come Monday, and despite Harry's best efforts, he wasn't able to avoid all of them. He had read the Hogwarts Herald out of simple respect for Hermione, and also to see if he could pick up any resentment from McGunny's article since he had turned him down. The editor's article was professional and well-written as always, without a hint of ill will. There was even a little praise in it, not just for Harry, but for all the other champion's performances as well.

It was still embarrassing, especially when the gossip picked up, and he couldn't turn a corner without having groups of people stop talking or start whispering once his back was to them. At least, it was mostly the 'giggly' type of gossip and not the 'sneering' type this time around. It was still annoying, but definitely safer.

The only good thing that came out of the press attention, ironically came from Rita Skeeter's article. The article itself was atrocious, riddled with absurd speculations and romantic drama between Fleur and him. There was, however, one line mentioning Harry 'dressing to impress in his chic new outfit by Amy & Ginevra', that made it all worth while. Ginny had been ecstatic when she saw it, and nearly broken a rib when she hugged him before rushing off to show Aimee, all of her friends, half of her professors, her brothers, and to write a letter about it to her family back home.

It was the first time he felt he had really started paying back her loyalty.

Things were definitely different after the first challenge. The foreign students all treated him differently. Krum wasn't exactly friendlier, but he seemed to have finally decided he could trust Harry, and stopped asking him difficult questions. Jophery asked him to fly for the German quidditch team so that they could finally get someone capable of out flying Viktor. One of the girls even requested he be their date to the Halloween ball.

Fleur teased him constantly.

"My God, you are much too short! Eat your salad!"

"What are we going to do with this wild hair? There isn't a comb in the world that can tame it."

"Why must you wear these glasses? You have such pretty eyes!"

She was never mean about it, but it was driving him batty, and worse he thought she knew it too. So did Natalie if her smirking was anything to go by. Harry suspected his old girlfriend might actually be putting the Beauxbaton's champion up to it. Three Beauxbaton's girls asked to be his date to the Halloween ball.

He took Ginny.

Halloween was the most the fun Harry had in weeks. There was good food, crazy dancing, contests, and games. There was even a slime ball war (much like a snow ball fight except of course with slime). He still wasn't sure who got him in the back of head, but figured it was an even toss up between Ron and Natalie.

Even Hagrid and Madam Maxime came, and had fun acting like a couple of teenagers.

Classes resumed as normal. In Celtic class, they spent a week building house, so that they could meet out of the cold. The house itself was just a large circular stone wall with wooden doors and windows, a straw thatched roof, a wooden floor, and a large stone fire pit in the center to keep it warm. It was just as cozy in the house they had proudly made themselves (albeit with a lot of magical help), as it was in the willow grove. They studied Samhain, the gods of harvest, and the art of hunting.

Hermione finally figured out the Patronus Charm, and earned Gryffindor the extra points. Draco figured it out shortly after. Harry waited another week before demonstrating his. Oblitz glared at him suspiciously the entire class.

He got better at sword fighting in Dueling Club.

Ron was furious. Draco could still kick both their asses at it.

Harry found himself being dragged to parties and charity events every other weekend. Aimee (properly corrected eventually) & Ginevra were mentioned three more times by the beginning of December. Snape's loathing for him was reaffirmed with every event he had to escort his ward to. Luckily for Harry, he seemed to take most of this loathing out on the hosts rather than the Gryffindor himself. Not including the three completely unfair detentions, which really might have only been done to Snape's laziness. The man hated sorting his storage closet and scrubbing cauldrons. The fact that Harry hated these things as well was entirely beside the point.

Everything fell into a workable routine of work, study, and play. He even managed to work in some free time to himself to write letters to his godfathers and the Reichers, practice his art work, and read through The Book of a Thousand Gods.

Life was good.

And then the second challenge was announced on the first Friday of December.

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"Impossible," Hermione said, staring disbelieving at the challenge rules. They had been handed out to everyone during first period classes, to prevent them from aiding the champions accidentally or getting themselves into trouble. There was definitely a lot of trouble to get into. "The first challenge someone nearly died with the safeties, and now he wants them to do something even more dangerous without any safeties at all and with no way to help them if they get into trouble? It's insane! Who would agree to this?"

"Miss Granger, you are dangerously close to writing our Lord an apology letter," Professor Toure warned, her expression unforgiving. "And for your information, all three champions have already accepted."

Besides, they are not going in without protection. Each champion will carry a champion's badge, which will allow them to be magically transported in and out of the boundary, and medical personnel will always be on standby if someone comes back injured. Really, this challenge is a lot less dangerous than the last."

"They're hunting a dragon!"

Yes, Harry was having a hard time wrapping this thoughts around that too. He understood people did, in fact, hunt dragons long before they had the benefit of wands, but they were specialists, and even then more died young than retired (which was usually after three dragons. It was a very profitable trade after all). Besides, wasn't it illegal to hunt dragons, now a days?

"A sleeping dragon, Miss Granger. They're not actually going to fight it. Most of the challenge will simply be finding it. It's a test of endurance, not combat skill, and their main opponent will be the weather and the forest, not the dragon itself. Just so everyone understands what is going to happen, I am going to go over it with you," she said, and turned to the announcement to read.

'To win the challenge, a champion must locate the sleeping dragon, slay it, and return to the castle with some part of the dragon as proof. The dragon is located within the Forbidden Forest. A ten square mile area has been blocked off with a special ward that will prevent anyone except those champions with badges from entering or leaving.'

Professor Toure now turned her sharp eyes to each of them, insuring that she had their full attention.

"Now, here are the rules, which I expect all of you to respect.'

'Rule #1, only a school champion may hold in their possession a champion's badge. They can not be given or lent to another person, for any reason. Anyone found in possession of a champion's badge, and not themselves a champion, will be severely punished, regardless of age, rank, or station.'

'Rule #2, there is no time limit to the challenge, and a champion may spend unrestricted time searching within the Forbidden Forest, including after hours and during classes. However, if not within the Forbidden Forest, champions are expected to attend classes and keep curfew, and any missed classes can only be made up on their teacher's discretion.'

'Rule #3, a champion may make use of any items within the school to aid them in their quest, including library books, weaponry, brooms, food, etc, but may not accept gifts from other students, teachers, or outside sources. A champion cannot purchase or send for additional resources to aid in the challenge, with the exception of nonmagical clothing. A champion caught breaking this rule will be withheld from searching for three days for each offense and suspended from the challenge after three offenses. The second party will face severe punishment.'

'Now, any questions?'

Several hands shot up, including Harry's. Toure pointed towards him first.

"Isn't it killing dragons illegal in Britain?"

"The hunting of dragons is illegal, yes," she said, "but the Court authorizes the extermination of a dragon that proves a hazard to human settlements. This particular dragon was caught half a mile outside of a wizarding village in Northern Scotland. It destroyed three cottages, killed most of the local livestock, scared away the wild game, and injured several people. It's been relocated twice, but returned both times. It's execution is a bit unorthodox, but inevitable nonetheless."

She pointed to Clyde.

"Can't the champion's just cast a locating charm to find it? It seems kind of a weak challenge."

Toure smiled and turned to Hermione. "Perhaps you could answer that question, Miss Granger?"

Hermione nodded, "Dragon's skins are almost impervious to magic, including locating charms. Unless it happens to be blowing fire while you cast the spell, it won't work."

"Absolutely correct, anyone else?"

The school was buzzing with excitement about the latest challenge all morning, and even Harry could feel himself caught up in the enthusiasm. He held himself in check though, for Hermione's sake. She was obviously upset about the danger, and the fact that all three champions were absent during lunch did nothing to alleviate her worry. When Fleur and Cedric showed up late to dinner, but Viktor did not, she was practically frantic.

"What if something happened to him?" she asked.

Harry tried to reassure her. "He's just still looking, Hermione. Think about it. Fleur and Cedric aren't as used to the cold as he is. To him, it's probably a warm spring evening."

"But the forest-"

"Everything is hibernating. The worst he's going to find is some hungry foxes or wild boar. The really bad stuff is either asleep or deeper in the forest. If he does get into trouble, he has his badge and his wand. He'll be fine."

And he was fine. One sleepless night later, and Viktor was at the breakfast table just long enough to refuel, resupply, reassure Hermione he was fine, and then he was off again. Cedric and Fleur were quick to follow his example.

No one saw much of the champions over the next couple of days. They appeared irregularly at meal times, during classes, or at random times to warm up or rest or eat. Krum was the most rarely seen. He would show up at the castle for only a few minutes at a time during the day to gather food or just to reassure Hermione that he was in fact, alive and well, and wouldn't return to the castle until after midnight and then was out again before dawn. Cedric and Fleur were

just as dedicated, but Fleur wasn't used to the cold and had to return to the castle every few hours to defrost. It didn't help that she didn't own very warm clothing, and none of her classmates had anything better to lend her.

In the end it didn't matter, because after a week, none of the champions had found any sign of the dragon. Fleur was the first to realize it was going to take more than blindly wandering around in the forest to find what she wanted, and consequently was spending more and more time in the library than outside.

It didn't take long for Cedric to come to the same conclusion. The rest of Hogwarts soon lost interest when it became obvious that they wouldn't see anything really exciting from them whether they were reading in the library or wandering the forest. Harry had his own problems to deal with.

McGunny had requested to see him.

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"Is something the matter?" Harry asked, his first thought upon entering the abandoned classroom was that Oblitz had done or said something suspicious. He hadn't heard from McGunny directly for months now, and even the last interview he had done for the Hogwarts' Herald had been done through one of McGunny's underlings. He figured the other boy had accepted his reasons for not wanting a biographer, and was glad for it.

McGunny shook his head, his back turned to him as he wandered further into the classroom.

"No, not really. I'm still keeping my eye on the Durmstang people, but they appear to all be behaving themselves. That isn't what I wanted to talk to you about."

"What is it, then?"

The older boy stopped, and turned back to him. Harry felt the hairs on the back of his neck rise, and his hand twitch for the wand up his sleeve. There wasn't anything threatening in his expression, indeed it was friendly and open, but it wasn't one Harry had ever seen him wear before. At the same time, it was a little too familiar.

"I wanted to ask for your story again."

Harry shook his head. "I told you already why I can't do that."

"Of course, and you were right. There is no way I could write your story for anyone else to read. Not only would it likely violate national secrets, it would reveal personal things you would never feel comfortable with the public knowing. I understand that, and won't ask you to make yourself that vulnerable. I just thought..."

McGunny sighed, and his strange expression slipped away into something Harry recognized. Frustration and the desire to make someone understand. It was the only thing that kept him from running out the door and not looking back.

"I just thought, one day you would want someone to understand you, not just assume that they understand you. One day, you'll find a girl you want to marry and have children, and they'll all hear what the world says about you and that they'll want to know what is true and what isn't, but you won't have the words or the memory to explain it all. Perhaps it will still be too personal to say directly. Either way, you'll have your story that you can't or won't tell, and you might die without anyone ever having truly known you."

Harry said nothing. He could feel McGunny's sincerity behind his words, and it pulled at him like a magical force, urging him to accept his offer. But he couldn't do that.

"And that is what you want?"

"I do. I want to understand. If I can understand you, then perhaps one day what I write will have others understand. Even if it's just one other person. Even if it's never read by anyone else for a thousand years. I believe it will be worth it."

Harry looked away. It was starting to become painful to face that sincerity directly. He was afraid to be overwhelmed by it.

“What do you expect me to do?” Harry asked angrily, hoping passion of some sort would strengthen his will to resist. “I can't tell you, even if I wanted to. If Voldemort found out I told you certain things, both of our lives could be in danger. He's a legilimens, and he's used his ability on me before. None of my secrets are safe from him.”

“I've thought of that.”

Harry looked back at him, and watched as he removed a book from his bag and came forward to show him. It was large, black leather with steel fixtures, and a lock on it like he occasionally saw on books in the restricted section. It did not, however, require a key to open it. The pages were completely blank.

“What is it?”

“It's a Keepsafe Book. It's what witches and wizards write anything they want to keep secret. Book of Shadows, diaries, things like that. You can spell them so that they won't unlock without the blood of a family member, or a secret password, or special key or talisman. If someone forces open the lock, all the writing on the page disappears, and becomes irretrievable or is filled with something else. I had a grandmother who kept a diary that showed cookie recipes instead if you didn't say the proper password.”

“... um... okay, that's neat, but that doesn't really help.”

“I know, but this is my idea. I'm going to give this book to you. Only you will be able to unlock it. Every so often, we'll meet, and we'll have a writing session. I ask questions, you talk, a charmed quill will write what we say. Afterwards, you stick around for a while and do homework or something, and I revise what was written. When I'm done, you take the book with you. If we reach a point where you can't talk about what happened, then I leave you to fill in those parts on your own. So you keep the secrets you have to, and only I will know the rest. It's not like I'm interested solely in your secrets. It's what you

do and feel in the quiet moments between rescuing damsels and slaying monsters that I want to know. That's the part that explains who you are and why you do what you do."

Harry had to admit that was a good idea.

"How do I know if I can trust you? Even without the book, do you expect me to just tell you everything about me? I mean, come on."

"I'll take a Confidentiality Oath."

"I have no idea what that is. Is it magical?"

"Yes. Lots of Court officials and doctors have to take it before they talk about a case or treat a patient. I'll never be able to talk about anything you don't give me permission to talk about. It'll be like having a... a therapist."

Harry felt the corner of his mouth twist into a smile at that. He supposed if anyone needed to vent to someone, it was probably him. He dropped it quickly before McGunny interpreted it as a 'yes'.

"I don't know... I mean, I've got enough going on as it is..."

But McGunny already sensed he had gotten over most of Harry's resistance, and wouldn't be stopped now.

"We'll do it over... Sunday dinners... or while you're painting or... or... or just whenever it's convenient. I mean, we'll have to meet regularly. There is so much I want to ask you, and there's no telling what the future will bring. I'm sure that with the political situation you're in right now that a lot of important things are going to be happening in your life, and people are going to misinterpret or even lie about you at every turn. When that starts happening you're going to really need me to write for you, to have someone understand."

Harry tried to grasp the concept of working on something for decades, but couldn't. He understood working at the same job for decades or educating yourself all your life or being married until death, but working on a single thing for that long just didn't quite click in his head.

He thought he would get bored of it or just exhausted. McGunny didn't seem worried about that in the least.

"I still don't know. It's not really my thing," he said.

"Alright, then why don't we just try it out? We'll do three interviews, and if you really don't like it, then we'll stop. Let's give it a try, at least. Please? This is more important to me than you'll ever know"

And that's what worried Harry so much.

"... Alright. Three tries, but if I say no after that, then it's over."

"I promise, Potter... Harry... You're not going to regret this."

Harry didn't have the heart to tell him, he already did.

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Fleur was not having a good week. Since the challenge had begun, she had spent a horrible amount of time in an even more horrible forest where it never got above forty degrees, evil dead vegetation tore at her clothes and hair, and she felt watched where ever she went. She'd ruined her nicest boots too. Worse, it had all been for nothing. She hadn't found the dragon or any sign of it. Honestly, she had no idea what to even look for.

Now she was in the library, blessed warm but so far unhelpful. She had researched dragons, hiding spells, finding spells, hunting manuals, tales of dragon slayers, government policies on dragon extermination, but none of them had produced anything remotely helpful. If the dragon had chosen it's own lair, the informations might have been useful, but since it was hidden by wizards, this clearly wasn't the case and she didn't know what to do. All the caves she had found were empty (of dragons at least. There had been a rather startling encounter with a very drowsy bear), and the ground didn't seem disturbed anywhere she searched. Although it was hard to tell in some places. There were a few species of wandering trees that

were known for uprooting themselves and moving somewhere else, but if they had moved it hadn't been since summer.

But then, who knew when the dragon had been put in the forest? No one had seen or heard anything around there since school had started.

“Ah, excuse me, Miss Delacour?”

Fleur looked up from her book on Ents (it was worth a shot), and looked over her shoulder. A Gryffindor was standing behind her, roughly the same age as her. He had the shockingly orange hair of a Weasley, but she couldn't recall his first name.

“Yes, Weasley?”

“Sorry to bother you, but um... my brother Bill was wondering if you were available to talk. I'll explain that you're busy if you like. I understand you have more important things-”

“That's quite alright. I needed a break anyway.”

He seemed startled by her answer, and floundered for a moment as he tried to think what he should do next. “Ah...um..er... he's out in greenhouse number two, not the one with Potter's cobra of course, that's in number three so... yeah, he's not suppose to wander around the school, even though he goes here- I mean went here.”

“I hope Hogwarts doesn't let a cobra wander around the halls,” she said, feeling her amusement rise with his every flustered word.

“No, no, of course not... well, Nagini used to, but... I meant Bill. Bill isn't supposed to wander around.”

“I understand. Will you put my books away for me?”

“S-sure, I can do that.”

“Thank you.”

She left him flustered, and went down to the entryway, bundled up as best she could against the cold, cast a quick warming charm on herself. Outside the gray sky warned of snow and lots of it, and a hard northern wind threatened a full storm. Even Krum would have to spend the night indoors tonight. She sprinted around the castle as quick as she could, hoping to reach the greenhouse before the warming charm wore off. She didn't quite make it, but the running saved her from the chill, and when she entered the greenhouse she felt immediately overheated.

"Hoo," she sighed, pulling off her cloak. "Bill? Are you here?"

"Over here," he called, coming around an enormous fern. He smiled at her with his little boy smile she was becoming increasingly fond of, and pulled out a box. "Sorry to come by unannounced, but I got something for you."

"For me? Bill, you didn't have to do that!"

His grin turned impish.

"Of course I did. I'm the new safety coordinator. I have to make sure all the champions don't hurt themselves, like say... wandering around the forest with barely any clothes on in the middle of winter."

"I am not naked."

"Might as well be, as much heat as that getup loses. Come on, you'll like it. Well, most of it anyway."

He handed the box out to her, and after a good long moment of just being stubborn, she snatched the box out of his hand and opened it. Inside was a cloak and a pair of boots, dark gray and lined with rabbit fur.

"They're nothing fancy," he said, sheepishly, "but they're durable and warm. They're not magic, so the rules say I can give them to you. Ginny mentioned you didn't seem to have anything appropriate for spelunking in winter, so I thought you might like them."

“Bill, they're perfect! Thank you!”

She hugged him tightly and kissed his cheek. He turned pink, but still managed to keep grinning like a rogue..

“Glad you like them, because you're going to hate me for this one. My mom heard you didn't have anything either, so she sent you something too. Please don't blame me. It was Ginny's fault, I swear,” he said in mock regret, handing her yet another box. He tried to touch it as little as possible, as if there were something particularly nasty inside. She accepted it, more curious now than apprehensive. She opened it...

...and understood his feelings completely. She found herself face to face with perhaps the silliest (if not the ugliest) sweater she had ever seen. It was the same baby blue of Beauxbaton's school emblem, but the color was it's only attractive feature. It was bulky, shapeless, with a giant 'F' stamped across the front of it in golden sequence. Her face must have said it all, because Bill burst out laughing.

“I'm sorry, I really am. She means well, but her fashion sense hasn't evolved since she was in primary school. I don't expect you to wear it, but you can always take it back to France with you. Think of it as a funny souvenir.”

She gave it another considering look. It did look warm, and as long as she wore something over it, no one had to know. Gabrielle would laugh herself silly if she saw her sister wear it, which might just make it worth the embarrassment.

“I like it,” she said.

Bill's jaw practically dropped clean off his face.

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Sunday arrived with snow. Lots and lots of snow. It started falling lightly after sunset on Saturday, and gradually grew in strength through the night and into the next day. Even Krum hadn't bothered

searching under those conditions, and spent a rare afternoon with Hermione just talking in the library. Cedric and Fleur also visited in the library, but they went looking for ideas to aid their search once the snow let up. Cedric had a few he wanted to try, even though he doubted they would work.

Wanting to try out his ideas at the first available opportunity, he waited only long enough for the snow to ease up just a bit, and then headed out. The sun had just set, and the world was a bluish gray as light slowly drained from the endless white. Cedric trudged through the eight inches of snow to the boundary of the Forbidden Forest. He pulled out his champion's badge, the Hogwarts' coat of arms molded in gold and hanging from a heavy chain around his neck, and held it out before him. Passing through the barrier was like walking through a small waterfall, cool with a feeling of pressure coming down on his head and shoulders. He always checked himself instinctively to see if he was wet, but he never was.

In the forest, it was already deep night. Even without any leaves on the trees, skeletal wooden limbs reached out to block out as much of the sky as possible, casting the land in shadows. Tonight, however, the luminous glow of the snow under the light of his Lumos overpowered even the most stubborn gloom, and soften the darkest shadows into deep blues. He stopped occasionally to look around and admire the dramatic change. It was quite miraculous.

When he was finally deep enough that he could no longer make out the castle, he opened his satchel and pulled out his supplies for his latest experiment. There wasn't much to it. A Smell-n-Seek Hound, little more than a charmed origami dog the size of his hand, and one dragonhide glove. The Smell-n-Seek he had found in craft book for amusing young children, and its reliability was definitely questionable, but since he was searching for a smell instead of a magical signature, he thought it just might work.

If the poor thing didn't dissolve in the snow first.

"Smell," he instructed his charm, and it immediately stiffen in his hand and leaned forward to sniff at the dragonhide glove in the other. It wagged its paper tail to let him now he'd picked up the scent. "Seek."

The charm floated out of his hand and around his head, before drifting off towards the North. Cedric trudged after it, his enthusiasm growing. He may have actually stumbled across something that would work! And it was so ridiculously stupid too!

He grinned to himself, and followed it deeper into forest.

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Viktor speared the ground with his enchanted javelin, pulled it out, barely glanced at it's clean wooden tip, took a few more steps, and repeated the process. This had been his hunting technique for the past week. He'd only managed to cover a third of the entire territory, but he wasn't deterred. If anything, he knew he'd find it by Christmas, and he just had to hope the other two didn't think of something better or just get lucky.

The technique he was using wasn't really designed for hunting dragons, although the javelin was known to be at least partially effective against them, but for hunting Wolpertinger*, a type of antlered rabbit the size of small pony that hibernated in underground burrows. There was no point in looking for their lairs with your eyes, as they left no mounds or openings and were usually under a layer of snow. Javelins enchanted to pierce the ground effortlessly, poking through the earth until it came back bloody was the only way to find them. He just had to count on who ever hid the dragon hadn't buried it very deep. His progress was steady for nearly half an hour, when he found something he hadn't been looking for.

A hoof print.

He looked at it curiously, holding up his glowing wand to it. It was the distinct 'U' shape of a horses foot, and as he looked about he spotted several more. There were at least two sets of prints moving along side each other in one direction. His first thought was 'unicorns', but then realized these were much too large. Besides, unicorns could walk on top of snow.

There was no way horses would simply be wandering around the Forbidden Forest on their own. They had to have had riders.

Viktor immediately snuffed out his Lumos, and crouched low to the ground, looking around for any sign of watchers. How long had they been there? Had they seen him and the others? What was their purpose? A dozen ideas ranging from assassins to dragon poachers flitted through his mind. There was only one way to find out.

With only the barest outline of the tracks visible in dark blue of the snow, he kept his body low and began following them North.

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The Smell-n-Seek dropped out of the sky like a falling leaf, landing with it's head buried in the snow and it's tail wagging happily. Cedric let out a woop of joy and began to dig where it had landed, shoveling snow out of the way with his hands. He was reached the ground and was ready to bring out his wand to start with digging spells, but what he saw gave him pause. He recast his Light Charm, and pulled up some dead vegetation. He examined it closely, and once he realized what it was he let out a frustrated curse.

"Dammit!"

It was monkshood. Snape had his class brewing Wolfsbane Potion last Thursday. It wasn't the dragon hide the stupid charm had been smelling it was the potion ingredients!

An amused laugh shocked him out of his ire. He spun around with his wand, but saw no one.

"It was a good idea. I admit I thought it might work," came a familiar voice, heavy on the French accent.

"Fleur? Where are you?" he demanded, still unable to see her, even though her voice was close.

"Up here." He looked up, and found her hovering above him on a broom. In her gray cloak, she was barely visible against the sky above.

"How long have you been up there?" he demanded angrily. "Were you spying on me?"

"Of course I was. You didn't show up for dinner, so I knew you had to be up to something."

"How long?"

"Not long. Fifteen? Twenty minutes?" she admitted readily. "I wasn't going to steal your victory if you actually found it, I just wanted to see for myself."

"Right," he said skeptically, and started trudging back the way he had come. The snow had started to pick up again, and with Fleur spying on him, he didn't fancy being outside any longer.

"It iz not like it matters anyway, zince you didn't find anyzing," she pointed out. He glared up at her.

"It matters to me. At least, I know now I'm going to have to watch my back-" he started, but soon realized she wasn't paying him any attention. She was looking in another direction, off into the distance that her high vantage point allowed. "What is it? What's wrong"

"There iz zomezing coming... Cedric, I zink you should get out of zight."

"What are you playing-"

"Cedric, please."

There was honest panic in her voice, and joke or not, he decided not to risk it. He turned tail and ran. At least, he tried. The snow was deep, the route filled with obstacles half hidden, and he stumbled frequently.

"They're getting closer," Fleur called, "Climb a tree, you'll be in a better position!"

"Help me, then!"

He went for the most likely tree he could find, a huge old oak with several massive branches, but his gloves made finding a grip cumbersome. Fleur dipped low beside him, grabbing wrist and pulling him with as much strength as she could muster. They made it half way up before a crash and snap of underbrush being disturbed, drew their attention. He ducked as far behind the tree as he could and she shot upwards on her broom, hoping they hadn't been spotted.

"Viktor?" Fleur whispered, as a figure bolted beneath her.

It was, in fact, Viktor, but he wasn't alone. He was running, his wand held out before him to create a magical, obstacle free path as he moved on top of the snow, but his pursuers were close behind. Her first impression was that Viktor was being chased by men on horseback, but even in the darkening wood she knew that wasn't right. It took her a long, confused moment, before she realized they were centaurs.

And they were shooting at Viktor. She couldn't see the arrows themselves, but she could see the boy ducking them and branches shift from the impact. She didn't understand why he hadn't just portkeyed away already, but knew there had to be something wrong. Had he lost it? Had it been taken from him?

She withdrew her wand and aimed it below. "Expelliarmus!" she shouted, and spell rocketed downwards, smashing through tree branches and exploding in the snow before them. Both centaurs veered, splitting into different directions. They shouted something to each other, and one continued to pursue Viktor while the other aimed his bow towards her. "Stupify!" she tried, but he ducked behind a patch of trees. She tried to follow his movements, but he disappeared.

She scanned below her frantically, seeing nothing. An arrow came at her, and she twisted so that it only caught a loose bit of cloak. She cried out in surprise, and the broom shot up per her body's instinct to

retreat. It was a mistake, she hadn't had time to look where she was going, and ended up tangled in the branches of a tree. Another arrow shot passed her, dangerously close to her chest.

Frightened and angry, she screamed out a fire curse, hardly bothering to aim and watched in satisfaction as it exploded, knocking the centaur off its feet and into a tree. Seizing her chance, she began to untangle herself, intent on going after the other centaur. Cedric still had his champion's badge and could portkey away if he got into trouble, but Viktor obviously needed help.

She was so busy pulling the last of her cloak from the tangle that she didn't notice when the centaur got to its feet and gathered up its bow. He took aim and pulled back his arrow.

"FLEUR! MOVE!"

Dropping fast, she turned to the origin of the voice, and found Cedric dangerously exposed. He had his wand out, but had lost his footing and only one hand was keeping him from a fifteen foot drop. Their eyes met for just a fraction of a second, and then he looked ahead.

The arrow caught him square in the chest. He jerked at the impact, then looked down slowly to see the shaft sticking out of him. He didn't move even a fraction after that, but his hand loosed around the supporting branch and he fell...

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Harry knew he should have been inside, studying or playing with his friends, nice and warm by the fire and early to bed for a school the next day. He should have been, but it was a full moon. Even hidden by the snow and the clouds, he could feel Her and knew she would not let him sleep tonight. He was restless and giddy, and couldn't think of anyone to share it with except perhaps the Weasley twins, who were nowhere to be found (and neither was Jophery suspiciously enough). So he wandered the grounds, all but invisible in his Baluvian cloak and magic boots, exploring his world transformed.

His nocturnal eyes missed nothing. Every falling snowflake, every distant light, every curve of his white, glowing world.

He was glad he had decided to stay out for so long too. If he hadn't been wandering, he never would have seen the explosion inside the forbidden forest. He was quite convinced at that moment that someone had woken up the dragon, and that would have been a terrible thing to have missed.

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Medi-wizard Keigle had to say his latest assignment was by far the easiest he had ever had. All he had to do was sit around the cozy little cottage that had been erected near the boundary of the wards to the Forbidden Forest. He'd been doing it for over a week without incident.

It was rather like a vacation. The views outside his window were quite lovely, he caught up on some of his reading, got to wear bunny slippers all day, and the Hogwart's house elves took care of all his meals, cleaning, and chores.

Then, on a night where he wouldn't have thought champions foolish enough to even dare a search, he was pulled from his dinner by a woman screaming. He'd grabbed his medical bag, not bothering with his cloak or boots, and rushed out to see what had happened. One look at the boy, barely conscious and covered in blood, and he knew his vacation was over.

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Harry followed them back to the castle, guided more by curiosity than concern. The moon was fat and content, and there was little that was going to keep him from enjoying it. He wasn't going to get in their way though. He was very careful to make sure they didn't notice him.

He followed them all the way to the castle, through the hallways, and up the stairs. Cedric floated stiffly in the air, eyes wide and frightened,

hand to his bloody chest. Fleur pushed his body along as fast as she could, the medi-wizard muttering spells and shoving pins into chest, careful to avoid the hand over his patient's heart.

There weren't many people in the hall, but Harry kept to the shadows and secret passages anyway, slipping past even those few gawkers they happened upon, making a game of it. He went completely unseen all the way to the infirmary, where he hesitated for a moment. It would definitely be a lot harder to go unnoticed once inside, and Cedric obviously needed some serious care. Should he really risk distracting them?

Then he figured if Fleur didn't distract them, it was unlikely they would even notice him. He slipped inside. A privacy screen had already been pulled up, so no one even saw him enter or find himself a quiet corner to watch their silhouettes against the screen and listen. They provided a very helpful narrative.

"Careful, careful, we can't risk any further damage to the heart," he heard Pomfrey urge.

"I know. It'll be fine. Are you still with us, Mr. Diggory?"

There was a pained moan, followed by a strangled scream.

"Got it! Miss Delacour, get this to Professor Snape and inform of what has happened. He'll be able to use it to create an antidote to the poison later. For now, tell him we need a stasis potion if he has any, otherwise we'll have to send for it at St. Mungo's, and I don't know if he's going to last that long. Hurry, hurry!"

Fleur rushed out from behind the screen, covered in blood, clutching something wrapped in a white handkerchief. She didn't notice him at all as she left, but then he doubted she would notice anything until she had her mysterious item safely in Snape's hands. He removed his cloak and gloves, and moved closer.

He could smell the blood now. How much could Cedric possibly have left inside him?

“Stay awake, Diggory!” the medi-wizard snapped, “Don't you dare close your eyes! You just have to stay awake, and you'll be fine. Diggory? Diggory!”

There was a harsh sound of a slap, and a sharp, painful cry.

“Enough of that! Stay awake or I'll start breaking your fingers,” he threatened.

That really isn't fair, Harry thought. Cedric needed help, not more pain. He slipped around the privacy screen, surveying the damage. A memory rose up instantly, spiking through his giddy dissociation. Sirius had looked so much like this that day. Prone, pale, and dying.

Even as the pain rose up, it began to ebb away. He couldn't summon the tears to heal this one. He didn't have the love, and at the moment he lacked even the compassion. He couldn't heal, but... he might be able to do something else.

Neither Pomfrey nor the medi-wizard even realized he was there until he stepped up to the bed and placed his hand over Cedric's. Both jumped away in surprise and fright, dropping their equipment in their retreat.

“Potter! What are you doing?! Get out of here at once!” Pomfrey screamed at him, but he ignored her. They had stripped Cedric down to the waist, exposing his bare chest and their ghastly efforts to save him. Pins, large nasty pins like those at Madam Malkin's used to hold cloth in place, stuck out of the boy's chest in the rough shape of a circle around his heart. The wet hand beneath his, held some sort of moss over the wound for equally mysterious purposes. Harry suspected it was to fight the poison.

“Hey.”

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Cedric stared half lidded at this newest presence, familiar but inappropriate to the situation. Why was Harry there? He couldn't quite

bring himself to speak. "You've gone and made a mess of yourself. It's not as fun as people make it out to be, is it?"

Cedric shook his head, ever so slightly. The Gryffindor was quite right.

"Are you mad! GET OUT!" he heard Pomfrey shouting, her voice muffled as if underwater, though he could hear the other perfectly.

"Don't worry. I wouldn't lecture you if you weren't going to live to learn your lesson," Harry assured him.

"Mr. Potter if you don't step away right this minute, I will be forced to move you!"

"You're starting to feel stronger already, aren't you?"

"Stu-" Pomfrey began, but it was cut off by the sounds of a struggle, and then a man spoke. "No, don't! Look! Look at what he's doing!"

They were barely comprehensible, so Cedric ignored them, and simply nodded at the other, feeling his strength return even as he spoke.

"It doesn't hurt anymore, does it?"

And pain started to recede, leaving him feeling heavy as if he were laying in a bathtub while the water drained. All that was left, was the heat on his hand where Harry laid his own, slowing sinking deeper into his body. He blinked at him in confusion. "No, it doesn't. What's wrong with your eyes? They're all... shiny."

"You're dreaming. This is just a dream. They're fixing you up while you sleep. That's why you aren't hurting."

"...But I can feel your hand. It's hot. I feel the heat filling up my chest."

"Potion side effects. Nothing more. If you were awake, wouldn't you be scared? Would I even be here?"

Cedric looked side to side, as much as his position would allow, his vision still too blurry to make out much of anything except two people just out of his periphery and Harry standing over him, starkly vivid.

"I'm dying right now, aren't I?"

"Yes," Harry agreed. "But you won't die. Not tonight."

"Are you an angel?"

The smile grew to full out grin, making the vision before him a frightening thing. But who knew? Maybe that was how angel's were suppose to look.

"Yes, I'll be an angel for you tonight. I'll protect you from the dark places."

"Viktor. What about Viktor? He's still out there. I don't know if they caught him yet, but I don't think he can escape. Will you protect him, too?"

"Of course. I am a Wælcyrie*. I am where ever a warrior falls."

"Oh..." Cedric said, as if that explained everything. He relaxed back against his pallet. "Why do you look like Harry?"

More horrible grinning.

"How do you know he doesn't look like me? Maybe he's my cousin."

That made even more sense to the half delusional boy, and the Wælcyrie laughed, sending searing hot spikes of strength through his entire body. He let out a groan, grabbing its wrist, and attempting to pull its hand away, but it was immovable.

"Potter!"

The Wælcyrie turned, smiling fiendishly at the newest arrival. To scare it away, was Cedric's first thought.

“Potter!”

“Hi!”

The Hufflepuff looked to Harry for reassurance.

"I won't let him poison you either."

Satisfied, Cedric drank it quickly. His arm didn't even make back down before he suddenly stilled, his body caught in the tableau of a grimace. His role complete for the night, Harry pulled his hand away. It didn't get far. Snape snatched it up, then dropped it again, recoiling from the saturation of magic there. He glared at Harry.

"Go to my office. I want an explanation when I get back there. You will not leave until I say so."

"Okay," Harry said agreeably, and turned to go. There wasn't anything left here to amuse himself with anyway. Or at least, that what he thought until, out of the corner of his eye, he spotted the remains of Cedric's cloak and shirt.

Resting on top of the pile was something shiny.

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By the time Harry reached Gryffindor tower, news of Cedric's death (everyone was quite convinced he was dead and he didn't bother to stop and correct them) had spread, and everyone gathered in the common room to bounce ideas off each other in the place of actual facts. No one paid him any mind as he squeezed pass the masses. They had seen his odd comings and goings before, and there were more interesting things to discuss for once.

He was careful to keep his hood pulled low and his bloody hand hidden.

The dorm room was deserted, and he lingered only long enough to wash his hands and pack his school satchel with supplies. It was while he was looking for an extra pair of socks under the bed, when he found something... not entirely unexpected. His searching fingers closed around cool, smooth wood, and he pulled it out.

Gryffindor's sword sat in hands, thrumming with excitement and ready for battle.

"Not exactly what I was looking for," Harry mused to himself. "But it might come in handy."

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Anglo-Saxon word for Valkyrie. Yes, I know Harry isn't a woman and suggesting he'll protect a warrior from death is contradictory to the definition. Convincing Cedric of this despite the contradictions, is what Moon-crazy Harry finds so funny. And yes, Cedric would know what a Wælcyrie is, for the same reason everyone else knows about angels and Buddha and Hercules. It's just one of those cultural things that shows up in stories and historical references and such.

A real, fake creature. Like an American Jackalope. It's a running joke in places like Bavaria. Wikipedia it.

Book IV:

Chapter 13: The Forbidden Land II

The snow had picked up, and even with his perfect night vision, Harry found himself disoriented in the dizzying fall. He didn't mind. It was sort of fun. Besides, the enchanted ring on his watch insured he never became too lost. His glasses, the spares he wore at night to hide his night shine, had been transfigured into goggles to keep the snow out of his eyes. His fur cloak and boots made the cold tolerable.

He wondered if Snape realized he had run off yet, and if he realized where he had gone. The potion's master would figure it out eventually, and he wished he could see his expression when he did. Or Voldemort's. That might be interesting too. In a scary, swimming with sharks kind of way. His musings accompanied him all the way to the barrier, which he didn't notice until he walked right into it, nose first. Thankfully, he hadn't been in a hurry when he hit it.

It took a few moments to dig out the champion's badge and a few more to figure out how it worked, and finally he managed to push his way inside. He shivered at the feel of the barrier passing over his skin. He put the badge away and pulled out his watch again.

"Viktor," he said, and observed as the minute and second hands reoriented themselves. He followed it north.

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It took Snape exactly twenty six minutes to realize Harry had taken Diggory's badge. Twenty-five of those minutes he had been legitimately distracted assessing Diggory's condition and receiving a summary of what little the medi-wizard knew about how he'd come into such a state.

It took twelve minutes to confirm that Harry wasn't in the castle, and another three minutes to reach Voldemort's office.

The Dark Lord had been there most nights for the last few weeks, though he might be anywhere in the country during the day. Snape wasn't about to ask for an explanation for this, but he thought tonight might have something to do with it. Had the man set this all up? He couldn't fathom the reasons, but when it came to his master that was hardly uncommon.

He entered the office. Delacour was there already, drinking something she probably shouldn't to calm her nerves. To her credit, she wasn't crying or hysterical, she just didn't seem comfortable with sitting still. Voldemort was behind his desk, writing out something. He looked up at Snape as he entered.

"I expected you sooner. Was there a complication with Mr. Diggory?"

Snape looked at him squarely, trying to figure out if the Dark Lord wasn't aware of the entire situation already.

"... No, Diggory is in stasis. He'll keep until St. Mungo's can come and get him. There's no telling if his heart is salvageable though. Centaur poisons are impressive, even by my standards."

Voldemort nodded. "Hearts are easy enough to replace."

He turned to Delacour and gave her a reassuring smile. "Do not worry, my dear. He will receive the finest of care. Britain is indebted to you for bring our champion to safety."

She managed a shy, relieved smile. Snape was more than happy to ruin it.

"There are a few more urgent matters I must discuss with you."

"Of course. Viktor must be recovered at once. I have sent for Morgan and a team of Sentinels. With Diggory unable to compete, the badge will allow anyone to use it. They'll find him and bring these renegades under control within the hour."

Snape grimaced. Well, at least he knew Potter's part in the story hadn't been planned.

“About that...”

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It took him almost an hour to find Viktor. Even with his compass, he couldn't tell how far the other boy was, and it turned out to be nearly a mile and a half. An easy walking distance normally, but the mounting blizzard made it much less so. He was very glad he had such an excellent pair of boots.

Not just because they were warm either.

They were also very silent, which, along with his Baluvian cloak, was perhaps the only reason he was able to get so close to Viktor without getting shot. The Durmstang champion laid inside a cave near a small fire, seemingly unconscious. Two armed centaurs stood at the mouth of the cave, their backs to the fire, peering out into the blinding snow for enemies. Staring at them, Harry could see they were both in bad shape.

The younger of them was injured, partially burned on the right side of his equine body and there was a gash on his arm. Clearly, he had met the brunt of the other champion's retaliation. They were both thin. Alarmingly thin. Their equine ribs were easily visible, and their cheeks and eyes were sunken.

“We do not murder children,” said the elder, uninjured one, not looking at the other. “What you did was inexcusable.”

“Children do not blow up people,” the other said darkly. “They are the reason we are going to die in this place. I would have my vengeance.”

The elder said nothing for a moment, turning his eyes upwards to a sky of endless gray and white.

“It is a wicked moon tonight. It guides your mind to wicked thoughts.”

"She resents that remark."

Two arrows whizzed by Harry, neither coming even close to hitting him. He flicked his wand and both their bows flew out of their hands and into the snow. Now that they were unarmed, he pulled back his hood and removed his goggles. The younger tried to locate his weapon, but the elder merely look at him. He didn't look nearly as surprised as he should have.

"Hello," Harry said, smiling pleasantly, "Do you make it a habit of shooting every wizard you come across? I honestly thought centaurs were one of the less aggressive races."

The younger centaur stopped searching, and turned to him, glaring hatefully.

"You mock us? After all you have done, you have the gall to-"

His companion held up his hand, signaling him to be silent. Harry tilted his head curiously.

"I have never seen you before," the elder said, "But the stars have spoken of you."

"Do you hear the stars?" Harry asked.

"Yes. We hear the stars and the planets," he said, then looked to his companion disapprovingly, "If we listen carefully."

"I only hear the moon," Harry admitted, "And she's more than I can handle, but she is not wicked. Not really... I'm Harry, by the way. Or did the stars already tell you that?"

"They call you by a different name, Ghihalmelan. I am Firenze."

Harry nodded and turned to the younger expectantly, but he just crossed his arms and glowered.

"What do you want?"

Harry smiled. "I want Viktor. My friend pretending to be unconscious over there. You can stop now."

The prone figure looked up, and glared at him. Or tried to. There was a gash on his head, and he didn't seem able to focus on anything.

"And I want to know why you tried to kill Cedric. What did he ever do to you?"

The younger centaur snorted and stomped his foot, his glare utterly hateful.

"We are trapped in this place, isolated from our herd, from food and shelter so that we will die slowly of starvation and exposure, and you wonder why we are upset?!"

"Ulaithur," Firenze warned, then turned to Harry. "We want out of this barrier. We were trapped here, and do not know why. When we saw the other wizards and witch, we kept ourselves hidden and tried to determine your purposes. We don't know what you are looking for, but the talismans you wear seemed the only means of escape. We managed to take this ones," he pointed to Viktor, "but he ran away before we could make him tell us how it worked. We gave chase. The other boy and girl tried to stop us. Even after we caught him, it didn't help. The talisman doesn't work for us."

"Why didn't you just ask them for help? This is just an accident. They must have put up the barrier without realizing you were here."

"Like we said, we didn't know your purposes, but you obviously didn't want anyone else finding what they were looking for."

Harry thought about it, and decided their story made perfect sense. It was all a big, rather violent misunderstanding. They were desperate, not malicious. He sighed.

"The Dark Lord will be angry..." he explained. "You interrupted a very important tournament, and nearly killed our champion. I don't know what he will do to you if he finds you, but death will probably be the least of your worries."

Firenze nodded, and looked up again.

"The moon is bad... but the stars are in our favor."

"The moon is not bad," Harry insisted. "I would not be here if She were. I will take all of you out of the barrier. You will be able to go where ever you like from there."

"Why should we trust you?" Ulaither snarled, hooves pawing the earth in agitation.

"If I wanted to hurt you, I could have done it before you even knew I was here," Harry pointed out. "Besides, what else can you do?"

The centaur looked like he had swallowed something foul. Harry was exasperated to find that he reminded him of Ron. At least, he didn't say anything else. The centaurs gathered up their scant supplies, and Firenze allowed the still disoriented Viktor onto his back, which only seemed to deepen Ulaither's hatred for the wizards. Viktor was weak and disoriented from the blow to his head, and cold was finally starting to seep into him as they left the fire behind. Twice they had to stop when the boy lost his grip and slid from Firenze's back, Harry being the only thing keeping him from hitting the ground both times.

Harry convinced Firenze to help him take Viktor to the Sleuw's house. It was close to the unbarriered part of the Forbidden Forest, and would be a safe place to part ways for all of them. It was two miles Southeast, and another hour and half in deepening snow. Even Harry, high on the moon's magic, was starting to tire as they struggled through the storm. He couldn't imagine what the centaurs were feeling, for though they held a steady pace, they had to be worse off than him. They hadn't eaten in who knew how long? Days at least, and one of them was injured while the other carried another person. Despite what they had done, Harry found himself admiring them.

He found the barrier when he smacked into it...again.

"I hate it when that happens," he muttered, and pulled the talisman out. "I'm not sure if this will take all of us across at once. I'll walk Firenze across first, then Viktor, then Ulaither."

He helped Viktor down and set him beside the barrier, casting a quick warming charm on him.

"Hey," he said, shaking the older boy gently, "Stay awake or you'll get hypothermia."

Tiredly, Viktor forced his eyes open. "Potter?"

"Yep?"

"Yur crazy."

Harry laughed, loud and hard, and then went to Firenze. He held out his hand but Firenze shook his head.

"Among my people, you offer your left hand to your family as a sign of affection and the right to your friends as a sign of trust."

"And to strangers?"

"We do not offer our hands." He held out his right hand, and Harry graciously took it in his and lead him through the barrier. It was much harder to move through it together than it had been alone, and the force of it nearly pulled them both to the ground. They were left shaking and gasping as they pulled free of it.

Harry went back for Viktor. It was hard to say whether it was easier or harder to pull the older boy through than it was Firenze, as he was already tired and Viktor was leaning on him heavily. Firenze took him from Harry, and the Gryffindor stumbled back across for Ulaither. The younger centaur was shifting and pawing at the ground anxiously, unable to hold still. Panting hard and exhausted, Harry held out his hand for the final trip.

Ulaither suddenly went very still.

Harry, who had been bent over to catch his breath, saw his entire equine body tense and looked up. The look in the centaur's eyes gave everything away. Harry recoiled, but Ulaither caught his arm on retreat and pulled him closer to catch his throat with the free hand.

"Ulaither! Stop!" Firenze commanded, but he was helpless to stop anything from the other side of the barrier. The younger centaur tossed Harry to the ground, tearing the talisman from his neck as he went. He reared up on his hind quarters and let out a cry of triumph. Harry scrambled away, his wand lost somewhere in the snow. Ulaither turned to Harry, perhaps to complete his vengeance and kill him, but found the boy had pulled a sword from his cloak, so he merely gloated instead.

"I hope you enjoy your stay as much as we did, though I doubt a mere human like you will even survive the night," he sneered, and forced his way through the barrier. Firenze was there to greet him with a fist to the head. Ulaither stumbled back, but found his footing and reared up to strike back. Harry watched in horrified fascination as their hooves tore at one another even as their fist punched and wrestled in the animalistic savagery.

Ulaither broke away first, but he still had the talisman and rather than surrender it, he ran. Firenze started to give chase.

"Firenze! No, let him go!"

The elder centaur pulled up short, and turned back to him. Harry shook his head.

"People know where I am. They'll come looking for me eventually, but Viktor isn't going to last long out here. Take him to the Sleuw's and then go home. I'll be fine."

"Harry..." Viktor said, tiredly, "He has my talisman too. I can't come back."

"Fleur still has hers. She can bring me back. Go, before you fall asleep again."

Viktor protested, but Firenze grabbed him and tossed him across his back. He turned back to Harry before he left.

“The moon is wicked tonight, Ghihalmelan, but she desires something other than your death. I hope the stars will align so that we might meet again under better circumstances.”

“Until then, my friend,” Harry called back, and searched for his lost wand. Firenze knew where to go, but he still needed to find shelter and start a fire. He was hungry too, but he would have to do without. It hadn't been in his plans to be stuck outside all night and the only food he had was some candy to snack on. He should save it for later.

He glanced back, but Firenze and Viktor could no longer be seen through the curtain of snow. He looked down at the Sword of Gryffindor.

“You came in handy after all.”

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Fleur did not know Professor Snape very well, and she hadn't been particularly impressed with him when she had her first class with him. He knew what he was doing, but his teaching technique seemed crass and his appearance altogether uncleanly (well, honestly it was just his hair that looked unclean but that was more than enough). Standing in his presence as he systematically replaced every layer of her clothing with combat gear and informed her of her 'mission', she knew she had seriously underestimated him.

“The barrier is designed to be indestructible from the outside, but simple enough to bring down from within. The barrier is maintained by six keystones, if any one of them is destroyed part of the barrier will fail. You will destroy one of them and our Sentinels will take care of the rest.”

He began loosening and tightening her armor so the pieces moved smoothly without getting caught on each other.

"The centaurs are dangerous, particularly at night. Their vision is better, and they are experts with crossbows and concealment. This armor will protect you from their arrows, unless they manage to shoot you in the face."

She chose to ignore that last statement.

"And what about 'Arry and Viktor?"

"Potter can leave any time he wants to. He has a badge. Krum apparently lost or damaged his and can't. The only way he's leaving is if he finds Potter or you destroy the keystone."

"And if zey are dead?"

He gave her a blank look. "If they teach necromancy at Beauxbaton's, then I only ask that you use your discretion before raising them."

She gave a huff, and walked out of the Dueling Hall closet, and stopped. There was a crowd of students hanging out around the back doors, and they were all looking at her expectantly. She steeled herself and stalked forward, Snape following behind her.

Jophery was there and first to speak up.

"Vat's going on, Delacour? Vat happened to Diggory? Vere's Viktor?"

"I really don't 'ave time for zis right now," she said, pushing passed him and into the crowd that started to pull back as Snape came up behind her. She had to stop again however, when confronted by the Weasley twins, looking surprisingly menacing when they weren't smiling.

"Then how about telling us where Potter is? We can't find him anywhere and his cloak is missing."

A surprised murmur drifted through the crowd. Snape moved ahead, facing off against them and their intolerable quick-wittedness.

"Mr. Krum is where he usually is when he isn't in the castle and Diggory has had an unfortunate accident. I wasn't aware Potter was roaming this evening, but if does not return to his dormitory before curfew than I guarantee you will find him in detention tomorrow night," he sneered. "As will the rest of you, if you are not back in your respective houses in exactly," he checked his watch. "Six minutes. I recommend you hurry. This week's detention is cleaning out the spider webs in the sixth tower."

There was a collective shudder in the crowd. They had all heard stories about the sixth tower. It was supposedly cursed and infested with thousands of spiders. You couldn't see six inches ahead of you with all the cobwebs in the way. And it hadn't been cleaned out since the search for the acromantula. Most of the crowd quickly scurried off. The Weasley twins and Jophery weren't so easily dissuaded.

They glared at the potions master and Fleur, who met their gaze firm and steady before moving on. It would have all ended at that, but Pansy Parkinson came running down the hall.

"Professor! Professor!" she wheezed, hurrying up to him.

"What is it?"

"It's- It's Krum! He's back. That hairy giant just hauled him in. He's a mess!"

Fleur and he shared a quick glance at each other, before turning back to her.

"Where is he now?"

"The Great Hall. Hagrid just set him in front of the fire and went to go get the nurse."

"Idiot," Snape curse under his breath. "He should have just taken him straight to the infirmary. Who's with him?"

“McGunny,” she said scornfully, more than happy to make the situation sound as boxed up as she could so she would appear smarter for having noticed. “And Professor Flitwick and McGonagall.”

The students around them were very quickly moving off and Snape seriously doubted it was to get to their dorm rooms. Scowling fiercely, he headed towards the Great Hall to see what could be learned.

He was quite pleased to see that several teachers had arrived and were already ordering the students out of the Great Hall and to their beds. A few were lingering stubbornly, including McGunny and several of his reporters, but they too were being herded away. He squeezed in with Fleur, and made their way to the great fireplace. Viktor was there, and he did indeed look a mess. His cloak and boots had been pulled off, and he was wrapped in a blanket. His skin was pale, his hair wet, and he was shaking. A towel pressed to the side of his face, obscuring his expression. There were splashes of red against the white terry cloth.

“Viktor!” Fleur said, rushing to his side, finding an opening on the floor beside McGonogall. He looked at her hazily, and managed a weak smile.

“Hey.”

“He has a concussion, so he's disoriented,” McGonogall explained. “But he doesn't appear to be seriously injured.”

“What do you know so far?” Snape asked her. Her expression became distinctly unfriendly, but she answered.

“He was attacked by centaurs. They took his talisman before he could escape and then captured him. Then he tells me Potter came and talked to them, and convinced them to let him go. I think that's what he said. He's not making a lot of sense. Hagrid, however, confirmed that there was at least one centaur. He handed Mr. Krum over to Hagrid when he met him on patrol.”

“Patrol?”

"In case you haven't noticed, we're in the middle of a blizzard," she said icily. "Very easy for someone to get lost in. He took one of his dogs to patrol along the barrier in case anyone came out and needed help. It seems his idea had merit."

"Indeed. Well, that is one less thing to worry about. Did Potter show up?"

Her eyes widened.

"Don't tell me Harry really did go into that place and rescue another champion?"

"That would make all three, if he has. Hopefully, he's got it out of his system now."

"Three? How did he save Diggory?"

"Later. Did Potter turn up?"

She hesitated. "I haven't seen him, but then..." she looked cautiously at Viktor and Fleur. "It's that time of the month. I didn't expect to see him at all after sunset."

"Zat time of ze month?" Fleur asked curiously. Snape gave her the look she was quickly associating with sarcasm.

"Yes, I suppose there's no hiding it now. Potter's actually a girl..."

She scowled at him. "Excuse me for noticing zat you are both talking weird."

"He has a monthly project for one of his classes that requires him to be up most of the night. That's all," McGonogall assured her, awarding Snape a warning glare. "I'll check with Professor Brennan and the Tower just to be sure."

"You do that. In the meantime, Miss Delacour, you will go ahead with the original plan. Even if the danger has passed, the Sentinels must still investigate the attacks."

“You’re sending her out in this weather? After everything that’s happened?”

"It is her decision. If she doesn't want to go, she doesn't have to."

Everyone was suddenly looking at her, but she was looking up at Viktor, whose expression had become so miserable.

"I couldn't do anyzing," he said. "I couldn't save myself and couldn't protect him either, and he didn't even ask it of me. He just smiled and said he'd be fine and valked off. He vasn't scared at all. I zink he's gone mad."

“No, he's always been like that,” Snape muttered.

“Don't worry, I'll find him,” she promised, and got up to go. It was now past eleven, and the night was long and her task would be difficult in this weather. She strode out of the Great Hall, and of all people to have avoided the teachers, it should be Natalie. Her expression was tight with restrained emotion, but Fleur could see it in every line of her face.

"It's Harry, isn't it?" she said, as if she already knew the answer. "He's gotten himself into trouble again, hasn't he?"

Fleur said nothing, but Natalie cursed as if she'd answered.

“That idiot. That stupid... he always does this... God dammit, what is wrong with him?” she snarled, and then just stalked away. It was the most baffling thing Fleur had ever seen the other girl do, and Natalie was a baffling person in general. Could Natalie and Potter...?

She pushed the thought aside. It was irrelevant for now. She had to make sure he was alive before she started wondering at his love life.

[illegible]

Harry managed to find shelter in a hollowed out hill, eroded at some point by a flood. It was smaller than the centaur's cave, but that was just as well. There was less space that needed to be heated. He had enlarged the spare cloak he had packed (just in case Viktor had needed something warm and dry), and hung it over the entrance to keep out the wind and keep in the warm, and his Everheating Fire Spell would burn for hours even with only a few soaking wet twigs.

It was good to be magical.

After that, he was too exhausted and hungry to do anything else but curl up inside his cloak and watch the fire. Dawn was still hours away, and the moon was still giddy and laughing in his ears. He smiled a bit and chuckled sleepily. He had never slept during a full moon since that summer, but he thought he might achieve it this time. It had indeed been an interesting night.

He was going to get thirty lashes for this, which wasn't really funny, except that he probably going to give Snape a sore arm. All of his friends were probably beating their heads against the wall and lamenting, 'not again!' He really was hopeless, but that was okay. He had his honor and his regrets were few.

He wasn't going die here, at least. Once the storm was over, Fleur would find him and no doubt take him home. It was just a matter of time.

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Fleur found him in twenty minutes. Despite Snape's instructions, she wanted to make sure that Harry was alright first. The snow had started to lessen, but the temperature had dropped and the wind was picking up. She was convinced he would be half dead when she found him, so it was a pleasant surprise to find that he was in fact fully alive and had found himself a shelter. She certainly didn't mind sharing it with him.

He was fast asleep, and didn't so much as stir as she made the place more comfortable. Snape wasn't a nice man, but he was a practical

one and hadn't expected her to complete her task until after the storm (which made her wonder if he hadn't sent her knowing perfectly well she would attempt to find Harry first). As such, he had provided her with abundant supplies in a convenient carry all Bottomless Bag. She pulled out two sleeping mats, blankets, and pillows and rolled them out beside Harry. Then rolled Harry onto one.

He didn't really wake up, but shifted into a more comfortable position and grumbled, "Go sleep in your own bed, Luna." That gave her pause, and she wondered for a moment if that were some sort of nickname for Natalie or perhaps the reason Natalie always seemed angry with him.

She cast a protection spell on the entrance of the cave, and climbed into her own sleeping mat beside him. Tomorrow, they would have plenty of time to talk and plan, but for now all either of them really needed or wanted was sleep.

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Gryffindor was sleepless that night. McGonogall had checked the common room twice (mostly to make sure the Weasley twins hadn't snuck out) and found it filled with students each time. She didn't have the heart to tell them to go to bed. They may not have known Harry's habit of wandering the halls during the full moon, but tonight, when both Diggory and Krum had been attacked, they were all very aware that he wasn't with them now.

She understood how they felt, and though there would be a lot of tired faces and short tempers in the morning, she would over look it this once. In a way, it was comforting. She couldn't bring herself to sleep either. That boy would be the death of her. He was worse than all the Marauders and young Snape, Lucius, and Narcissa put together... in a room with weapons, potions ingredients, and gum.

Speaking of Snape...

"What are you doing here?" she blurted out, before she could stop herself. He gave her an annoyed... more annoyed than usual... look,

and took a sip of his tea. Slowly. He had a skill for making people feel foolish, but she had long ago developed immunity. "You know what I mean. Even you sleep more than four hours a night."

"Really, last I heard I apparently don't sleep at all, and survive on revival potions. It's why I'm so cranky all the time, you know," he said idly, and took another sip. She wasn't impressed.

"I'm immune to your Slytherin wit, Snape, so you can drop it."

"And I'm not your student anymore, Professor, so you can bite me."

She snorted, and retrieved a cup from the pantry and then helped herself to his kettle. There was just enough left for one cup. He must have been there for quite some time. She gave him a considering look, taking a sip. It wasn't the school's tea, which was, alas, one of its few failings. This tea was actually good.

He must have noticed her expression (and been very tired), because he offered an explanation.

"A Christmas present from Vesper. We both had a deep loathing of the school's Earl Grey... or mop water... or whatever the house elves try to pass off as tea."

Oh, Vesper. Poor, poor Vesper. The staff all still talked of her, remembered her fondly. Her strange love for Snape had been a topic of many colorful conversations, and to this day no one could agree on whether her fiancée had loved her back. McGonogall hadn't believe he was capable of it anymore... hadn't, at least, until this moment. He had sounded... fond when he spoke of her.

What was he doing up anyway?

"I wonder what she would have thought of all this," he said offhandedly, without prompt. He was either very tired or he had drunk something other than tea earlier, she thought. He was never this talkative. "I bet she would have started a fight with our... with my master. Then gone and done something insane and rescued him. God Almighty, they could have already been related."

He rubbed his forehead as if in pain, but his tone still had that same fondness in it. Her world tilted, ever so slightly. She set down her tea and quickly took a seat before lost her balance.

Snape had cared about Vesper. And more importantly, he did care about Harry. The sad thing was it was so incredibly obvious. Yes, they bickered and lamented the other's existence, but who did Harry go to when he needed guidance? She was rather sad to admit it wasn't her, but definitely relieved that it wasn't usually Voldemort. And Snape, didn't he always know what Harry was up to? Didn't he come to his rescue when ever he got in over his head?

If Snape didn't care, would he be up here at three in the morning, waiting for word of the boy?

"She was a remarkable woman," McGonogall said, trying to hide the quiver in her voice. "He certainly could have benefited from her guidance."

"And she could have benefited from his dumb luck," he said bitterly, but continued on in his usual reserve. "I'll never find another woman of that caliber. It's incredible that I should have even known two. I don't know how I'm going to settle for anyone else after them. We'll make each other miserable for sure."

She felt another wave of shock. He intended to get married? As she understood it, he hadn't been interested in it until Vesper had proposed to him.

"You want a wife?"

He gave her a wicked smirk. "I'm not that crazy. I want children, preferably legitimate ones, which unfortunately requires a significant legal other."

Who was this man?

"You look surprised."

"You hate children."

"I hate other people's children. I'm told it makes a difference when they're your own. Besides, if loving children had anything to do with it, you'd have popped out a dozen by now."

And why the hell was she talking to him? They hadn't talked... ever really. He had arrived at Hogwarts a scared, intelligent, lonely little boy. They had never said anything to each other not in reference to schoolwork or his most recent fight with the Marauders. He had left school an angry, intelligent, ambitious young man. She had never heard of him again, let alone spoken of him until he came back. He had returned a jaded revolutionist, disenchanted with his own cause. She had hated him for that, knowing he must have been among those who had murdered friends and students of hers for reasons he didn't even believe in. Nothing in his behavior suggested contrition, and after all these years she had never forgiven him.

She still didn't. She couldn't. But...

"I pity your future offspring."

His smirked widened. "Me too."

'And I pity you,' she thought to herself. 'I hate you for what you've done, and I pity you for whatever made you this way. I never thought of you as lonely until now.'

"At least you'll have some practice with Potter," she said.

He made a face, and she burst out laughing. She hadn't seen that face since she'd made him pair with James Potter in seventh year transfiguration. How strange that this man should be acting as the guardian to his fiercest enemy's child. Or perhaps it was appropriate. That child was Lily's too. Perhaps it explained their relationship. An old hatred for the father mixed in with the old love for the mother. He must be as confused and conflicted as she felt right now.

It still didn't explain Harry though.

But then, when it came to being mysterious and surprising, that child could give an old pro like Dumbledore a run for his money.

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"This is starting to get ridiculous," Voldemort thought to himself standing out on the turret of the tower. He had no real business being up there. It was late, cold, and frankly dangerous (for anyone other than himself) to be out in the storm. He needed somewhere to think though, and his office felt stifling tonight.

He had intended to talk with Harry this evening, keep the boy company as they waited out the night. It seemed he had missed his chance, and that was rather irksome in more ways than ones. He didn't mind making plans around whatever mischief Harry got himself into, but it was another matter altogether to break plans because of him.

The moon madness had been funny to begin with, with no real harm apparent, but if it continued to lead to such an absence of judgment, something would have to be done. Harry got into enough trouble when he wasn't looking for it.

This could all be easily manipulated into his favor, but people were going to start to wonder why Harry was allowed to get into these situations in the first place. Certainly, responsible guardians didn't let their children wander around in the middle of the night or negotiate political situations with dangerous magical beasts. This was very close-minded in his opinion, but people were often unreasonable when it came to their offspring or even other people's offspring.

He wondered what it was like when people had a dozen children with the expectation that they wouldn't all live to adulthood. If it had all remained that way he rather thought the wizarding world would have a lot less stupid people, and the ministry wouldn't have been necessary (he was convinced it was only invented to protect the stupid witches and wizards from their own silliness, but of course it eventually was infected itself by it).

If he were still capable of having children, he would have been sure to raise them the old fashion way, but the closest thing he had was Harry, and who knew if there would ever be anyone else with as much potential? With no children of his own, Harry would have to carry on the Slytherin line and the gift of parseltongue, while simultaneously serving as his lord as protege, companion, and prince. He had to be careful with him.

Even if testing his limits was so much fun.

It was time that Harry called on a little divine protection. The Earth favored them both, but while he had the benefit of carrying her cause for the next thousand years, Harry's position was more tenuous. Or perhaps transcendental would be a more accurate term. At any moment, She might decide Harry would serve her better as something other than Harry, and reclaim his body and his memories so that his spirit might take some other form and then who Voldemort have to talk to?

So Harry needed protection from a lesser, but strongly influential god. No god would directly defy the Mother, but She was less inclined to interfere with a person under the management of one of her Children.

The sooner Harry found such a deity the better. He needed all the protection he could get.

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Book IV:

Chapter 14: The Forbidden Land III

"This isn't your fault," Hermione insisted, glaring across the infirmary at Viktor. Madam Pomfrey and the medi-wizard were supervising Diggory's move from Hogwarts to Hogsmeade, where he could be floored to St. Mungo's, and she had snuck into the infirmary to talk to the Durmstang champion for a while before she had to go to class. It wasn't turning out how she had hoped. He was in a rare, petulant mood and as much as she could sympathize with his frustration, she wasn't going to endorse it. It was her friend out there, after all. She had more to lose than pride.

"He's dere, so I could be here," he pointed out, "And he might be dead..."

"Don't be ridiculous," she snapped. "I know him a lot better than you, and he's come out of a lot worse situations than this. He's... designed for adversity."

He turned to her, but she was turned away now, staring out the foggy windows at the forest. The snow had finally stopped, and the gray stretch of trees was clearly visible under the rising sun. If one looked close enough, they could make out the various paths to and from that barren wasteland of trees that had been made in the night. Hermione tried to guess which ones were Harry's, and most of the paths she decided on ran all over the place from the lake to the fields to the castle to the forest. She could make out Cedric's too, the very faintest hint of red shining through the snow. Viktor's wasn't as clear, but she could tell where the centaur must have been carrying him towards the Sleuw's. Even now a handful of Sentinels could be seen walking along the perimeter of the barrier, looking through the snow for evidence.

Last night must have truly been horrible, and she didn't know what news the day would bring. Harry had always survived, but not always unscathed. His luck was too patchy for her comfort.

"Cedric said somezing like dat. Dat doing da impossible is just vat he does. Vhy is dat?" he said, his voice challenging.

She looked back at him, her expression impatient.

"I don't know."

He snorted. "Don't know? Or von't say?"

"What is that suppose to mean?"

"Ever since I came here, dere are all dese vild stories about him and dis feeling dat he's important, but no one really knows anyzing. Vhy is he Voldemort's student? How does he get into all dis trouble? And last night... dere vas somezing vong vith him."

"Viktor, you had a concussion and weren't thinking-"

"No! I know vat I saw. He vas mad. His eyes vere strange. He shouldn't have even been dere! How did he get Diggory's badge? Vhy?"

"To save your ungrateful self!" she snapped at him, and turned to leave. "I'm not discussing this with you, now. Harry is my friend and I'm not going to talk about him behind his back. If you want answers you'll have to wait till he gets back to ask him yourself."

"Vait!"

She turned back and glared at him. "I know you're frustrated with being stuck waiting here while Harry goes off to save the world. Welcome to the club! Meetings are Tuesdays and Fridays. See you there!"

She stormed out, slamming the door behind her, leaving him feeling stupid and even more frustrated. And more than a little like a jerk. She was right. He was being ungrateful and paranoid, but... it was weird. In more ways than one last night had been strange, dream-like even. He needed reasons. Logic, motivations, explanations, even if it

was just his mind playing tricks on him. There was nothing to be satisfied with this 'because that's just how it is' attitude everyone here had adopted.

Was Harry good? Wicked? Mad? Mentally ill? If he was, why was everyone covering for him? Why such loyalty and respect? Did it have anything to do with the Dark Lord? What did that mean for the future, when war finally erupted between their countries? Did it mean anything at all in the scheme of things?

He wanted to ask Dumbledore all these things, but even more he wanted to ask Harry himself. To go into that forest and drag him out, sit him down, and demand his answers.

Therein lay the problem, of course. He couldn't do anything. He couldn't go into the forest without his badge, he couldn't have dragged Harry out even if he did, and it was sort of stupid to demand answers with an impenetrable barrier between them. He couldn't even thank him properly like this.

And wasn't that stupid?

Wanting to interrogate him and thank him at the same time. God, he needed to get out of this castle.

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“Arry... 'Arry...”

Harry blinked sleepily, squinting up at the blurry thing above him. The smell of lavender and lilacs drifted into his awareness.

“Fleur?”

“Shhh... 'ere, Professor Snape zed you might need zese,” she whispered, replacing his glasses with another pair. His vision cleared, and he could see her amused expression and her very bad case of bed head. He looked around, and found things as he feared. So it hadn't been a dream, but when had Fleur gotten there? He found a

sleeping palate beside him, and felt heat bloom in his ears as he realized she had been sleeping so close, and that if he had rolled over he would have been on top of her.

“Come on, you must 'urry if you want to zee zem,” she urged quietly, tugging him to his feet. He followed obediently, trying to be as quiet as she seemed intent on being. He eased his way around their fire, now merely a stubbornly glowing smolder of ash, over their satchels and Fleur's broom, and to the entrance of the cave.

“Shhh,” she reiterated, holding up her finger. “You look on zat side, I will look 'ere.”

His first thought was that Firenze had come back with the champion's badge to lead him out, and Fleur intended to attack him not realizing he wasn't really their enemy. Looking outside, however, showed no Firenze, or really anything at all but a lot of white.

“I don't see...”

“Sshhh! Zere, zere!” she insisted, pointing towards his right. He looked again, and saw nothi-

“Oh...” he gasped.

It was difficult to see them clearly against the snow, but as they moved their silhouettes passed over the gray lines of trees like white shadows. Harry had seen a unicorn only once before, when Hagrid had shown him one at the medical bestiary. That creature had been magnificent as it was, but out here in their element they took his breath away.

There was an entire herd, over a dozen, frolicking about like puppies. They didn't sink into the snow like logic demanded, but lingered on top of it, until they decided to roll into it or throw down one of their playmates. Only the stallion, slender and elegant as the rest but nearly twice as large, remained stoic and alert to their surroundings amidst the youthful play. It only took a minute or so for him realize they were there, and his large blue eyes fell on them. There was no cry of alarm, just a shake of his slender head and an annoyed snort.

The rest of the herd cease their play and stood, turning to look at what had their leader's attention.

Harry couldn't breath with so many of them focused on him. He sensed their magic, the pureness of it, so steeped in the most loving aspect of the Earth's power. Their presence here was a gift from her, spontaneously given.

The leader broke into a sprint and disappeared, his herd following him deeper into the forest.

And just as spontaneously taken away.

He let out a sigh, able to breath once again. He turned to Fleur, and felt his breath catch again. The light that slipped through the opening shone down on her, making her appear to glow. Or had it been the sight of the unicorns? As beautiful as she was, he had never seen her as lovely now with that expression of loving, adoration and longing as she watched them disappear.

He quickly looked away, and hoped she hadn't noticed him ogling her.

"Ahem... Ah... when did you get here?" he started, turning back into the cave, where it was warmer. It was also darker so she would be less likely to notice him blushing, as he pretended to prod the fire back to life with another twig.

"Last night... early morning? You zlept right through my arrival, so I let you be. Zer wasn't anyzing to do until it was bright enough."

"Like now?"

"In a bit. Breakfast first, and zome anzers if you please."

He flinched at the thought. What to say? He couldn't give her reasons he didn't know himself. It was like being drunk (he had just little experience with that thanks to Snape), without the benefit of memory loss. He remembered everything he'd done and said and felt, but as far as his thoughts were concerned he was as clueless as everyone else.

She didn't push right away, but let him build up the fire and collect his thoughts, and even left him to cook after she had presented him with eggs, bacon, and a skillet from her bag courtesy of some very thoughtful house elves.

But once they were settle to eat, she started in on him.

“Zo... 'ow did you get Cedric's badge?”

He kept his eyes very carefully trained on his eggs, just in case they rose up to kill him, you know.

“I saw you both after the attack and followed you to the infirmary. You ran right by me. After I found out what happened, I waited till everyone was distracted and took it.”

“Ow did you find out? Not even the medi-wizard knew what 'ad 'appened.”

He thought thought the bacon was starting to look particularly mutinous, and bit it in half before it would instigate a rebellion. He chewed it slowly to make a point to the rest of breakfast. It wasn't a stall tactic, despite what anyone else might have thought.

“Cedric told me.”

“Cedric was 'ardly conscious.”

“Cedric told me,” he reiterated, but didn't elaborate on. “I went to find Viktor. I promised Cedric I would look after him.”

Which was true, even if it wasn't the motivation for his misadventure, it certainly sounded better than 'it seemed like a good idea at the time'.

“How is he?”

She sighed. "Aggravated, I imagine. I know you like to zave people, but being zaved iz 'ard on one's pride. Ezpecially when you are rescued by a little boy, no matter 'ow cute."

He ducked his head in embarrassment.

"And 'ow did you manage to convince zem to let Viktor go?"

"They weren't bad people... at least Firenze wasn't and maybe Ulaither was just pushed too far, but they were stuck in the barrier for days, maybe weeks. They were starving and desperate. All they wanted was to go home, so when I offered to take them out of the barrier they didn't put up a fight. Not until Ulaither finally snapped, anyway. Firenze tried to stop him, but he ran away with the badge and I got stuck."

"Hhmm..." she said, and looked at him thoughtfully. He ate his breakfast slowly, hoping she'd get bored of studying him before he finished eating and ran out of excuses to look at her directly. "I'm sure zere iz more to zis, but I will let it go for now. Ze important thing iz to get you out of 'ere as zoon as pozible."

"Do you have a plan?"

"Do I look like a boy? Of course I 'ave a plan. We are going to find a keystone zat supports ze barrier and destroy it. The barrier will come down, and zen you will be able to leave. Very zimple."

That did indeed sound very simple, so he knew there had to be a catch.

"And you know where the keystones are?"

She lifted a regal brow. "Yes. I 'ave a map."

"How easy will it be destroy these keystones?"

"Very. Zey are eggs."

"Eggs?"

“Ze dragon's eggs. Zey are using ze eggs to channel ze dragon's own magic to make ze barrier. Very clever.”

He thought about that, trying to imagine how such a design worked, but had only the barest notion. He didn't like the idea of destroying an egg though. They were already going to kill the mother, why kill her offspring as well? Hagrid would have happily raised them in her place.

“Is there any we can destroy the barrier without harming an egg? Like move it somewhere to disrupt the magical flow? Break the magical connection somehow?”

She looked at him curiously for a moment, and then smiled indulgently.

“Do not worry, we will not be killing any babies. 'Alf ze eggs are infertile and don't even 'ave a fetus. Just yoke. Ze baby dragons eat zem when zey are born. Ze map shows which is which.”

He sighed in relief and nodded to her. “It's a good plan. I'll get ready.”

“Good, good. Roll up ze zeeping mats while you are at it, will you? I don't intend to come back 'ere.”

“Why not? It'd be a better place to take a break than at the castle. You know, while you're hunting the dragon?”

She gave him sly smile. “Ah, but ze map, you zee, it does not only show ze eggs. It show ze dragon too. No more 'unting for me.”

He gaped at her. Surely, this challenge was null at this point? What with the centaur attack, Cedric at death's door, and yes, his own reckless interference. She laughed at his expression.

“I might not get full points, but I will definitely get enough to close ze point gap with ze ozers.”

He shook his head. She was weird, or maybe just French, but either way there was no reason to tell her exactly how twisted that sounded.

As long as she didn't break into maniacal laughter he thought he might still be safe.

"Well, congratulations, I guess. Lets hope that the third challenge isn't canceled, what with Cedric unable to compete and all."

She frowned, not liking the thought at all. They had gone through a lot in this tournament, and as much as she hated it she wanted to see it through to the end. She didn't believe in leaving things half done. She didn't believe that other's should either.

"Let us 'ope 'e recovers quickly."

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"He hasn't shown up yet. I checked the tower and the infirmary, but no one's seen him. Delacour hasn't shown up either."

"They moved Diggory to St. Mungo's this morning. He was under a stasis spell. It must have been really bad."

"There are Sentinels at the barrier, but none went inside. I don't think they can take it down themselves or it's going to take a while."

McGunny nodded at the three reporters. They had been sent to gather information, along with several others, and were the first to return. They didn't have much information, but they practically confirmed his suspicions. Something very bad had happened in the forest, and Diggory had almost died. Potter had somehow gotten Diggory's badge and gone into the Forbidden Forest, and possibly saved Viktor or at least helped in his escape. Delacour had gone after Harry. Neither had come back yet. The hows, whats, and whys of the situation weren't as clear to him.

"Well done. Let's get to the Great Hall. They'll have to make announcement soon and that's as likely a place as any."

They nodded, and moved out like faithful soldiers to follow his orders. He felt a dark satisfaction in their obedience, accompanied by a sharp pain behind his eyes. He grimaced and had to stop.

“Are you alright, McGunny?” Delby, his sports writer, asked. He managed a grim smile for him and the others who had turned to see what was the matter.

“Headache. I was up all night, and I'm feeling it now. I'll be fine after I've had some tea.”

That was a true and misleading statement. He had been up all night and he did have a headache, but he had been having headaches off and on for over a month and tea wasn't going to help them. He thought it might be stress, but that wasn't something he was going to reveal to his staff. They had to believe in his strength, and admitting that his role took a toll would hurt more than just him.

They continued on to the Great Hall, and split off to their respective seats. The Hall began to fill. The owls dropped off their usual deliveries of newspapers and letters. He ate a bagel distractedly as he scanned his edition of Wizards Weekly, but there was nothing in reference to what had happened at Hogwarts. He looked over at the Gryffindor's table periodically, but Harry's spot remained noticeably vacant. The Champion's absences were glaringly obvious as well.

“Students of Hogwarts-”

He had been so distracted looking at the empty seats, he hadn't realized that Lestrage had taken the podium to address everyone there. He scrambled to retrieve his notepad and quill from his satchel, as she continued.

“No doubt many of you have become aware that events have taken place last night that appear concerning and strange. I am here to inform you what has happened and to assure you that it is under control,” she continued, looking completely sincere, and yet completely untrustworthy at the same time. Perhaps it was just because everyone already knew her reputation.

“While in search of the sleeping dragon within the Forbidden Forest, all three champions came under attack by a group of centaurs. During the attack, Cedric Diggory was severely injured. Miss Delacour was able to evacuate him to the medi-wizard's station. He has been stabilized and moved to St. Mungos, and is expected to make a full recovery...”

There was a collective sigh of relief at the Hufflepuff table. She went on for another ten minutes, explaining in a very sugar coated way what had happened. Somewhere in the middle of it, however, Voldemort had arrived and sat himself at the teacher's table. She paused, but he gestured for her to continue, even as he turned to talk quietly with Snape. McGunny wasn't sure what Lestrage said after that, because his attention was solely riveted on the Dark Lord.

It's his fault. He wanted this to happen. He wants to kill them all.

His headache was worsening, but his rising hatred was smothering the pain. It was definitely Voldemort's fault. Weren't all these deadly challenges his ideas? His designs? Could all these 'accidents' truly be coincidental? Maybe they could have, but not Harry's role in stopping them. How could he have been so conveniently placed each and every time their lives were in danger?

A realization came on him then, horrible but suddenly, overwhelmingly obvious.

Voldemort was trying to kill the champions, and Harry knew and was trying to stop him.

It made perfect sense. Killing the foreign champions and making it look like an accident would incite Germany and France, while the Dark Lord twisted the incident into a regrettable mistake among the British. Killing Diggory would only reinforce the idea of it all being unintentional or perhaps even one of the other champion's fault. Tensions would rise, and it would only take a small incident to start a war.

That was what Voldemort wanted after all. The papers might have called the building of a 'British Assembly of Cultural Preservation' and

stockpiling of goods acts of job creation and market regulation, but he knew how to read between the lines. The Dark Lord was building an army and gathering supplies for an invasion.

Harry had to know. As much time as he spent with Voldemort, he must have figured it out or even been told, and now was trying to prevent it. The evil monster couldn't punish Harry for it, not yet. Not with everyone looking at him as a hero, and watching his every move. So instead, Voldemort continued to elevate Harry's heroism in the eyes of the people instead.

It would make his death so much more outrageous, especially when the Dark Lord found some way to lay the blame on the foreigners.

That had to be it. It would explain why Harry always seemed to be in the right place at the right time, why he so readily moved into danger, and why he guarded his reasons so closely. Hadn't he said it himself? 'I can't tell you, even if I wanted to. If Voldemort found out I told you certain things, both of our lives could be in danger.'

Harry knew Voldemort was capable of killing him, and had been trying to protect McGunny. But now what? Did he know his life was already endangered? He had to. Maybe the stolen badge was really a cover, and Harry had escaped. But no, Viktor had already said Potter had rescued him and been caught in the barrier.

"... Mr. Potter is quite safe, and will hopefully be returning to the castle by this afternoon. In the meantime, classes will resume as normal. Good day."

McGunny blinked and forced himself to turn to Lestrage, but the headmistress was already leaving and Voldemort was following her. He turned to his notepad, surprised he had actually been writing what she was saying. He couldn't even remember her speaking. Skimming his notes, he caught on to what was happening. Delacour was bringing down the barrier to rescue Harry, and the ramifications of the night's events would be evaluated and discussed with the foreign ambassadors before it was decided if the tournament would resume or not.

McGunny already knew it would, and once it did, Harry and the other champion's lives would all be in danger again. But what could he do? Facing off against Voldemort directly was out of the question. Perhaps if he told the ambassadors they could help Harry? Maybe... Why hadn't Harry tried that?

Probably couldn't. Secrecy spells or contracts or something. McGunny would have to ask for it on Harry's behalf.

Which would be treason.

His headache was growing, pounding on his temple like a hammer and threatening to overwhelm him. He couldn't think like this. He needed a Headache Relief Potion, and a few hours to think things through.

"Are you alright?" someone asked him. He looked bleakly over the speaker and shook his head.

"I'm going to the infirmary."

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"It should be 'ere."

Harry stopped and looked back at Fleur, who was looking down at her map. Trekking through knee deep snow wasn't as fun as he remembered it being from last night. Of course, neither was blood or people trying to kill him when the moon wasn't full. He was going to have to do something about that when he got back.

They were in a small clearing, surrounded on all sides by sprigs of sapling bent nearly in half under the weight of snow. There was nothing special about the area, but if there was some sort of sign of the keystone then it was well buried.

"Where?"

She frowned thoughtfully, and started walking in a large circle. She tightened the circle until it was about a meter wide and finally stopped.

“Zome where in zis zircle. Under ze ground.”

They both got out their wands and started casting their own digging spells. Snow went flying and after a while so did dead plants and then dirt in hard frozen chunks. They worked at it for nearly ten minutes before they had to stop, tired from the repetitious movements of the spell. Their hole was only about half a foot.

They looked at each other.

“I don't suppose you know how deep it's buried?”

“... zix feet?”

“Oh come on!”

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She slept deep and had for a long time now, but there was no reason to stir. She felt neither hunger nor thirst, and her clutch remained safe around her with nothing to threaten them. In her dreams she was warm and content, and on those rare occasions she felt inclined to awaken the awareness of a biting cold began to seep into her consciousness and sent her retreating back to the realm of dreams. There was no reason to face such a thing when their lives were not endangered.

Until their lives were endangered.

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They gave up on the digging spells after an hour, when they finally reached soil that wasn't frozen. Fleur found a shovel in her Bottomless Bag, and they took turns digging. The work was hard and dirty. It kept them warm until they stopped and the cold air cooled

their sweat slick bodies, and left them shivering. It only got harder as they got deeper, having to fling dirt higher in order to keep it out of the hole.

At some point, Harry started to laugh.

“What iz zo funny?” Fleur asked, confused that he would find amusement in their current situation.

“I was just thinking... you're going to have to dig up a dragon by yourself. Good luck with that.”

She huffed. “I won't dig up ze entire zing!”

“You might have to, if you want to find the head. What if they buried it upside down? Or with its head under its leg? All I'm saying is, I don't envy you. Not at all.”

She kicked a clog of dirt at him, which did very little considering he was already covered in dirt. He continued to work and he was just about ready to give Fleur her turn, when his shovel dug in and a strange cracking sound gave him pause.

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She tensed as something unpleasant and painful course through her body in one violent thump, then stilled. In the aftermath, there was no pain but a great uneasiness had settled over her. She did not feel safe any longer. Reaching out with her senses she anxiously checked on her brood, feeling their magic pulse in time with hers. Lovingly, she wrapped each one in her magic to comfort them and comfort herself in their wellbeing. She knew some of these eggs were empty of life, but they were very much a part of her and she treasured them until the very moment her brood devoured them and made that magic apart of themselves.

She checked each one, and with each one found unharmed she started to relax. Until she came upon the last. There was something wrong.

She stirred.

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They squeezed into the hole together, digging the egg out with their bare hands until at last it was free. They could barely hold it, even with their gloves on, it was burning hot. They tossed it out of the hole and into some snow, and by the time they had climbed out the snow around it had melted around it in a perfect circle.

It was large, but smaller than Harry thought it would be, and hard and leathery at once. The shell was vaguely pink with brown spots, and a large crack on one end where Harry suspected he had hit it with his shovel. They both stared down at it curiously for a long moment, waiting to catch their breath from their labor.

“Congratulations... it's a girl,” Harry joked. Fleur chuckled. “So how do you want to do this? It seems kind of disrespectful to smash it with a shovel.”

“Dangerous too. You felt 'ow 'ot it iz on ze outside, 'ow 'ot on ze inzide do you zink it iz? If we zmashed it we could get burned.”

Harry frowned. He hadn't even thought of that.

“So no exploding spells and fire or freezing spells probably wouldn't work... Oh! I know!” He went over to their supplies and rummaged through it until he found Gryffindor's sword. “I'll cut it open.”

“Ah, zat should work. Just be careful.”

He unsheathed the blade and took a moment to admire it. Now that he was taking swordsmanship lessons in Dueling Club, he had a better appreciation for the blade. He already knew it was sharp, and magically powerful, but now he knew it was also exceptionally light and well-balanced in a way that only magic wielded by someone or something very skilled would be able to create. The sheath was more

precious to him, however. It was a gift from his godfathers, and one that showed they respected him as a fighter as well as their godson.

Fleur made an impatient sound. "Yes, it iz very big and imprezive. Are you done fondling it?"

He burned with embarrassment. Honestly, her mind was dirtier than his! The egg remained where it was, its heat causing steam rise up like smoke. The blade cut through the as if it were paper, slicing it cleanly in half.

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Another spike of pain and she felt the death of her egg as keenly as if it were herself being cut in two. She opened her eyes and threw back her massive spiny head to scream out her rage and pain, throwing back mud and water and ice with her violent awakening. She roared into the freezing cold air, until her anger over came her pain and spat out great swaths of fire, setting the surrounding trees alight.

Her tail and wings smashed the surrounding ice to pieces as she clawed her way out of the embankment, shaking free the remnants of the stream that had hidden her resting place. As she reached level ground, she let out another trumpeting roar.

Her egg was destroyed, and her sanctuary defiled. She could not rest again until the threat had been dealt with and her eggs were safe. She was perfectly capable of running, but the trees were too thick and her enemy was no doubt fleeing already, so flight was the only option. With a powerful swiped of her tail she smashed the trees around her into splinters, and with in moments she had cleared enough space to spread her wings. From there it was but a few powerful flaps of her massive wings and she was in the air, flying to meet the slayer of her egg.

And kill it.

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The egg fell apart, the pinkish orange yoke poured out, and set the dry grass beneath it on fire. For just an instant the sky swirled with color, like the surface of a soap bubble, before it burst. A sharp burst of wind signaled the fall of the barrier. Neither of them really noticed.

They were both too distracted by the frightening sound of a very, very angry dragon.

“Oh... Snape did not mention zat would 'appen,” Fleur said, rather stunned. “At least I won't 'ave to dig it up.”

Harry, who had experience with this sort of unexpected turn of events, recovered faster.

“Do you have any brooms in your bag?” he asked, sheathing his sword and slipping it into his belt. He stalked over to her bag and tore it open, and began rummaging through it. He pulled things out and tossing them aside, looking deeper and deeper, but it was hopeless looking for things that way. The bag really was bottomless. “How much junk is in this thing?”

She pushed him aside, stuck her hand inside and pulled out a broom instantly and tossed it to him. She reached in to find another, but came up empty.

“Zat's ze only one,” she lamented. “Should we 'ide?”

“And be trapped? She'll find us. She knows what we did. Get on the boom, we're going to make a run for it.”

“I don't-”

Another roar rang through the air, closer than before. The dragon was moving fast, and Fleur needed no further convincing. She got onto the broom behind Harry and wrapped her arms around his waist.

“Go!”

He shot straight into the air, and she tightened her hold as the icy wind nipped at the exposed skin of her ears and face. He flew in a tight circle trying to find the dragon, but it proved unnecessary. It was heading straight for them. Fleur didn't even have time to gasp at the sheer size of it, before Harry had turned the broom in the opposite direction and fled.

“Get to ze castle!” she cried, her voice barely discernible in the roaring wind.

“It's too dangerous! Someone could get hurt!”

“If we don't we could get dead! It iz a castle, it's dezigned to fend off dragons,” she reasoned. He grit his teeth and silently conceded, because while he might be able to out fly a dragon by himself, he definitely couldn't with another person.

She was gaining on them, and she was gaining fast.

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Snape was not happy with the world. He hadn't slept at all, wanting to be ready just in case Potter or Delacour showed up needing antidotes from centaur poisons or just to be the first to ream Potter out for being reckless and stupid again. Neither student had turned up, but McGonogall had. Ugh. He must have been more tired than he thought given the things he had said. It had made for a very awkward breakfast atmosphere.

To top it off, even his Slytherins were conspiring to irritate the hell out of him.

“Do you think they're dead?” someone whispered.

“Maybe... I bet Delacour is,” replied another.

“Why not Potter?”

“Cause he's a freak like that.”

“Parkinson,” he snapped. “Pay attention to what you are brewing, or you'll be testing the end result.”

The girl had the decency to look embarrassed, especially when several people giggled at her expense. For once, Cypher wasn't one of them. She was paying very little attention to what she was doing or anything else for that matter, but at least she was smart enough to let Draco handle the actual potion making. Hermione was making an effort to concentrate, but taking out her frustration on her potions ingredients wasn't doing her any favors.

He went back to grading his papers, annoyed with himself for not getting them done last night, and tried to ignore the continued gossip. Naturally, something else had to go wrong that morning.

Buuuuwwaaaaannggg...

Snape's papers flew out of his hands, and not a few students jumped in fright, knocking over or dropping their ingredients everywhere.

Buuuuwwaaaaannggg...

The class settled, looking around themselves stupidly for the source of the odd sound. It seemed to come from every direction, from the very walls themselves. It took a moment for Snape to identify the sound and when he did, he felt the blood run cold.

Buuuuwwaaaaannggg...

“What the hell did Potter do now?” Draco said, looking more than a little amused. Snape resisted the urge to go up and slap him upside the head. After all, if his godson really knew what that alarm signaled, perhaps he wouldn't be so glib. He could hope anyway.

For now though, the best thing to do was keep the students calm and exactly where they were. When he had first taken his Hogwarts orientation as professor, he still remembered the safety documentary saying that the dungeons were the safest place to be during a dragon attack. They also were the best place to be in case of a tornado, and

honestly he had thought he would experience the second long before he ever did the first.

Buuuuwwaaaaannggg...

"Ignore it," he instructed. "It's nothing you should concern yourselves with."

Reluctantly, everyone turned back to their work.

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Buuuuwwaaaaannggg...

Viktor woke with a jolt, throwing aside his blankets and scrambling to his feet.

"It's the dragon."

He spun around, blindly groping for the wand that wasn't on him. McGunny stood by a window, looking at him blankly. Beside him another bed, ruffled from use, and a school bag. The Ravenclaw must have been there for quite some time, yet Viktor couldn't recall when he had arrived.

Buuuuwwaaaaannggg...

"Vat? Vat about the dragon?"

"It's awake. It must have awoken when the barrier came down," he said coolly. "You need to hurry."

Buuuuwwaaaaannggg...

Viktor opened to ask 'For what', but then he realized. The dragon was awake. That meant something had happened, something had gone wrong and Fleur and Harry were in danger. He scrambled to dress and find his wand, ignoring McGunny's unwavering stare. The other boy didn't say a word until Viktor was half way to the door.

“When you're done,” he called. “come back and see me. Harry is still going to need your help after this.”

Again Viktor began to ask 'For what?', but another chime of the alarm alerted him to his more urgent task. Once he was gone, McGunny turned back to the window, watching the distant form of Harry flying closer and closer.

Buuuuwwaaaaannggg...

“I would appreciate you not dying today, my friend,” he said softly, “You still owe me a story.”

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Buuuuwwaaaaannggg...

“Move quickly, but do not run!” McGonogall instructed, moving her class towards the dungeons. Her group soon caught up with Flitwick's class, and both teachers fell in line with each other.

Nearly Headless Nick floated above them.

“Isn't this exciting?” he said cheerfully, “I haven't been through one of these in centuries. Used to have them almost once a month when I was a boy.”

Buuuuwwaaaaannggg...

“Ooohh... that sound still gives me chills.”

The professors shared a look.

“Don't look at me,” Flitwick said, “He's your House's ghost.”

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“Arry! Dive!”

He didn't question Fleur's frantic command, pointing his broom down into the inner courtyard. Fire rushed over their heads, followed by six tons of muscle, teeth, and claws focused only on their demise. The dragon flew passed, and Harry took the opportunity to fly into the covered walkway and out of sight.

“What should we do?” he asked, trembling from the the close call. “I didn't think she would follow us into the school.”

“Why not? Dragons are infamous for taking over castles,” she pointed out, trying to sound unconcerned even though she was shaking just as hard.

“I thought you said castles were designed to keep dragon's out!”

“Zey are! Zey just aren't designed to keep zem away!”

The dragon suddenly landed onto the awning of the walkway, smashing part of it in. She let out a deafening roar and slapped her tail angrily on the courtyard, sending clods of earth and rock flying. Fleur tightened her grip around Harry, and if he hadn't stopped breathing before hand he wouldn't have been able to now. They didn't dark speak or even move from their hiding spot as the beast snarled and sniffed, slowly hunting them down.

Harry knew it wouldn't take the dragon long to find them, but he couldn't just fly out into the open. They were so close to it that either the tail or the teeth would kill them before they could get away. Carefully, he began to fly his broom backwards, silently moving it towards the entryway to a western corridor.

The dragon suddenly stopped sniffing. Harry instinctively stopped as well. In his ear, Fleur's breath, already loud and fast, quickened.

“Harry,” she whispered. “Our shadow.”

He gasped, realizing they were already outed, spun his broom around and bolted for it. A massive spiny tail came at them from the side,

smashing through a column and barely missing them. They flew through the doorway, too fast for so little room and hit a wall with the sides of their bodies. The dragon's snout followed them through, snapping its dagger-like teeth close enough for them to catch the spittle.

"Fulmenio!" Fleur shouted, flinging out her wand. An bolt of light flew out at the dragon, and hit it square in its open mouth. The dragon pulled back in surprise, tearing apart the door way with her plated head. Harry pushed the broom forward to escape.

Another angry roar, and the entry way they had just left was suddenly filled with fire, and it rushed up either end of the hall, knocking out windows and setting tapestries ablaze. He pushed the broom faster, taking the first available turn and let the flames speed pass them.

Voldemort is going to kill me for that, Harry lamented, then realized he probably wasn't going to live long enough to have to face the dark wizard at this point. His choice in turns was unfortunate, because now he was in a heavily windowed corridor looking into the courtyard. And what a marvelous view he had of the dragon tearing at the still burning mortar. The castle was already beginning to repel the attack, smothering the flames and pushing the stones back into the place, but the dragon's destructive rage was winning out. He needed a plan and fast.

"Fleur, can you apparate?"

"What?"

"Do you know how to apparate?!"

"Not in ze castle! It's warded!"

"If I take you past the castle grounds can you apparate?"

"I... I won't leave you!"

"You'd be doing me a favor! Once your off the broom I can definitely out fly it!"

'Definitely' was a little strong, but he was fairly certain he could.

"No! It iz too dangerous. We should just move deeper into ze castle or ze dungeons. Ze Zentinels will be 'ere any- 'ARRY!"

Their choice was taken from them by six tons of death blasting through stone and glass, damn near crushing them. They were throw aside violently, knocked from the broom and sent rolling across the corridor until each hit the wall. Dazedly, they tried to reorient themselves and stumbled to their feet. The dragon was also disoriented, and in the confusion Harry snatched up the broom and Fleur and slipped through the impromptu opening.

Their take off was shaky at best, but their destination was clear. They moved towards the lake as quickly as they could, striving for as much distance between them and their would-be assassin as they could.

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Voldemort strode briskly towards the castle entrance, making a point to cross through the still smoldering courtyard on his way. The castle was steadily reassembling itself, but the damage was still obvious. Bricks pulled themselves together imperfectly, parts of them ground into powder and burnt wooden frames of the windows barely held themselves together, let alone any glass that hadn't been shattered or melted.

It was quite impressive, Voldemort admitted to himself, but he wished the dragon's power could have been exercised on something more deserving. Like Durmstang's boat or Madam Pudifoot's. At least he had some ideas on how to further fortify the castle against external attacks, which he would have Lestrangle implement during the summer.

He'd make Harry help, he decided, as punishment for this entire fiasco. If he survived.

The Dark Lord exited the castle keep and looked around. He could see a dozen Sentinels he had posted around the barrier running towards the lake, ready and willing to face this latest threat, but they would be too late. They hadn't thought to carry brooms and apparating wasn't possible

Harry and Delacour were half way across the lake, another mile from the anti-apparition boundary, and dragon had already caught up to them. They could not out fly their pursuer, and were forced to get clever. Harry was flying as low as he dared and turning sharply, forcing the dragon to fly higher and make wider turns or risk losing its updraft and send it crashing into the ice. The flames were much harder to dodge, but Delacour proved her worth by casting Shield Spell after Shield Spell and a few attack spells just to keep the dragon cautious.

They were still losing. Their magic or their luck would run out long before the dragon's rage did, and they were getting no closer to the boundary now.

Voldemort closed his eyes and took a deep breath, ready to exert some very interesting magic, but a noise behind him drew his attention and he spun around instinctively, his wand jumping into his hand. Krum's wand found its owner's hand just as quickly, and the two found themselves facing each other in equally defensive positions. Voldemort scowled.

"You should be inside with the others," he said darkly, feeling more than a little distrustful. What was this child doing sneaking up behind him? Then he noted there was a broom in Krum's hand.

"I should be killing da dragon. Isn't dat da challenge?" he snapped back, his voice thick with accusation.

Voldemort arched his brow, then relaxed. He smirked, and pointed out towards the lake where his protégé and Delacour fought for their lives. "Then by all means, you better hurry. The Beauxbaton's girl has a head start on you."

The Durmstang Champion's furious expression made Voldemort chuckle, and for a moment the Dark Lord thought the child would have the audacity to attempt to hex him. But no, Krum was in a hurry, and ran passed him, barely clear of him when he jumped on his broom and sped out towards the lake.

Voldemort took another deep breath, gathering his magic, then held it. Krum had just challenged him, which was the first interesting thing he had seen the champion do since he had arrived. He wanted to see how far the boy's bravado would take him. If things got out of hand, he would intercede, but wanted to test this one's strength first.

Especially if there was a chance they might meet on the battle field.

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Harry made another sharp turn, nearly dragged off his broom as Fleur struggled to keep her balance with one arm around him and the other waving widely. A mace like tail swung pass them, skimming the ice. The dragon lost some of her balance and wavered clumsily in the air, until a few power flaps of its wings brought it higher and she steadied..

"That was close," he huffed, taking the opportunity to move further across the lake.

"Faster!" she begged breathlessly, fear and exhaustion leading her steadily towards desperation.

"I can't. No unless you want to get off and run," he snapped back, fear and exhaustion leading him steadily towards irritability. It proved a mistake on both their parts, for the second and half they had focused on each other, they had taken their attention off the dragon. She reasserted her significance in their concentration by nearly dropping on top of them. Her legs on either side of him and a tail swinging behind, he could only move forward, and risk the teeth and fire. They slipped out from underneath her with all their limbs, but she caught the bristles of their broom in her mouth and flung them.

The broom snapped, and Fleur fell off the back while Harry was tossed further away. He landed on his side, and even with all the snow to cushion him, the pain was incredible. It ran the entire length of his arm, before the intensity of it faded into total numbness. His glasses were lost, but there was blood leaking into his eyes so it didn't matter any way.

"Ahh..." he moaned, and forced himself to sit up. "Fleur?"

"Run!" she screamed, but it was impossible. He didn't even know if he could stand.

An angry snarl reminded him of the danger, and he forced himself to his feet, stumbling away from the dark fuzzy mass of maternal rage. The dragon had landed, or crashed really in her attempts to catch them, and partially broken through the ice. The back half of her body had slipped beneath the water, while her arms and wings and head struggled to pull her out again. The ice was thick, but she was heavy and having already broken it she was struggling to find a patch that would support her weight.

She was close enough that even Harry's addled wits knew he was still in danger.

He stumbled over the hem of his cloak as he attempted to flee and fell, unable to stand again for the pain and dizziness that over came him. The dragon noticed him again. She continued to struggle, but now she struggled towards him, snapping at him and tearing away the ice he was collapsed on.

"ARRY!"

The dragon grew impatient and drew back her head, her chest filling with fire. Harry laid there frozen, his thoughts of fire flitting through his mind.

His little room the Dursley's, his painting bursting into flames and Dudley wrestling the cursed bedsheets.

Voldemort standing by the fire place during Christmas break, grinning at him wickedly. 'Want to see something interesting?' He shoved his hand into the fire and pulled out a piece of it, a perfect sphere of flames hovering above his open palm.

Writing in his journal, the candle on his desk flickering for no reason.

Teacher Brennan and the others sitting around the fire pit, stirring up the flames with a poke. "The body is composed of earth, but life is made from fire..."

He closed his eyes tight, expecting indescribably pain and then...

"Fragorio!"

There was explosion, a wave of heat, and inhuman screech of pain.

He opened his eyes again. He could not see any better, but he knew that voice.

"Viktor!"

Fleur was suddenly beside him, forcing him to his feet and pulling him away.

"Move, you fool!"

"Congelo!"

Fleur hesitated, then shoved him forward, forcing him to stumble away on his own.

"Go! Keep going!"

"What are you...?"

She had already turned back towards the fight, however, and begun waving her wand.

"Congelo!"

Viktor repeated the spell, then Fleur, and then Viktor again. Each moving round and round the dragon moving in as close as they dared, as it snarled and snapped and blew fire at them. The ice around it began to thicken, but rather than try to climb onto it the dragon was now trying to escape it, as it began to form around her claws and wings, sticking them to the ice and holding her there so that she couldn't move. Every time she turned to melt ice growing on one part of her body with her fire, the wizard and witch summoned ice somewhere else.

The ice was slowly winning, and so were they. Slowly, ever so slowly, the dragon began to weaken and slow, her enraged cries turning instead to panicked shrieks as the ice climbed over her, until only her head remained free courtesy of her flaming breath. Even that was slowly being taken away. She could no longer expand her chest to breath deep. She could barely breath at all.

Her cries fell into pitiable whimpers. Harry's heart clenched.

“Stop!”

Fleur and Viktor broke off the spell. There was a moment of silence, but for the dragon's long suffering groan.

“It can not live,” Viktor said. “If it lives, it vill come for you again. Dey remember der grudges until dey die.”

“I know but...”

“It iz awful, but we can't stop. It will only make it worse for 'er.”

Harry nodded, “I know, but... not like this. It's too horrible. I... I can make it quick.”

He turned back towards the dragon, and forced himself to move as quickly towards her as he could, intent on not prolonging her suffering or allow his feelings to runaway with his resolve. His left arm was useless, hanging limply from its socket, but his right was still good and he used it to withdraw the Sword of Gryffindor from its sheath. He

didn't know if dragons had any sense of dignity or pride, but if they did he hoped the death he offered her was one she would find befitting.

Her moaning had subsided into calm shallow breaths, even as his own sped up as he approached her. This close beside her, even with his lousy vision, he could see her yellow eyes and the myriad of emotions drifting across her reptilian face. Hate. Resignation. Regret. Ice was still forming and gradually moved up to cover even her eyes. At least, she wouldn't see it coming, even though she obviously knew it was.

"I'm sorry," he said, and slid the blade home.

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Voldemort sighed in relief, regathering his scattered magic back into him. Now that the dragon was at peace, he no longer needed to supplement the champions' Freezing Spells with his own magic. Hopefully, none of them had noticed him do it. He didn't like the idea of the foreigners knowing he had this particular talent. There weren't very many wizards who could send their magic over a mile in such a subtle manner, and for certain less publicly acceptable actions this was a useful skill.

It was a necessary risk, however. The two of them would not have been enough to over power the dragon, and Harry was in no state to help them even if he knew the spell.

Still, he hadn't anticipated Harry making the final blow. It sent a shiver down his spine thinking about it. The potential power behind such an act. The slaying of a dragon was no small thing after all, and he fully intended for his pupil to take full advantage of it.

After his punishment, of course.

Book IV

Chapter 15:

For once the Reicher household did not wake to the usual morning chaos that Robert now associated with two little girls who could not tell the difference between 'wake up' and 'wake up when you feel like it' and a private school that didn't care to explain it to them. There was no frantic searches for socks that matched, homework assignments, or barrettes, no races to the bathroom and wrestling matches for the mirror, no whining about breakfast, their teacher, or each other, and no negotiations about what would or would not be packed in their lunch boxes (there was no way Kyle would let his girls eat anything that was served off an assembly line no matter how much Robert complained their ridiculous tuition included it).

On this particular morning, it was the first day of the holiday break, and Robert was quite happy to enjoy the company of his daughters still happily in their pjs, giggling over their green Christmas tree shaped pancakes and Kyle and his endless (and somewhat obnoxious) holiday cheer. His own work was at a standstill as the Court of Legal Affairs and the Court of Licenses, Registrations, and Permits was bogged down with last second cases and end of the year paperwork, and his own projects were on hold until paperwork could all be filed.

So he was looking forward to nothing more exciting or eventful happening than was typical of this time of year (which was rather eventful with two young daughters intent on catching one of Santa's spying elves and Kyle's insistence that they each have at least a half a dozen sugar cookies throughout the day). This was perhaps why he wasn't prepared to open his newspaper to find Harry Potter sitting on top of the corpse of very BIG, very DEAD dragon, and dropped his coffee in his straight into his lap.

"OUCH! DAMMIT!" he shouted, and jumped to his feet.

"Robert!" Kyle glared at him, and pointed to Morgana, looking scandalized, and Alyssa, who looked ready to burst out laughing.

"Sorry," he muttered, and grabbed himself a towel.

"What happened anyway? Are we being invaded by orcs?" his husband inquired, looking amused now that the profanity had passed.

"No... dragons this time. No worries, Prince Harry dealt with them."

There was a predictable squeal of delight, and the girls abandoned their pancakes in favor of his newspaper and even Kyle came over to see what the latest news was about. Splashed across the front page was Harry and the dragon, plus another older boy and girl and the headline was practically screaming 'Harry Potter Slays Dragon As New Hogwarts Champion'. Their prince certainly didn't look particularly happy about the whole affair, looking rather beat up but still somehow more impressive for it. The sword was a nice touch.

The article read like a cheap adventure story, throwing out images of a speedy chase and a life or death battle. There was only a sentence or two mentioning a dislocated shoulder and a concussion, and nothing dedicated to the fact that a fourteen year old was nearly set on fire and eaten for no good reason at all. There was a little speculation on how precisely Harry had become the champion and what had happened to the last one and how the dragon got out of the warded boundary, but to the adults it was obvious that what little was said was romanticized drivel. They smiled and 'oohed' and 'awwed' with their little girls, who couldn't be expected to understand what Harry had just faced, but when they went off to play 'Harry vs the Dragon', they sat down together to say what they really thought.

"Kyle, I'm starting to have serious doubts about the Dark Lord as a parental figure."

"It's a pity the adoption papers you submitted weren't approved."

Robert blinked. "What? When did I fill out those?"

"It was in that pile of school forms you signed last year."

"... You sneak! You said those were permission slips for dance lessons!"

“They were... at least half of them!”

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He went out to Hagrid's house (he had been given the cabin the medi-wizard had stayed in during the second challenge for the remainder of his stay as thanks for finding and bring Viktor safely back to Hogwarts) after dinner, but before dueling club practice. He wasn't looking forward to the meeting, but he needed to get away from everyone and Hagrid was the least likely to congratulate him for killing the dragon. Of course, that meant he probably wasn't going to have a particularly pleasant visit.

The little house had a much larger door than Harry remembered, and that was obviously necessary, but it did nothing to ease his anxiety as it loomed over him. He tapped it softly, unrealistically afraid it would fall on top of him, and squash him flat. There was a loud baying bark at the door, followed by a booming 'down boy!' and scratching at the door. Harry very much hoped that was really only a dog, and a normal one at that. He was well aware of Hagrid's eccentricity when it came to pets.

The man swung open the door, looking around curiously until they landed on Harry. His expression was completely blank for just a moment, and then his eyes narrowed.

“What you be want'n then?”

Harry flinched. He had expected this. Hagrid had been outraged by the whole idea of the second challenge, and Harry's participation and conclusion of it wasn't going to endear him to the man. It didn't make the rejection hurt any less.

“I... I needed to talk to you... about something,” he said, staring down at his shoes. There was a tense silence, and Harry was almost certain Hagrid was going to close the door in his face.

“Fine. Come in then, yer lett'n out all the warm air.”

Hagrid moved away from the door, and he cautiously followed the giant man inside. Hagrid hadn't wasted time making the little house his own. The furniture had all been enlarged (by who, he hadn't the foggiest as he had never seen Hagrid with a wand) and rough wooden items and furs predominated the decor. An enormous black wrinkly dog regarded him balefully from beside the fireplace.

"So what ya want to say?"

Harry turned back to Hagrid who now had his back turned to him, fussing with a tea kettle.

"Um... it's about... ah, well... I talked to Bill this morning. Bill Weasley, you know? Is chief of safety and-"

"I know Bill," he said curtly.

"Oh, right, of course you do. Well, he was saying with the barrier broken down, the stasis spells the dragon eggs are under are starting to wear off, and they're going to need to be taken care off. I thought... I mentioned to him that you might be interested. I told him you have experience with... spirited animals. He said I should ask you."

Hagrid went very still, which wasn't particularly safe since he had just little a match to light the stove and seemed to have forgotten about it. Forgot about it until burned his fingers. He grumbled a curse, suckled his scalded finger. Then he looked back to Harry, who was relieved to see he didn't look angry anymore. Just exasperated.

"Why'd you do it, lad? Wh'd you kill er? She jus wanted to be lef alone to care fer er little'un's."

Harry looked up him helplessly.

"I didn't go into that forest to start a fight with her. I would happily have let her sleep forever, but things happened. A lot of things happened really fast, and I had to make a decision. I didn't want to hurt her, but I didn't want to die either. And she would have killed me and Fleur, and who knows who else? I'm sorry any of it happened.

This stupid game. My stupid decisions. You have no idea how much I regret all of it.”

Hagrid let out a heavy sigh and sat himself in his chair, tea forgotten. He ran his hands through his hair and his beard, struggling to think of what to say. He still wasn't happy with what had happened, but he didn't blame Harry. Perhaps he never had. He was sort of awkward when it came to being angry.

“So...” the giant man said after a long moment. “How many eggs we talk'n bout?”

Harry smiled cautiously.

“Three alive, two empty.”

“Yikes. They'll be fight'n over their share the moment they hatch.”

Harry grinned.

“I'm sure you can handle it. Although, you might need to fire proof your house... and your beard.”

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“I am sorry, I was being such a jerkyesterday,” Viktor said as he escorted Hermione from the Great Hall to the Dueling Hall. She didn't honestly need an escort with her brother trailing behind them with his unpleasant redheaded friend, but he hadn't had much time to talk with her since their fight yesterday and he didn't know if she was still mad at him. She didn't look mad. She was smiling in her usual, coy way.

“I'm sorry too. We were both frustrated and upset, and took it out on each other. I know you just wanted to understand what was happening, but I didn't have any answers and that just made things worse. Lets just forget about it,” she said, and he was perfectly happily to do just that. “Thank you, by the way, for going out to rescue Harry and Fleur. Harry is trying to downplay the danger he was in to

make be feel better, but I know he would have died if you hadn't shown up. You really are a hero."

He hadn't thought of anything that happened yesterday as 'good' except for the part where everyone survived. The situation should never had happened, there were so many careless mistakes by everyone, and he still had more questions than answers. He had his fair share of accolades from the youngest first year to the German Ambassdor to Voldemort (gag) himself, but it wasn't until Hermione had thanked him for saving her friend, and not just for killing the dragon, that he felt any sort of pride for what he had accomplished.

"Just... I was just returning da favor," he said, and then mentally flinched. That was not a very heroic thing to say. Luckily, he was saved from floundering for a better response. They had reached the Dueling Hall and stopped, and just as it looked as if Hermione might just lean forward to kiss him on the cheek (he had never once kissed him on the mouth and he was starting to wonder why*), her brother and his friend came up behind them and escorted her straight through the door.

"We'll take it from here," Draco said, his smile stiff and unfriendly. "Don't want to be late."

"Draco!"

Ron gave him a particularly nasty glare, and slammed the door shut behind them. Viktor stared at the door for a long moment, baffled and somewhat amused. Honestly, how could Hermione's 'big brother' be so much less mature than his sister? For that matter, what was that other kid's problem?

He gave a mental shrug and headed off to the Hogwarts' Herald office to find McGunny. The boy had warned him of Harry's continued peril even after the dragon, and that made Viktor suspect the other boy knew something about the strange events that had been happening. More than anything, Viktor wanted clear answers.

He had only been by the newspaper office once or twice, usually accompanied by Hermione, and right then it was even more

frantically busy than before and he hadn't realized that was possible. The staff all ignored him as he entered, bent over their typewriters in deep concentration or running back and forth between the printing press, McGunny's office, and various reporters. He snagged one of the photographers dashing toward's McGunny's office. The boy blinked up at him.

"Hermione's not here," he said.

"I am not here to see her. I'm here to see McGunny."

"Oh... I'll tell him you're here."

Viktor let him go and he dashed the rest of the way into the office. A moment later he returned.

"He'll see you. Go on in."

Viktor did. The door snapped shut behind him and the first thing out of McGunny's mouth was an anti-spying spell cast on the entire office. It startled him a lot more than it should have. McGunny's office was tiny, with barely enough room to walk around his old teacher's desk, but unlike the rest of the main office it was tidy and neat, with all the papers carefully filed away or sitting in mail slots. The first issue of the Hogwart's Herald was hung on the wall, each article had been snipped out and hung in its own custom frame so that the entirety of it came together as a misshapen jigsaw.

"I'm glad you came," McGunny said, although there was nothing particularly happy about his expression. "But next time a little more discretion would be appreciated."

"Vat do you know about Harry?"

"Right to the point. Good. We only have about ten minutes before they start to wonder what we're doing. And to answer your questions, I know a lot about Harry and the true purpose behind this tournament, and even a little bit about you."

Viktor scowled, already impatient with the runaround.

"Then say it."

McGunny didn't for a moment, either to prove who was in charge or to organize his thoughts, he didn't know and didn't care. He wanted answers now.

"Voldemort intends to kill you."

The words sent a jolt up his spine. He couldn't say anything, and after a long moment, McGunny continued, highlighting the Dark Lord's plot to murder the champions and instigate a war, and of Harry's desperate attempts to stop it, and the risk he had obtained in doing so. As each event that occurred from the moment of his arrive unfolded from this new point of view, it all started to fall together into something terrifying.

"And Harry's strange behavior when he went into the forest?"

McGunny hesitated there, but after checking his watch, continued.

"He has a condition. I'm not sure of the specifics, but the full moon triggers a sort of madness. I believe it's from the Dark Lord performing some sort of magical experiments on him. He didn't behave this way until he came back from summer vacation, and I know for a fact he spent part of that time under the Dark Lord's care."

"Voldemort experiments on him?" he asked, horrified by the prospect. He had seen nothing in Harry's behavior to suggest there was such a heinous form of abuse, but it did make an awful sort of sense.

"I think so. I can't be positive. My belief is it revolves around some sort of immunity to Lycanthrosis. You have been told about his godfathers?"

Viktor nodded hesitantly. He had been told, but hadn't really believed it. So that was true as well?

"He's spent the last two summers with them, and they guarded him most of last year. It would make a sort of sense, but again I can't be positive. He's never hurt anyone though, and the teachers are aware

of it and don't seem concerned. But enough of that, I didn't tell you all of this to satisfy your curiosity."

"How do you know any of this to begin with?"

McGunny gave him a bland look. "It's what I do, and I'm very good at it. For instance, I know that Durmstang's intentions for being here are no more pure than the Dark Lord's reasons for inviting you."

Viktor stiffened. What did he know? His thoughts jumped to the strange owl that night in the Hogsmeade cellar, and he wondered if McGunny might not somehow be responsible.

The Ravenclaw put his hand into his pocket, pulled something out, and held it out to him. It was a small silver star. More importantly, it was Viktor's portkey. Immediately, he searched for it in his robe and found it. He looked at McGunny quizzically.

"Oh, so you have another. I got this one out of your boot while you were resting in the infirmary. I think I'll keep this one then."

"How did you-"

"It's what I do, Viktor. Like I said, I'm good at it. But we only have another minute or two left, so let's get to the heart of the matter. I want you to take Harry back to Germany."

"Vat?! Vat are you talking about?"

"Harry put himself in great danger to protect you and the peace between our countries. You owe it to him to take him with you somewhere safe. France, Germany, Timbuktu, it doesn't matter, as long as the Dark lord can not reach him."

"I... I don't have dat authority."

"But Ambassador Schwartzmann does. Ask him. I bet he would do it for the chance to remind the world exactly what sort of monster Britain's ruler is."

Viktor thought for a moment, and realized that was true. McGunny had thought this through extremely well, which made him wonder...

"Why? Why are you doing dis? If you vere found out you could be tried for treason."

McGunny didn't answer him though, merely stood up from his desk, and canceled the anti-spying charm.

"That's all the time I'm afraid I can spare for now. Come back later with a response to my questions and we can continue the interview from there."

"Vat are you-"

The door burst open and a reporter hurled herself inside, though she halted as soon as she saw Viktor.

"Oh, sorry! I didn't mean to intrude!"

McGunny shook his head. "That's alright. We're done here. Any luck reaching Diggory's family?"

"I don't know if they got the letter or not, they haven't sent a reply. They must be swamped with sympathy letters though-"

Viktor stalked out, knowing he wouldn't get anymore answers today. Perhaps that was for the best, because he had far too more answers than he knew what to do with. Heaven and Earth, what was he going to do? It was all awful and terrifying, and in some ways fantastic. Voldemort was the devil, manipulating everyone including his own countrymen. Harry was a victim, trying to be the hero, but he needed the sort of help Viktor would gladly extend if he could.

Perhaps he could convince Hermione to come too, if she knew both her best friend and the one who loved her would remain by her side. What would bind her to this place? Hermione loved this school and her education and perhaps her foster brother, but what could she do with it all once she graduated? She had been adopted by purebloods, but was a muggleborn herself, leaving her stuck between two

different class prejudices and with slim prospects for careers or relationships. In Europe, someone of her talents and beauty would be accepted and appreciated in almost any field.

He was getting ahead of himself though and he couldn't afford to do that. He had to talk with Ambassador Schwartzmann to warn him and see if this rescue attempt was even possible, before he even thought about broaching the subject with Hermione. He should probably talk to Dumbledore too, but he was afraid to return to the cellar. Did McGunny know about it? If McGunny had figured out this much, couldn't someone else have as well?

One step at a time he decided. He needed to talk to the ambassador first.

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The dragon was killed on Monday. Harry made it till Wednesday before the other shoe dropped. The first warning came in Potion's class, when he received a detention from Snape to make up for the potion's work he had missed and the two missing essays. As he was walking out the door at the end, Snape stopped him for a moment.

"Don't make plans for this afternoon."

He received no elaboration, and wasn't going to push it. He hadn't gotten a caning yet and he wasn't about to remind the potions master of that fact. He hoped that wasn't what this afternoon was about. Classes dragged on, and he counted the minutes. When they were done, he baled out of hanging out with his friends, citing his mountain of homework he was behind on and the exams the next day. He didn't think they believed him, as he had been using that excuse since he had returned to the castle. It wasn't his habit to share his depression.

The library was his refuge. Most people took one look at his mountain of books and took the hint, and he really did have a lot of school work to catch up on. He got through one of his potion's essays and his reading for Celtic class, when McGonagall came looking for him.

“All alone, Mr. Potter?”

He looked up at her, smiled wanly and gestured towards his books.

“Just playing catch up.”

She regarded speculatively, then seemed to remember why she was there.

“Lord Voldemort is waiting for you in the castle keep. He said you should dress warmly.”

“Did he say what this is all about?”

“No, but I wouldn't keep him waiting. I already sent your friend Clyde for your cloak and gloves. Go, I'll collect your books.”

He nodded. “Thanks, Professor.”

Clyde met him at the bottom of the stairs with his scarf, gloves, and his warm black cloak (his Baluvian one was being cleaned by the house elves and had yet to be returned). They shared a disparaging look.

“I don't suppose you'll actually come back in one piece for once?” Clyde asked.

“If he meant to kill me, he would have done it already. Don't tell Hermione about this, okay? She'll just worry.”

His friend shook his head. “If she asks I'm going to tell her. Being lied to hurts worse than worrying. Give her a little bit more credit.”

Harry ducked his head, ashamed. He really was getting carried away in his lies. He used to only do it because he had to, and now Clyde had just pointed out that he was doing to avoid hurting people, which was a self-deluding lie in itself.

“Yeah, you're right. Sorry. See you at dinner, then, I hope.”

"I'll save you a potato. With cheese and bacon..."

Harry grinned at him. So Clyde had remembered his favorite food? That was strangely touching.

"Thanks."

Voldemort was waiting for him just where McGonagall had said he would be, and across the bridge, Harry could see the Dark Lord's black car. It was the first Harry had seen him since Monday, and then it had only been a brief glance through the open door of the infirmary, where Madam Pomfrey had been preparing to pop his arm back into his socket. It was strange that they should meet so long after the fact, but the man must have been busy cleaning up the entire mess.

"You look tired, Harry."

"Too much homework. Where are we going?"

Voldemort turned and led him out to the car. Victoria was there in her chauffeur's uniform, holding open the back door for them and looking worried. That wasn't a good sign. He gave her a reassuring smile as he climbed into the back seat with the Dark Lord. Chief Sentinel Morgan was there as well, which made Harry suspect this was an official matter rather than a personal one between Teacher and Pupil.

"We need your help with something, Harry, in order to wrap up this entire messy business," Voldemort said, once they had all settled comfortably. "Our foreign visitors have agreed to overlook your blatant violation of the Tournament regulations due to the extenuating circumstances. It helps that Diggory listed you as his second in the event that anything happened to him."

Harry frowned. "I was still registered as his second? I turned him down though."

"I minor technicality I neglected to mention."

That made Harry smile just a bit, until he realized what he was just been told.

"Wait a minute, you mean I'm the Hogwarts champion now? How does that work? I'm not old enough!"

Voldemort smirked. "That rule only applies to selections made by the Goblet of Fire. Seconds are a personal choice by the Champion and can include anyone. Admittedly, that is an oversight on my part. It would have made things quite awkward if Diggory had chosen the captain of the Chudley Cannons or Newton Settlebeek*. It worked out in our favor this time."

Harry sighed. The year had just gotten that much more difficult.

"That's what you get for interfering in things that are none of your business," Voldemort said, unsympathetically. Harry shrugged. That was very true.

"This last one wasn't entirely my fault."

"Which is the only reason I haven't crucioed you. As things stand I will let your training for the third challenge be punishment enough. You will report to Professor Snape every Saturday morning and whenever else he tells you to until the end of the year."

Harry grimaced but nodded. Honestly, it didn't sound that bad. He wasn't expecting to have fun, but he suspected it would be more productive than his own self training for Dueling Club. Not that he was going to let anyone think his time spent with Snape was anything but a cruel and heinous punishment. Particularly not Voldemort.

"I'll do my best."

"You better."

"And the nutty behavior during the full moon? I don't suppose you have a solution for that?"

"I have a few thoughts on the matter, but I'll discuss those with you alone when return to the castle."

Harry snuck a peek over at Morgan, who was so quiet and still it was easy to forget he was there. Morgan looked back steadily, but there were no clues to figuring out what they were all going to do in his blank face.

"If all of this is settled already, then what are we doing out here?" he asked, looking out the window. They didn't really seem to be going anywhere. Instead of taking the road to Hogsmeade, they were now driving along the edge of the Forbidden Forest without any road in sight. The day was unreasonably warm and sunny for the season, and the snow from the weekend blizzard was wet and slushy.

"You'll see. We're almost there."

After a few minutes, the car turned and entered the forest through the slimmest of openings in the trees. The forest here was different than what it had been in the barrier. Here everything came and went as it pleased, and there was air of foreboding at a level beyond what Harry had previously experienced. He was starting to become nervous.

The ground was without a path and even the charmed car was having trouble giving them a smooth ride. It shook and jerked randomly for a few more minutes, until they entered a clearing and smoothed out again. Harry looked out and felt his heart jump into his throat.

This was definitely their destination.

Some thirty to forty Sentinels encircled the clearing, some facing out into woods to watch for danger, but most of them facing a small herd of centaurs gathered together in the middle. There were a little over twenty, but half of them were too young to be considered adults and seven of them were mares, one an old man, and the rest strapping but clearly overwhelmed stallions. Among the stallions he recognized Firenze and Ulaithur.

He turned back to Voldemort and Morgan, who were staring back at him, but neither's expressions had changed. The car came to a stop,

and Victoria opened the door for them. They climbed out. The centaurs all turned towards them, seeming to know who their fate rested with. A Sentinel came over to meet them.

"Is this all of them?" Morgan asked.

"Most of them. I think half a dozen mares got away, but it didn't seem worth the effort to go after them. You said we were looking for stallions, yeah?"

Morgan didn't reply, instead turning to Harry.

"Do you recognize the ones who attacked the champions?"

"What?" Harry turned to Voldemort who stared at him expectantly.

"We must put this to rest. Diggory's parents and the people of Britain demand justice, and for that someone must be punished. Now tell us, who here is responsible for Diggory's near death."

Harry could only blink at him in horror, then stare out at the centaurs. They were all terrified, particularly the children, and more than a few were injured and bleeding. Firenze stood at the edge of the herd, positioning himself between the foals and the Sentinels. Ulaithur had a mare tucked protectively under his arm and she in turn held a wobbly legged colt. Harry was careful not to let his gaze linger on any of them.

"No. I don't see them. They were probably bachelors without a herd."

"Harry," Voldemort admonished. "I know you are lying. We found a crossbow in a cave around where Krum was kept. The arrow and the poison on it both match the arrow used to shoot Diggory. The crossbow was also engraved with the herdmark of this herd. We did not make a mistake. One more time, who is responsible?"

Harry looked down at his shoes rather than the centaurs.

"What are you going to do to him?"

"Kill him of course. He tried and very nearly succeeded in trying to kill not just one wizard child but four. How could you possibly justify defending him, Harry? He deserves to be punished."

"So do you, I don't see you with a wand pointed at your head."

"Crucio!"

Harry collapsed under the pain of the curse, and screamed. It only lasted a few seconds, but that was long enough to leave him gasping and boneless in the snow. A hard cold hand fisted in his hair and pulled him up to his knees, forcing him to look back at the centaurs, who were looking as horrified for him as he did for them.

"This isn't the time for your stubborn games, Harry. Tell me who shot Diggory or I'll kill every stallion, mare, and foal here just to be sure."

"You're a monster," he hissed in parseltongue, "You're only worried about covering your own mistakes."

Voldemort sneered. "Don't get self-righteous. A child-murderer deserves to die, and you're letting your own weakness get in the way of that."

"He nearly died because of what you did. He wasn't thinking clearly. It's not like the situation will ever repeat itself."

"I'm not pandering to your asinine notions of right and wrong," Voldemort continued in English. "You have to till the count of three or they are all dead, and you have the blood of the innocent as well as the guilty on your conscious. One..."

"Wait!"

"Two..."

Harry looked back towards the centaurs, his gaze immediately finding Ulatithur, who seemed to suddenly understand what was happening and detached himself from his mare.

“Thr-”

“Here!” Ulaither shouted, stepping forward. The gathered Sentinels all swung their wands towards him, stopping him in his tracks. He glared at all of them, before he turned his eyes to the Dark Lord. “I am the one you are looking for.”

Voldemort stared back at him evenly, then turned to Harry. “Is this the one?”

The boy closed his eyes and nodded. “Yes.”

The Dark Lord turned to Ulaithur. “There were two of you.”

“I was the only one who fired a bow to kill. He tried to stop me. He is not at fault.”

“Who is the other?”

Ulaithur said nothing. Voldemort turned to Harry. “I want them both.”

Harry glared up at him hatefully. “I doubt you care about the other's innocence, but Viktor will. If you kill the centaur that carried him to safety, this whole stupid thing will blow up in your face.”

Voldemort's eyes hardened, and Harry flinched back in preparation for another crucio or even a good old fashioned back hand, but instead received a demeaning little pat on the head.

“Much better. Manipulation is more affective than preaching, isn't it?” Voldemort pulled away and addressed his Sentinels. “Take him, scatter the rest.”

The Sentinels moved in, conjuring ropes and whips. The ones with ropes surrounded Ulaithur, who moved forward to meet them, while those with whips began to crack them threateningly, driving the rest of the heard back and forcing them to break off one by one in different directions. Ulaithur's mare cried out and reached out to her mate, but a Sentinel intercepted her with a savage strike to her stomach with his whip. She screamed, and Ulaithur who hadn't

moved to resisted at all as they steadily started to tie him with ropes, spun around, pulling Sentinels off their feet as he went. The Sentinel who had struck the mare didn't even have time to scream as two massive hooves came down on him, stomping him into the ground with a sickening crunch.

"Run, Natiyana! Take Umari and run!" was all Ulaithur managed to get out before a half dozen stunning spells threw him to the ground.

"Ulaithur!" she cried out in anguish, but moved back to her colt, who stood too frightened and shocked to move as his whole world began to unravel before his eyes. She took him by the shoulders and pulled him away, reluctantly, snarling and kicking her hooved feet at any who dared approach, threatening a death as horrible as their compatriot's.

Harry watched them go, overwhelmed by it all. By death, by the tearing apart of a family, by the ruthless casualness with which these people's lives were being destroyed. As the herd disappeared into the trees, and Ulaithur was finally portkeyed away, Harry turned to the Dark Lord who was watching him curiously.

"I hate you."

Voldemort snorted. "Don't be so melodramatic."

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"General! I wasn't expecting you," the young sergeant said, then remembered himself, and stepped briskly into a salute.

"That is the thing about surprise inspections, they're a surprise. At ease," Lucius said with wave of his hand. They were in London headquarters, set in a courtyard surrounded on all sides by high walls. Some fifty wizards and witches (one barely distinguishable from the other in their unisex uniforms) practiced drills, learning to move together fluidly and break apart fluidly and come back together again. "I wanted to see how the advance guard is progressing."

“Very good, sir,” he said, and gestured out onto the courtyard. “Their running drills now on how to keep organized even when they have to duck and cover. We suspect it will be good practice when we're fighting in actual cities.”

Lucius nodded and watched the drill for a while, noting the ease of their movements, the coordination. This was very unlike the days when he was a Death Eater, where every man and woman was in it for themselves and if you lived or died it was do to your own ability and not the ability of your partner.

He would always prefer the old method better, but for simple common stock like this, thoughtlessly obeying the command of the superior intellect of the group was probably best.

“Very good. But put them through narrow obstacle courses. There are a lot of narrow streets in the old cities.”

The Sergeant saluted. “Yes, sir!”

Lucius walked away, he still had twelve other units he wanted to inspect and then he would have to prepare for a holiday party at one of his associates' home. Gilderoy Lockhart, was not by any means one of Lucius' favorite people, but what he lacked in intelligence, wit, and insight, he made up for in usefulness and unquestioning self importance. The man was a fool, but he was a handsome fool who looked good in a uniform and could quite charmingly convince most other fools that the military might some how make them equally good looking and successful. Lockhart was at the heart of the Brass Cult recruitment campaign, which so far had been widely successful, and Lucius was willing to put up with a few hours of his company every couple of weeks if he kept the ranks full and the public admiring.

With nothing more concerning than controlling his temper long enough not to strangle his future host, he made his way to his next stop, not realizing he carried on him a hidden passenger who was carefully taking note of everything seen and heard for an enemy that wasn't yet an enemy. And his little observer was gathering enough information to expose the resources and training of every level of

command of Britain's forces from its chief commander to the lowliest recruit.

And if Germany had its way, it would be having a nice long chat with Lucius' BUG very soon.

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"You really should know better," Voldemort said as Victoria drove them away from the now empty clearing. Morgan was not with them, and really Harry wished the Dark Lord wasn't there either at the moment. He was angry and disgusted and scared by everything that had happened, and wanted nothing more than to be alone and somewhere he felt safe. Voldemort wasn't being at all helpful. "I can't have you acting defiantly in front of my Sentinels. It sends the wrong message. If a child could get away with such arrogance, then they would assume they could as well. It would get tedious correcting them all one-by-one."

"Mm."

There was a long silence, and Harry kept his eyes glued to the window, hoping that was the end of their conversation.

"You can't stay mad at me forever."

"Maybe not, but I'm sure I can for more than fifteen minutes," he snipped, still not looking at him.

"Touché. But when the heat of the moment has cooled, I hope you will understand that everything that happened here was necessary."

"When the heat of the moment has cooled, then so will Ulaithur's corpse and I will have yet another thing to hate you for."

"He tried to kill you. He tried to kill your friends, and I guarantee he felt no regret for that. You saw how quickly he killed that Sentinel, yet I hear no outrage for his demise. That man may also have had a wife and child, parents and siblings, friends and neighbors."

Harry grit his teeth. "I know that, but we shouldn't have ever come here. This isn't our territory. We started the fight, and then we got angry when they fought back? It's arrogant and stupid, and you're so damn intent on making sure it looks good that you don't even care about that. You don't care about those centaurs, or about Diggory or that Sentinel. It's just a twisted game to you, and you've dragged me into it."

"Ah," Voldemort said, as if he understood, but Harry doubted that he really did. Chances were he was incapable of that sort of empathy. It wasn't even his fault. Harry had seen his soul before, seen how magic held it together, and knew certain parts of it were still missing. Parts that would make it impossible for him to understand the full range of human emotions or bond in the same way others did. It was sad, but right now all Harry felt was resentment and frustration. He was too angry for pity right now. They rode the rest of the way to the castle in silence, but when the car finally pulled up the keep, Voldemort spoke again.

"I know this all must seem unbearably cruel to you, but I assure you in the scheme of things it is best for Britain. To rule this land, I was made to be able to make these decision which someone of a kinder disposition would find spiritually crippling. You understand better than anyone that this is my purpose, handed down to me from the Earth herself. I am not going to change. Not for you or anyone else. I am incapable. You understand that as well. However, you also have a destiny, and it is linked to mine, how pleasantly or painfully that destiny unravels itself will depend greatly on your ability to overlook the more savage aspects of my rule and appreciate the generosity I can and do extend to you. I do not expect you not to be angry, but I do expect you accept me as I am and to obey me as your ruler and your teacher."

Harry listened as the car door was opened on the other side and then shut. A moment later, Victoria opened his door and Voldemort was standing right in front of it, staring down at him with his cold red eyes. The Dark Lord extend his hand to Harry, leaving the Gryffindor to make his decision then and there.

Harry stared blankly at it for a long time, weighing his choices and what they would represent now and in the future. In the end, he really didn't see any other option. He reached out and accepted his hand. Voldemort's hand closed around his, and Harry jerked away instinctively, but could no longer break free. He was firmly, but carefully, pulled from the car.

"A wise choice. Come, I have a bit of generosity to extend in lieu of my cruelty."

Voldemort walked him into the castle, still gripping his hand. Harry struggled after him, his stride shorter and still weak from the crucio and his own turbulent emotions. There were not a lot of people in the halls, but the few that were stared at them shamelessly as they passed, more than a little baffled. He felt his ears burn and tried to take back his hand, but the Dark Lord wouldn't let go.

They finally arrived at the office, where Voldemort released him and walked over to his desk. On top of it was a chest, about the size of Harry's school trunk, made of dark lacquered wood and decorated with glyphs and runes in solid gold. Voldemort ran his hand over the top of the box, closed his eyes and sighed, then looked to Harry.

"Do you know what is inside here."

Should I? Harry wanted to snap, but settled for shaking his head.

"The heart of the dragon, whole and perfect. A vessel of undiluted power just waiting to be opened, which is your right as the the one who slew it."

Harry couldn't think of what to say, it was too unexpected after everything else. It was a generous gift indeed as a dragon's heart was worth well over five hundred gallons, but one earned through killing. He didn't know how he should feel about it. He was too filled with emotion over other things.

"I... thank you," he tried uncertainly, "But how... what am I to do with it... precisely?"

Voldemort sighed, a bit disappointed by his apprentice's lack of excitement.

"A small part of it, you will eat, raw. It is good for the health of your heart, lungs, and liver and it is said to extend one's health by twenty years. It also helps to strengthen your magical core. The rest of it you will use as a sacrifice to the god or goddess of your choice, to gain both their favor and their protection. Choose wisely, and you may be granted the ability to push aside your moon madness and protect yourself against the malignant magics of spirits and fae."

Harry's eyes widened. Oh, bollocks! He hadn't a clue which deity to choose! He had been so busy with other things, he'd barely skimmed a few pages of The Book of a Thousand Gods. Voldemort took one look at him and seemed to understand. He sighed.

"It seems you work best when under pressure. You have until the Winter Solstice to pick your god and prepare your altar. Teacher Brennan will assist you in the actual ritual, as I will be Ireland. Go. You haven't much time."

Harry left, but once free of the office he collapsed to his knees, and found himself shaking uncontrollably. His heart began to pound and his breathing became erratic.

Too much, too much. Too much to handle now at this moment. Too much blood on his hands, too many mistakes, too many decisions. He couldn't breathe. He could only sit there, leaning against the wall, trying not to faint as his world began crushing down on him.

Merlin, he was going to die from thinking too much.

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In case, you're wondering, Hermione can't kiss Viktor on the mouth due to a Chastity Contract. Snape mentioned it before. If she did kiss Viktor, he'd have the rather unpleasant experience of a severe rash... on and in his mouth. It's a method to discourage rape as well as consensual infidelity and underage sex and 'snogging'.

A wizarding world movie star, yes they have movies although not as prevalent as with muggles, who specializes in action films. Like Jet Li, Jean Claude Van Dame, or Arnold Schwarzenegger in the muggle world. Imagine any of these people playing in the Triwizard Tournament. I did and kept laughing all day at random moments.

Book IV:

Chapter 16: Treason

"Relax," McGunny said, appearing out of nowhere to sit beside Harry. He pushed him further against the wall for more support. "You are having a panic attack. Cup your hands over your mouth and breath slowly."

Harry did as he said, but he felt even more smothered than before and almost immediately pulled his hands away again. McGunny grabbed his hands and put them back.

"You're hyperventilating. You have too much oxygen not too little. Keep them there."

This time he did as he was told, the older boy's authoritative voice was so much easier to follow than his own hopelessly scattered thoughts. It helped that he kept commanding him, 'Breathe slower', 'Look at me', 'You'll be fine in a minute'. And gradually, he could breathe on his own again, his limbs still trembled but he could think clearly. Which meant he realized how ridiculous he was acting.

"Don't..." he tried, but his throat closed up on him and he looked away.

"Don't what?" McGunny asked, his voice still as commanding as before.

"Don't tell anyone... please."

"... You should at least see the nurse. This could happen again."

"No! She'll tell... if it's about me, she'll tell Voldemort or Snape, and I can't... I can't be..."

"Calm down, you're going to give yourself another fit. I won't tell any one. I promise."

Harry nodded his thanks, and slowly got to his feet. McGunny kept a hand on his arm to hold him steady but let go when Harry moved

away from him. His thoughts began to organize themselves, and he realized there was something wrong with the situation.

“What are you doing here?”

“I heard Voldemort had come and got you and that you came back looking ill. I was worried. Something bad happened, didn't it?”

Harry looked away. “Yeah.”

“Come on, we both better get out of here.”

They walked away, heading no where in particular but taking the least used route to do so.

“Do you want to talk about it?” McGunny said after awhile. Harry shook his head.

“Not right now... maybe after dinner I can...”

“We could talk about something else. Something that doesn't have anything to do with the tournament.”

“You mean, like for the biography?”

“Sure, maybe now would be a good time. You did promise me three sessions and it's been three weeks already.”

Harry ducked his head guiltily. It was true, he hadn't spared much time for McGunny, and as busy as the Ravenclaw seemed to be he hadn't felt rude in doing so. He was being polite, he had quite happily lied to himself. He really needed to stop doing that.

“Okay.”

They found themselves an empty classroom and transfigured some old desks into an overstuffed reading chair and a small sofa. Harry curled himself onto the sofa, while McGunny sat in the chair with the KeepSafe book and the magic quill. It smacked of muggled therapy,

but Harry was careful not to laugh. After the panic attack, McGunny would probably skip Madam Pomfrey and take him straight to St. Mungo's.

"Is there anything specific you would like to tell me about yourself or some event in your life?" McGunny began. Harry shook his head. He wouldn't even know where to begin. "Then you don't mind if I just start things off?"

Harry shook his head again.

"Alright. Would you tell me... what was life like before you knew you were a wizard?"

"Before I was...? I don't know what you mean."

"You lived in Germany for half your life, believing you weren't magical in the least. What was that like for you? What was school like? Were your parents close? Did you have any friends there?"

Harry thought for a moment. It had been a very long time since he had thought of his life in Germany, except for a few random moments of nostalgia when he visited the Durmstang students or when Christmas rolled around.

"I was happy. I lived in Cologne with both my parents, in this tiny little studio, and we didn't have car so we had to walked everywhere."

"What was the studio like?"

"We used curtains in the place of walls so there wasn't any privacy for anything except the bathroom which was minuscule. And we had big, big windows, like warehouses sometimes have, to let in light. That's why they say they got the place. All that light to do their art in, and a view of the entire neighborhood..."

Once he got started, Harry found he couldn't stop, the memories came out in perfect detail. He talked about the noise from the little cars honking at each other as they passed on too narrow streets, the daily drama of Claudia, the neighbor next door who had more lovers

than she had common sense, and how the planes rattled the entire studio when they flew overhead.

He talked of the walks to school, his mother's hand in his, and walks to the market and to the park and to the museums and to tiny little stores where everything is made by hand right in front of you. He talked about his father's inability to follow a manual and the half a dozen mishaps with the kitchen sink, Harry's first bike, and the cassette player.

He talked about football games, school plays, sledding, his first and last goldfish, art lessons, and a dozen other tiny things, of places seen, of lessons learned, and the inexplicable moments that just stuck with him. And when he had run out of things to talk about before it all ended in a moment of pointless violence, he just sort of trailed off. He looked to McGunny, who was leaning on one arm, just looking at him, smiling a bit amusedly.

"For someone who didn't think he'd get anything out of this, you certainly displayed a lot of enthusiasm."

Harry turned away, pulling out his watch to hide his embarrassment. "How long have I been talking?"

He read his watch and gaped.

"Impossible."

"Isn't that your specialty?"

"I'm sorry. I promised you an interview and all I did was rambling about nothing."

"Quite the contrary, you paint a beautiful and vivid picture. You must have loved that place very much."

Harry nodded, smiling a bit as he recalled it. Life wasn't perfect, but looking back on it, it was the happiest and most care free time of his life. He hadn't been special to anyone but his parents, who were the only people who really matter at the time, and acts of heroism were

acted out with swords made from cardboard and the dragons were dangerous only in his imagination.

"Do you think you would ever like to return there?" McGunny asked.

"To Cologne?" Harry asked.

"Yes, to Germany in general perhaps."

"Maybe... yes. I want to return someday. I've wondered what it's like now. The studio would be gone, the Dursley's sold it, but the neighborhood probably isn't that different. I'd like to lay some flowers on my parents' graves, at the very least."

"Maybe you'll have the chance here soon. Relations between Germany and Britain seem to have improved over the last year."

"I hope so. I really do."

He let out a yawn, and rubbed his eyes. He was tired, physically and emotionally. The interview had served as a good distraction, but he needed to rest. He had exams tomorrow and essays, but there was no point in doing them when he knew he wouldn't remember a single thing and truthfully it seemed pretty trivial in comparison with other things he had to deal with. This once, he would let it go and hope for the best.

"I'm going to bed."

McGunny nodded. "That is a good idea." He snatched the enchanted quill from the page, where it had continue to write everything they were saying, and closed the book. "Here." He handed the book to him, which Harry accepted. It was surprisingly lite, but still sturdy in his hands.

"Thanks for... well, everything pretty much covers it."

The Ravenclaw gave him a business-like smile. "Think of it as a down payment."

"I'd rather think of it as you being my friend."

McGunny blinked at him, stunned. Friend? So suddenly? It wasn't something Harry had ever offered lightly. Those few he had, he kept close, but no one could figure out how he chose them. McGunny had secretly hoped for it, but hadn't counted on it. After all, he had approached him not as a friend but as a scholar. But that was Harry. How he chose his friendships and his loyalties was as strange and mysterious as everything else about him.

"I... I would like that."

The younger boy nodded. "Goodnight then. And good luck with exams* tomorrow."

"You as well."

And Harry left for Gryffindor tower, while McGunny sat there and ruminated over what had just happened. A delightful turn of events, and he would be enjoying it immensely if it weren't for his god awful headache.

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"You are excused from exams, Mr. Potter," Professor Vector said, handing him a hall pass. Everyone turned to him, but none were as surprised as Harry himself.

"What?"

"As the new school champion you are exempt from exams. No one told you?"

Harry's expression clearly said that no one had, and a few people broke out into snickers, even as other glared at him jealously. The announcement had been made during dinner the previous night, but he had missed it, talking with McGunny and was rather glad that he had. It was bad enough trying get to his bed with his entire house congratulating him and cheering him and just generally sucking out all

the energy he had left in him. Hermione, his angel, had been the one to send the Weasley twins, his devils, to escort him to his dorm. He couldn't remember what happened after he'd collapsed onto his bed, but his boots were by his trunk, his glasses on his bedside table, and a blanket had been thrown over him when Clyde woke him up the next morning.

"Well, you can always take the exam if you want to," Vector offered cheerfully, causing even more giggles.

"Er... no thanks."

"That's what I thought. Here's your hall pass, though I doubt anyone is going to stop you. Enjoy the day."

"... while you still can," someone called from the back, and everyone laughed, except of course for Hermione.

"That isn't funny!"

It sort of was, Harry thought, in macabre sort of way. He shrugged it off, took his pass, gathered his things, and headed towards the library. This was one thing off the list of a hundred and twenty-seven he didn't have to worry about, and he wasn't going to question it. He still had the other hundred and twenty-six things left to do.

At the library, he received yet another surprise from Madam Pince. As he entered, she looked up from a stack of books she was checking back in as if she were expecting him.

"Headmistress Lestrage sent your pass already. I just need you to read and sign the Risks and Responsibilities form and I can give you a key."

"I'm sorry?"

She looked him for a long moment, to see if he was being intentionally daft.

"No one told you?"

"It seems to have slipped everyone's mind. Now, what are you talking about?"

"You've been granted access to the Restricted Section."

"Oh."

The day was just full of surprises, and not knowing what to do about it at the moment, he decide to leave it be. He accepted the release form to go over later, and went in search of comfortable place to read. It didn't take long, as there was no one to compete with for seating. He settled in an overstuffed chair in direct sunlight, brought out The Book of a Thousand Gods from his bag, and started where he had left off. Exactly two pages from where he had started. Each god had exactly one page dedicated to them, which made his current progress rather sad.

A'achua. Goddess of Butterflies.

No.

Ababanon. God of Elm Trees.

Eh.

Adsullata. Goddess of Underground Springs.

Better. Slightly. Kind of.

Five pages done. Only nine hundred and ninety-five to go. He let out a huff. He should have taken that stupid Arithmancy exam.

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He was woken from a deep slumber by a hand gently shaking his shoulder, and he blinked blearily up at McGonagall who was looking at him with more than a little amusement. He looked at his lap to see how far he had gotten.

Cait'wain. God of Adolescent Girls.

God? What was He doing with all those adolescent girls?

"Sorry to disturb you, but you have visitors," the Transfiguration teacher said. This sounded rather dubious to Harry, and he must not have hidden his thoughts well enough for she noticed. "I think you'll like these ones. I promise no one from the press will be stepping into this castle any time soon."

"Then who? I don't really know a lot of people outside of the castle," he said, putting away his book. With any luck his visitors would turn into an adequate distraction.

"I am not entirely sure who they are, but since they are a part of your approved mailing list I assume you are on good terms with them. Their last names are Reicher, two men and two young girls."

Harry nearly dropped his bag. This was a surprise! He certainly wasn't expecting them to travel all the way from London to Scotland just to say hi.

"Perhaps you would like to get out of the castle for a while, and go down to Hogsmeade for lunch," she offered.

"Can I? I mean, it isn't even a Hogsmeade weekend..."

She gave a dismissive shrug. "You'll be under the supervision of two adults." There was a lot about the situation that made him think she was breaking at least half a dozen rules for him, and he was reminded that she was in fact a Gryffindor, and not just his teacher.

The Reichers had been placed in a room near the castle entrance designated as a waiting room, with lots of stuffy chairs, extra portraits, twenty year old magazines, and a few children's toys that Alyssa and Morgana were happily ignoring in favor of pestering their fathers about castles and Harry and dragons. They ran up to him the moment he arrived, and surprised him by stopping to curtsy before they

jumped all over him. He shook hands with Robert and Kyle, made small pleasantries, and then conceded to the girl's pleas to go out.

"Please, tell us about the dragon! Was it scary? Did it breath fire at you?" Morgana asked as they took to the road. It was sunny, without wind, and unusually warm still so they had all agreed to walk to Hogsmeade, hoping it would take away some of the girls' excess energy.

"Yes. Very scary. She blew fire all over the place. Set part of the castle on fire," Harry said idly. "Her tail was worse though. Covered in spines and one swing could have sent an elephant flying."

This unexpected detail set off a whole new set of fantasies and set off after Alyssa, who squealed and ran ahead to escape her. When they were far enough away, Robert set his hand on his shoulder to gain his attention.

"Are you alright?"

Harry gave him a wry smile. "Yes. Why? Did I lose a limb and everyone neglect to mention it to me?" He made a show of counting all his fingers and touching his ears and nose to make sure everything was still there. Kyle bopped him upside the head.

"That's not what we meant. It's hard to believe, I know, but lawyers and even their dashing assistants, know a thing or two about people put into extremely stressful situations. It can cause problems that have nothing to do with the body."

Harry thought about his panic attack and the latest rounds of nightmares robbing him of sleep, but didn't see the point in telling them about it. What could they do? They weren't psychologists, and after today who knew when he would see them again? In any event, they weren't ready to hear about the centaurs or his religious quandaries.

"Don't worry about it. I've already talked with the school councilor. They're making sure I don't go crazy."

Of course, the school didn't actually have a councilor but they didn't need to know that. He was talking to McGunny who seemed to have some inkling of what he was doing. Push came to shove, he could talk to Pomfrey and get some calming draughts and anti-anxiety potions. Come to think of it, he could probably make those himself.

"That's good," Robert said skeptically. "But if you need to talk..."

"I'll show up on your doorstep completely unannounced. I promise."

"We'll hold you to that," Kyle said, and that was the end of the conversation, because Alyssa had run back to them and jumped into Harry's arms for protection. He hefted her onto his back and pulled out an imaginary sword and pointed it at Morgana, who was still growling and roaring at them like a dragon.

"Cease, foul beast!" Harry cried out dramatically, "Thou shalt not harm thy fair damsel!"

He charged after her and Morgana turned and ran away, laughing while Alyssa giggled into his ear. The trip to Hogsmeade was a pleasant change of routine. The entire village was decked out in Christmas decorations, and with the new dormitories and houses there were many more people and many more decorations and festivities than usual. Dozens of people stopped to wave hello to Harry, including Ambassador Schwartzmann, who was taking a stroll, and a Sentinel, who asked for his autograph. No one seemed to quite know what to make of Harry's companions, but since they seemed to be there by Harry's own inclination, no one questioned them.

The Three Broomsticks was busy, but Madam Rosemerta got them all a seat immediately and was at her most charming, going so far as to give them all some complimentary chocolate mint cookies and a free round of drinks. It was vaguely awkward for Harry, but Robert and Kyle made jokes about similar incidents they'd had while working for loftier clients, and some of their stories were down right hilarious.

They talked and talked, and when food arrived they talked between bites of foods (and in Harry's case used his potpie as a handy demonstration of basic dissection techniques that would come in

handy in potion's class, which Morgana and Alyssa were less than pleased to discover was even worse than they had heard), and talked some more, ordered a round of drinks, talked, took turns to the loo, ordered desert, talked more quietly as the girls began to nod off, and finally said their goodbyes in whispered tones as Robert and Kyle hoisted up one daughter each and made their way to the floo. Harry checked his watch and found they had spent almost four hours together.

He made his way back to the castle, feeling a sense of privilege being welcomed to spend the afternoon in the company of a family so thoroughly loved by one another that all the complimentary cookies and handshakes in the world would never compare to it. His thoughts turned to Voldemort, as they frequently did lately, and he felt a strange mix of anger and pity. The Dark Lord did not care about people like the Reichers, and would as casually and callously have destroyed them as he did Ulaithur and his family. The reason for that was because he was missing a part of himself that allowed him to empathize or even appreciate the special bonds that composed any relationship that wasn't steeped in personal ambition.

Voldemort was an incomplete being.

This conclusion struck him suddenly and powerfully, dancing around in his head as he made his way back to the castle alone.

He's incomplete.

Incomplete.

What was he missing? Why? How? And it stuck with him for several minutes before it made a sudden leap to the real question he needed to be asking himself.

What did he need to do to make him complete?

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Viktor found McGunny after semester exams were over. It wasn't the Durmstang champion's way of being considerate of the other boy's academic pursuits, but merely the longest he could delay giving him an answer. He didn't know if McGunny was taking the train home like almost everybody else or not, and two weeks was pushing his luck if he were.

"For a spy, you really aren't very discreet. Anyone could have seen you there and wondered what you were up to," McGunny said as Viktor stepped out from behind a pillar. The champion didn't dignify him with a reply.

"I have spoken with him. He is willing to help... if you can prove dat help is necessary. Dat shouldn't be difficult for someone with your supposed skill."

McGunny's expression was bland. He wasn't rising to meet his antagonism. "It won't be. His medical records should have more than enough evidence to prove abuse and extreme personal danger. Pomfrey's filling cabinet is no Gringotts."

Viktor didn't recognize the reference, but he got the point.

"Even dough I say he'll help... I zink I should add he'll only help if it doesn't interfere with da prime directive. Ve're not here to start a fight, believe it or not."

McGunny's expression remained bland, but Viktor didn't think he believed him.

"I understand. It shouldn't take long for the Dark Lord's true intentions to rear their ugly heads."

"And vat are you going to do now? He has offered to help you as vell, if you vant it."

The Ravenclaw shook his head. "I'm not Potter. I have family here vulnerable to the Dark Lord if my treason is discovered. Once I give you the proof you need, we will not speak of this again. I'm leaving it in your hands."

Viktor nodded. That he could understand, and it made his complete manipulation of Viktor and his country somewhat more forgivable. They walked away from each other, neither looking back.

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“What a horrifying and fabulous idea.”

Harry sat across the fire from Brennan, their handmade lodge was almost half a mile from the castle and a few extra silencing spells insured their privacy. He clutched The Book of a Thousand Gods, anxiously waiting for the man's answer. The idea he had formed on the road remained firmly planted in his mind, and no amount of distraction, be it friends, homework, or his many troubles were enough to dislodge it for even a moment. Even the many known and unknown dangers that surrounded it, dangers to himself and to others, could make abandon the thought.

“Is it possible?” he asked the old man. “Is there any way?”

“If you are looking for a specific ritual, then no. If you're looking for a specific god, I know just the one. Here, give me the book.”

Harry came around the fire, and sat beside him, handing him the book. Brennan opened it and flipped through it briefly before settling on one page. He pointed out a name and handed it back to him.

“Her. She is the one you need.”

Harry read, and the more he read the more confused he became. He looked up at Brennan.

“I don't understand... how can She help?”

“She is one of the very strongest goddesses you will ever encounter, and She is far less likely to do you wrong than Her male counterpart. If She cannot help you Herself, than there will be some other god or goddess in Her retinue that can.”

"But there is no ritual..."

"The ritual can be created by anyone, so long as it incorporates the four basic elements of a ritual. The Protection, simply put the preparation needed to protect the supplicant from disruption by human or inhuman interference, the Call, the part of the ritual designated to gain the attention of the specific god or goddess and make it known that your offering is dedicated to them only, the Sacrifice or Offering, which is self explanatory, and the Request, which should also be fairly obvious. It would not be difficult to do this, but whether She would accept your request is the problem."

"You don't think the dragon's heart will be enough?"

"More than enough, but even She can not defy the Earth. If the Earth will not allow it, it cannot be done."

"And the Earth would not allow this..."

Brennan let out a sad little laugh, and lifted his hands in supplication to some unseen thing. "She may. For all we know, this idea is really Her idea, and we are therefore obligated to carry it out."

"Is there any way to know?" the Gryffindor asked, feeling his frustration and uncertainty mounting. He had come to Brennan because he had to. He had neither the skill nor the knowledge to carry out this task on his own, but rather than simplifying matters, the old man only seemed to complicate them.

"She will find a means to stop us if we are in the wrong. The ritual will fail. An interruption will occur. There will be some sort of sign."

Harry nodded, and they fell into a long silence, staring into the fire together.

"There are other dangers," Harry said at last. "If we're discovered... what we intend to do to him would be considered an attack on Britain's ruler. Treason, whether we succeed or not. They won't simply throw us to the werewolves."

"Torture," Brennan agreed, "Then death if we're lucky, Askaban if we're not. If this works, I will consider it well worth the price, but I am an old man, and my time in this body is limited. You on the other hand, have your entire life ahead of you. A future that is bright and full of promise."

Harry shook his head. "Not if things stay as they are... Voldemort... he'll... I don't know. I just feel like if he continues as he has... I'll go completely mad. I'm part way there already."

A comforting hand landed on his shoulder, and Brennan gave him a reassuring smile.

"I will help you, and am most honored to be allowed the opportunity. I will do some research tonight and complete an outline for the ritual. Come back tomorrow after the other students have boarded the train, and we can begin a protection circle and gather supplies for the altar. If anyone asks who you picked try not to answer, but if pushed tell them you have selected Condatis, a powerful water god."

Harry nodded. A course had been set, and now there was nothing to do but let it carry him along. He should have felt relieved, but he felt even more anxious than before. Was he wrong? Did it matter? This was self preservation at its most bizarre.

Weakly, he thanked Brennan, and left the lodge. The sky had turned gray, and the days were settling back into winter, cold and dreary. He stood for a long time just outside of the door, always just hair's breadth from turning back and telling Brennan he had changed his mind. A sudden icy wind enveloped him, causing him to cringe and pull up the hood of his cloak. The wind didn't die down, and he found himself making a sprint for the castle and the shelter it provided.

It wasn't until he was safely and warmly inside, that he realized he could have more easily just have turned around and gone back inside the lodge. He hadn't thought of that though. Hadn't thought of turning back to find sanctuary, rather he had gone forward.

Perhaps that was the sign Brennan had been talking about.

Or maybe it was an ill portent of things to come.

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“Ooh.”

“Dare I ask?”

“Don't worry, I will not make you buy it for me,” Fleur reassured him, smiling mischievously. They were making their way through the upper class section of one of London's finer shopping districts, on a 'not-date', filling their Christmas shopping list quota. She had been given permission to visit London for a day on the condition that she took someone who knew the city so she wouldn't get lost. Bill had been handily available. He had gotten what he needed within the first hour and between two shops, but Fleur viewed shopping as a cultural immersion and would not be rushed.

They visited bakeries, novelty shops, antique shops, clothing stores, sporting goods stores, a weapon's smith, two galleries, and where now passing through a street dedicated solely to jewelry. The one that had caught her eye specialized in restored jewelry five hundred years or older, and their display was quite impressive. Manikins dressed as princesses and pagan warriors adorned in massive pieces of golden jewelry, Celtic knots, ancient crests, and ancient scenes of hunts and battles, wound their way around bodies in regal sophistication which would otherwise seem garish by modern fashion.

“It iz funny,” Fleur said, “Paris is considered ze 'ight of fashion nowadays, but I would give my left foot for any one of zese pieces.”

“I think they'd settle for half your bank account,” Bill laughed. “I know these people. I worked to remove curses on their stuff before. They fund university expeditions to Ireland and Scotland to unearth old burial mounds, and rob the dead. The universities keep the corpses and pottery, but they get to keep anything really valuable.”

“Zat iz awful.”

“Yeah, but I doubt they'll be in business much longer. The Dark Lord is already proposing a ban on the practice.”

“No, I mean zat it iz awful zat you would burst my romantic bubble. You are a boor.”

Bill looked scandalized.

“Moi? A bore? Well excuse me, but it's harder than is sounds rustling up dragons and centaur assassination plots. They're all very busy during the holiday season you know. We had to book the last ones six months in advance!”

She giggled, and wrapped herself around his arm. They continued down the street until the jewelry stores gave way to more novel stores, like the rare plants store and an exotic apparel shop. They wandered into a rare books store, and were greeted by what appeared to be a librarian who had more money than fashion sense.

“Welcome, welcome! I am Bernard Wittlesmith, the owner of this establishment,” he greeted them, removing his purple artist's cap from his bald head. “Now which of you is interested in purchasing a book?”

Bill shrugged and gestured towards Fleur. He honestly didn't know why she had chosen this particular shop. There were several other book stores they had skipped altogether with a wider selection and probably cheaper prices as well, but then she probably had a lot more experience with fancier shops like these than he did.

“I was 'oping you 'ad some books on 'Ogwarts,” she said, smiling at him in her most charming way. “And perhaps ze Forbidden Forest.”

“Ah! You must be Fleur Delacour! I have read about your exploits in the paper. It is an honor to meet you,” he exclaimed happily, and reached out to shake her hand.

“You are too kind.”

“Not at all. Please wait here just a moment, I have just the book for you!”

He scuttled off and disappeared behind a row of shelves. He hummed to himself as he went, and when his humming was no longer audible, they both turned to each other. Bill was annoyed.

“Isn't it the customer's decision what they buy?”

She shrugged. She was used to strange shop owners. The best shops tended to have eccentrics running them, and it was often best to let them do what they did. They had a special magic of their own that could not be understood by anyone else.

Ten minutes later, Wittlesmith returned with not one, but two books. He handed the smaller one to her first. It was dark purple and titled in gold print. It wasn't about Hogwarts or the Forbidden Forest, instead it seemed to be about...

“The Fall of the British Monarchy'?”

“Excellent book. It has a little of everything. Ambitious men and women, knights and princesses and nobodies turned somebodies, love, betrayal, honor, battles, political intrigue, prophecy... just lots and lots of things. You'll love it.”

“Hmm...” She admitted, she was intrigued. It helped that when she opened it, the first things she saw was a young woman, a Queen it appeared, dressed in armor and carrying a sword. She looked back at him. “I'll take it. What about zat other one?”

“This one? This one I would like to ask you to deliver to Mr. Harold James Potter. I'll give you a ten percent discount on your book if you do.”

“He ordered a book from here?” Bill asked, immediately suspicious.

“If I wanted to take orders I would have become an employee rather than an owner. I don't do orders. I tried to send this book out to him

months ago, but it kept being returned without being received. Security measures, I suppose.”

Bill's suspicions rose considerably. “They are there for a reason and we're not going to go around them for someone we don't know anything about.”

“Yes, yes, that's all very practical. But this is important. He needs this book.”

“Let me examine it first,” Bill said, holding out his hand. Wittlesmith looked reluctant, but as he realized this was the only way to get what he wanted, he relinquished the book. Twenty-three spells later, even the eldest Weasley child had to admit it appeared nothing more than a very simple albeit boring book. The bookkeeper, seeing that he was finally done, snatched it back, and all but hissed at him, then gave it to Fleur. She looked it over.

“‘Encyclopedia of Centaurian Prophecy Techniques and Philosophies: Volume 3 The Celestial Naming System.’ What about volume 1 and 2?”

“He doesn't require volume 1 and 2. Only 3. Now then, if you'll come with me, you can pay and I can wrap up your parcels.”

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For all the anguish filled days that crawled by, the arrival of the Solstice seemed to come out of nowhere for Harry. Excused from exams, he had more time to himself and his thoughts than he was comfortable with, and when at last he reunited with his friends at mealtimes and the end of the day, he couldn't push away his pointless worrying. This seemed to make his friends worry about him, and he had guilt to deal with as well.

There was a distance forming between them, particularly he and Hermione, and it had been for quite some time he realized. Where once they would have spent hours talking to each other or going on small adventures, now there were long silences and forced smiles.

Harry grieved it, but he didn't have enough of himself left to spare to re-affirm it. Not enough time. Not enough energy. If things turned ugly after tonight it would all be pointless anyway. She had made him promise to talk to her when she came back from the holidays, but didn't honestly know if what he could or even should tell her when she did.

McGunny was starting to take over her role, and that was frightening, because as much as he liked the boy, he didn't trust him or care for him like he did her. They had another interview after coming back from seeing their classmates off at the Hogwart's express. Harry had skipped over the death of his parents, still not ready to face that, and his life with his relatives, that was too humiliating in many ways, and went right to the night he had come back to the Dursley's and found Snape waiting for him and his stay at WYRA. He had dug out his first wizarding book for the occasion, the pages between filled with sketches of those boys he had met. The sketches weren't nearly as good as he remembered them, but they did bring to mind those days of disorientation as he adjusted to the idea of being a wizard.

He felt as disoriented now as he had then. His world was shifting, but he didn't know how or in what ways it would change. Forward was the only way to go, and he marched with the determination of a soldier to the lodge house, where Brennan was waiting for him.

The previous day they had laid down the wards that would protect them, runes painted in a mixture of ashes and wine on the walls, and burned sage in the fire pit, which left the entire place uniquely fragrant. That morning he had gone into the woods to cut down a young holly tree that had been bent and broken by the harsh winter wind and the weight of too much snow, and brought back the pieces to build an altar Brennan used his magic to weave the goddess' special symbol, a bull and a dog bowing to each other, into a swatch of cloth, so that the bright gold thread shown clearly against the green silk.

When he walked through the door at sunset, it looked completely unfamiliar. He remembered the runes, and the beginnings of the altar, but the atmosphere was different. The altar had been completed, the silk cloth laid over the holly shrine, a bushel of wheat, a scattering of apples, and some walnuts, had been strung around it in a circle, and

there were pitchers of milk, wine, and honey on the right. A sword, a scythe, and spear rested on the left. The fire in the pit was enormous, and if it weren't for magic it would have set the entire place on fire. The chest containing the dragon's heart rested on top of the altar.

Brennan was dressed in robes of white with no shoes, a staff similar to the one he had seen Voldemort carry to the werewolf colony was in his hand, and a line of ash was smeared across his forehead. They looked to one another briefly, but nothing was said. They both knew their parts.

Harry removed his shoes, socks, and cloak and set them aside. The fire insured it was warm enough for him not to be cold, but even a little too warm. Brennan stood by the altar, a bowl in his hand, and when Harry approached him, he dipped his thumb into it, took it out, and ran a line across his boy's forehead. Harry could feel and smell the ash against his skin.

"Are you ready, my Pupil?"

No, he wasn't. He would never be ready for this. Not in a thousand years. But his tongue spoke the opposite of what his mind was screaming.

"Yes."

Brennan stepped back, and he stepped forward, then knelt before the altar, closed his eyes and began to pray.

"Madris*, Goddess of the Scythe, of the Field, of the Chalice and the Blade*, I call to you and beg thy indulgence..."

He continued on for several minutes, calling out Madris' many names and euphemism, praising her, cajoling her, begging her attention. Slowly, the air began to thicken with magic. The fire grew larger, roaring like a lion and turned bright yellow with licks of blue. The urns holding the wine, milk, and honey burst, and the walnuts all snapped open like popping corn.

He had Her attention.

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Voldemort stood at the peak of the hill, staring down into the glen where Druids in white robes gathered to perform their sacred rites by torchlight. He was not welcome there, and in his way he respected them, so he did not demand it. They were not honoring the gods or goddess that were his patrons anyway.

He turned back to the hill, where a horde of fae were already celebrating, dancing and drunk, and chasing their females in and out of the invisible hollows. They were not his folk, but they were mediums to those he honored, so he tolerated their antics as they mucked about the shrines he had created, eating and drinking the offerings.

They offered him their own drinks, winter wine and winter meade, smelling sweet and warm and he was tempted. They offered him their food, spiced apples, honey glazed meat, breads soft and hot and he was tempted. Women, naked and pale as death, touches his cheek with blue tinted finger tips, chilling his skin and boiling his blood and he was tempted. Hobgoblins, the wild kin of the more familiar banking goblins, offered him weapons the likes of which would put Gryffindor's to shame and he was tempted.

Their purpose was to tempt him after all, but he wisely refrained from partaking of any of their offerings. He would become one of them, a fairy folk, bound to the ephemeral aspects of nature, vulgar and beautiful at once. They would make him a king, a general to their Oberon, or some master among the Unseelie Court if he let them, but his ambitions remained with wizards.

Gently, but sternly, he turned them all away, fixing the shrines and refilling the offerings with wave after wave of his wand. They would continue to destroy his shrines, but that was their right, and come morning the offerings they had tempted him with tonight would be left on the shrines, and he would gather them up without fear of becoming one of them. The food would not taste as good nor the drink, and the women would be gone altogether, but the weapons

and the other gifts would still be there, as powerful as ever and rightfully his.

“Do you feel Them stirring, Lord Wizard?” a nymph crooned in his ear, delicately touching his hair, his cheek, his lips. Her brilliant red hair stood out against her white skin like blood, her gray eyes were clouded with drink and desire, desire she directed solely at him. “Andraste and Toutatis and Ogmios* and Madris, all reaching out to you. Can you feel them touch you? Feel them touch you like I do?”

He smiled grimly, and took her hands, pulling them away. She was a delight, but not for him, and it was only her words he would allow himself to take interest in, not her desires.

“Who is Madris? Not one of mine,” he said, knowing the first three gods well, as they were some of those he had built his shrines to. The last one was not familiar to him, at least not by that name.

She scowled petulantly as he pulled her hands away, and was even more dissatisfied when her affections were turned aside for inquires. Like a spoiled child she pouted and retributed with sullen snappishness.

“Great sorcerer! Hah! Does not even know when a Goddess means to kill him! Great fool instead, me thinks!” she snarled and tore away from him. His strength was great, but hers was greater and she escaped. He went after her, to demand an explanation, but the crowd was thick and here no one moved aside for him.

He cursed under his breath and went in search of a crone.

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Harry had been in the presence of gods before, but each was unique. The Earth left him overwhelmed, open, and without boundaries. The Moon left him fearless, energetic, and uninhibited. The Storm God made him feel formless, pulled in by and a part of a great rush that could not be destroyed except by its own exhaustion.

Madris made him feel like a Master.

Master of what, he didn't entirely understand, but he felt an undeniable strength and protectiveness that was, as of yet, directed at no one and nothing. He felt the power to build up his world with his own hands, nurture it with perfect tenderness of a mother and protect it with a dragon's savagery. The self-doubt and confusion of the last few days melted away, leaving him with an absolute certainty that his course was true.

He opened the chest, and inside rested the dragon's heart, bloody and plump as if it had only been removed moments ago. The heart was still warm as he pulled it out, and he waited briefly, expectantly, to see if it wouldn't start beating in his hands. It did not move, but being nearly ten pounds and slippery, he was challenged enough keeping his grip. He carried it like an infant, cradled in his arms, towards the fire.

"Madris, Queen of a Hundred Gods, Ruler of the Hearth, I bring an offering of flesh and magic to honor thee. Please accept this tribute from your humble servant."

Taking the heart in both hands, he gently tossed it into the roaring fire. His hands were still stretched out to it when the magic dispersed into the air, igniting it all in blue flames. The force of it shoved the flames into his lungs, and threw him to the ground. Behind him, the shrine was set alight and Brennan let out a cry of surprised terror.

Harry laid on the floor, staring up at the dance of flames above him, watching it set the roof on fire. He, himself, felt little pain. The fire that touched his skin and filled him inside was like the touch of slightly too hot water, strangely pleasant and slightly painful at the same time. Slowly, he breathed out the magic, and with it came his wish, bathed with so much intention and passion that it could leave nothing to misinterpretation.

Consciousness began to slip away from him, but he kept his mind open long enough to sense the retreat of the goddess, bearing away the spell that would likely change his world forever.

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The crone he found wasn't as old or as ugly as he would have liked (the older and uglier a crone the wiser she was, at least when it came to the fae), being only a few centuries and having more than five teeth and both eyes, but she told him what he needed to know without the annoying tendency to speak in riddles first.

"Madris isn't coming to kill you. She just wants to give you something," she said, then took a bite of cheese he had given her in payment. It was sour, but that was the preferred flavor for those of her ilk.

Voldemort felt relieved. He doubted the Earth would allow him to die, but that didn't mean She wouldn't let him suffer. She did not coddle Her children, even those important to Her.

"A gift?" he asked, because sometimes gods gave him less pleasant things, like warnings or tasks or rotted gnome heads (although that last one could have just been a Goodfellow*, who despite their names really weren't very good at all).

She continued to chew her cheese slowly, savoring it, and didn't speak until she was done.

"Yes... of course, it will likely kill you, so I understand how Firwyne might have been confused."

He tried to ask what he was to be given and how to refuse it, but it was too late. A horde of new fairies suddenly landed in the clearing, signaling the arrival of their patroness, Madris, and though the other folk welcomed these new arrivals with much enthusiasm, Voldemort felt a deep sense of dread come over him.

The fairy horde split up, carrying their food and drink among their fellow revelers and playing their pipes and their strings to replace the drunken musicians, and as they scatter their goddess was revealed from the crowd. She was beautiful, as goddesses tended to be, but in an older more regal way than the fertility or love goddesses he was

more familiar with, with hair black as ink and skin darkened by sun, and draped all in a purple tunic with a sword strapped to her side. Beside Her stood a boy god, naked with a face the same as Hers, and a white hound with red ears leashed in His hand. Voldemort didn't know what to make of Her. She was not a nature goddess, no single element composed Her being, but he did not recognize Her from the pantheon of warrior gods and goddesses nor those associated with fertility.

She turned to him, and he rose to meet Her. There was no point in trying to run away. That was why She had brought the boy god with the dog. A spirit dog would find him anywhere. The boy would find the dog anywhere.

He bowed to her respectfully. She tilted Her head in acknowledgement.

"I have something for you," she said. Her voice was that of authority. Not military or social authority, but maternal authority. A Goddess of Mothers, maybe?

"Would you take offense if I refused it? I'm told this gift will likely kill me," he asked, trying to sound polite. Gods could be reasoned with more often than not, if one were respectful about it. As long as love or revenge wasn't involved at least.

"It doesn't matter," She said. "It is the dearest wish of one of my Children for you to have it."

She lifted her hand, and he stepped away. He found himself stopped by the boy child, His hand rested on his leg, cherubic face smiling sweetly at him even as He stole the use of his limbs. Madris' hand found his chest. Something wet and red was in Her hand and she gently pushed it into him.

His eyes widen. The thing She had shoved into him was beating, like a heart, but rather than blood it pumped magic, excruciatingly painful magic, tearing at his own magical core. He started to tremble, and when the boy god removed his hand, he fell to the ground. Gritting his teeth, he snarled out a call to his own gods, offering a reward of blood

if they would but pull out the poison She had sown, but none appeared. She was more powerful than Them, or perhaps They lacked Her skill. He had never offered prayer to a god of healing before.

He tried to expel it with his own magic, but the thing welcomed it, weaving itself into his power, making them one and the same, infecting him so thoroughly he would have to tear out all his own magic to be rid of it. Pointless, because then he would be dead anyway.

He clawed at his chest, where the pain was the sharpest, as if it were snapping a rib with every steady beat, but there was nothing to grab hold of. Then the blood came up, and he vomited it out onto the ground. Fairy folk, still quite happily enjoying themselves, skittered away but then moved back in to taunt him. This wouldn't have happened if he were one of them, they laughed and he was offered some wine. He lifted his head just long enough to spit blood into it, and snarl his defiance.

Their offer was useless now. He had already been infected with her wicked spell. He turned to her, to make her an offer, but she was already shaking her head in anticipation of what he would say.

"It is useless. The deed is done," She said, and walked away, Her son and His dog following obediently behind Her. Blood was coming from other places now. His nose, his ears, possibly other orifices he didn't want to contemplate, and with every new bleed came a new origin of suffering.

He hissed and snarled, trying to climb back to his feet, to walk it off, to defy fate, but his body betrayed him, refusing to do little more than twitch and spasm. The more jovial of the fae just laughed and kept offering him things he wasn't even physically able to accept, while the less savory kin gathered up his toxic blood for evil purposes.

For nearly an hour, he fought against the pain and the foreign magical intrusion, focusing on the glory he had been promised and revenge he would exact for this humiliation, but magic greater than his won out and tore him from the world into a dark and quiet place.

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Mid-term exams, include final exams for single semester courses such as European History of Magic, and also regular exams for two semester courses that always seem to have exams at that time. I hate those.

Madris is not in fact a real goddess. I created her simply because I could not find 'real' deities that would fulfill the role I required. I am sort of going to tell you what she's goddess of and sort of not. I'd like to hear your theories on the matter. Cause I like all your guys' theories. It's fun to discover the different ways people think of a single situation.

The 'Chalice and the Blade' are rip offs from The Di Vinci Code representing womanhood and manhood, but it was such a damn good symbolism I stole it, and shamelessly, because I'm a fanfiction writer and that what we do. Mwa ha ha.

Andraste and Toutatis are war gods. The Celts had many of them. Ogmios is the god of persuasive speech, the only I've heard of. It sort of suggests that Celts tended to fight rather arbitrate their disputes.

A Goodfellow, such as Robin Goodfellow a.k.a Puck as seen in Shakespeare's Midsummer Night's Dream, are fairly harmless breed of satyr-like fae but take delight in scaring and tricking people. They're also commonly known for stealing babies to make into fairies and replacing them with Changelings, but then most fairies and fae breeds do that. Goodfellows are just particularly good at getting through magical protections to do it.

Book IV:

Chapter 17:

Harry woke up in his bed, which was not the place he remembered leaving consciousness. That was probably a good thing, since that particular place had been set on fire last he recalled. However, all was not right here either, mostly due to the fact that Snape was scowling down at him like he knew Harry was a budding arsonist. He blinked sleepily, closed his eyes again, hoping he was simply dreaming.

"Potter, wake up. Are you dying?" the potion's master demanded, shaking him awake again.

Harry groaned, and rolled away from him. "Yee~eesss, now let me die in peace."

"If only. Get up, we're going to Dublin." Harry was tired enough that he thought he might be able to ignore him for a good ten minutes, but also tired enough that he didn't realize that was a bad idea. His warm blankets were snatched away, and not waiting for him to come to his senses, Snape muttered a spell so that Harry's clothes jumped out of his trunk and hurled themselves at him, including a change of underwear and his rather heavy boots.

"Agh! Alright, fine! I'm getting up, just knock it off!"

Thank Merlin, no one else was there to see him get a face full of skivvies. Snape smirked and strode away, leaving Harry to dress. The sky was still dark outside, and his bedside lamp flared to life as he climbed out of bed. He was still bone tired, and desperately wanted sleep, but he forced himself through his morning routine. Slowly, his mind began to start waking up, even though his body remained sluggish and uncooperative.

He remembered his spell, in the middle of brushing his teeth and nearly choked on his toothbrush. Earth, Sun, and Sky what happened? What had he done? He hadn't a clue what his spell would do, only that it was too late to stop it.

They were going to Dublin. That was what Snape had said. That was in Ireland, where Voldemort said he would be for the Solstice.

Well, shit.

He could only hope that because it was only the snarky potions master that came and got him and not a platoon of Sentinels, nothing too horrible had happened. Or at least, that no one suspected him of being responsible.

He found Snape waiting for him in the Gryffindor common room, staring out a window and deep in thought.

"Has something happened?" Harry asked reluctantly, afraid to know the answer, afraid to think asking would make him look guilty. Snape turned to him, looking him up and down, making the him even more uncomfortable.

"The Dark Lord was attacked last night, and might be dying. He has demanded our presence immediately."

Harry's eyes widened and he reached out to the nearest wall, incredulity stealing away what strength the exhaustion hadn't. Impossible. That wasn't the purpose of the spell. It wasn't suppose to hurt him.

Even though he had known it probably would to some extent.

"Dying?" His voice was so weak, it would have been inaudible if the common room weren't so overwhelmingly quiet already. For once, Snape didn't mock him for it, merely nodded.

"It is not for certain yet, but you need to be prepared for that possible eventuality. Come, we need to hurry."

The older man turned to lead the way to the exit, his massive strides forcing Harry to scramble after him to keep up. The castle was dark and Harry disoriented, unable to grasp that the same night he had summoned a Goddess he would face the consequences of his

actions. His wand was up his sleeve, more out of habit than practicality, as he didn't even have the energy or the concentration to cast so much as a simple lighting spell.

Lestrangle was waiting for them both at the entrance, her expression tight with irritation and worry.

"What took you so long?" she snapped.

"Potter sleeps like the dead," Snape muttered back and moved right passed her towards the door. She glared at him briefly, but the majority of her vitriol was reserved for Harry. He didn't look at her, instead following Snape closely. He was far too vulnerable to feel comfortable alone with her, but he couldn't afford to let her know how much. Especially not now.

Voldemort's black car was parked outside, and in addition to Victoria there were over a dozen heavily armored Sentinels standing around with brooms and wands in hand. Victoria's face was ashen as she opened the door for them, even in the feeble light of the torches. She was terrified, and when he caught her gaze he knew it wasn't entirely for herself that she feared.

Another surprise awaited him inside the car. Lucius Malfoy was there, his back to the driver's seat, looking dangerous in a uniform vaguely reminiscent of a Sentinel or a Brass Cult Cadet. His uniform was black, close cut to highlight the body of a man who hadn't let a life of luxury destroy his military physique. The buttons and fixings were gold, and the half dozen medals he wore at his breast were modeled after fearsome things: skulls, serpents, blades.

Harry had the rather dubious privilege of sitting directly across from him. Lucius gave him one, long assessing look, as if determining the chances of getting away with strangling him right then and there. Snape caught him..

"For Merlin's sake, Lucius, he's not your competition. Knock it off."

This earned the potions master a glare from everyone, but he ignored them completely. After that, no one said anything. They each stared

out their own window, lost in thoughts and schemes and worries of their own. This could be the end of the world as they knew it.

For better or worse.

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There were Sentinels at the door when Viktor got up that morning. At the sight of them, he nearly panicked and blasted them both, but luckily Jophery had been with him and grabbed his arm before he did anything so foolish.

“Vat is dis?” his friend asked congenially, to the nearest Sentinel, a middle aged woman with a scar on her lip. She gave him a half-hearted shrug.

“Orders. A Red Alert has been posted, meaning every available Sentinel and Brass Cult recruit is being called to every Red Facility in Britain. Hogwarts is a Red Facility. Number 27, no less.”

“Red Facility?” Viktor prodded.

“Strategic attack appoint. Government buildings, supply warehouses, private residences of Court Officials,... Hogwarts has had several attacks over the last couple of years so it's 27, even if most of the students are safely at home.”

Viktor and Jophery shared a concerned look.

“So vy is dere a Red Alert? Has somezing happened?”

Here, the woman seemed a bit reluctant. “Nothing you need to worry about. You just need to stay in the castle until it's over. Hardly a imposition in this weather. Now go on, I'm sure you boys have other things to do.”

They walked away, casting brief glances to see if the Sentinels were looking at them suspiciously or were preparing to follow. The

Sentinels paid them no mind, turning to each other instead for conversation.

"Vat do you zink?" Jophery asked once they were out of ear shot. Viktor just shook his head. There was no way to know what was going on.

"I'll try vriting Hermione if ve don't hear anything more dis morning. Her foster father is a commander in ze Brass Cult, she might know somezing."

They didn't speak on the subject again once they reached the Great Hall, where they encountered other Sentinels scouting the corridors. They tried again to glean some information from them, but again they were told it was just a safety precaution and not to worry about it. Other students arrived for breakfast, equally confused and unhelpful about what was happening. Having no where else to go, Viktor remained in the Great Hall after breakfast, playing card games with his classmates as he waited for some new information to re-emerge. It came with Fleur, who had been in and out of the Great Hall several times that morning already.

"Ave you zeen, 'Arry?" she asked. Viktor suddenly realized he had not, even though he knew Harry was spending the holidays at the school.

"No."

She frowned. "No one 'as. I noticed 'e didn't come down zis morning, zo I went to is dorm, but 'e iz not zere. Ze other Gryffindors 'ave not zeen 'im eizer. I tried ze library and Dueling 'All too. Nozing."

"Vill help you look," Jophery said. "But lets find a teacher first. Dey would know if he is suppose to be here or not."

Finding a teacher took almost as much work as finding Harry, but they did at last locate McGonagall speaking with a Sentinel near the castle entrance. Their discussion looked extremely heated, but they broke it off immediately when they saw them approach. She gave them a cautious look.

"Is something the matter?" she asked.

"I would like to know dat myself," Jophery quipped, but Viktor elbowed him in the shoulder before he said anything else..

"Ve vere vondering where Harry vas. He hasn't shown up for breakfast and no vone has seen him."

"... and because of all the extra security you were worried?" she guessed. "No need. Mr. Potter is on an errand with Professor Snape. They should be back sometime this afternoon."

Fleur let out a sigh of relief. "Zank goodness. Please, Professor, do you know what all zis-" she gestured at the Sentinel, "- iz about? It iz very zudden."

She gave a sympathetic smile, but shook her head. "I am afraid I am as much in the dark as you are. Anything I told you would be mere speculation, and that's worse than useless."

They split up after that, Fleur to her rooms, Jophery to amuse himself by exploring the castle, and Viktor to write a letter to Hermione. He nearly made it to the owlry with his missive, when he met someone along the way that gave him pause.

"I zought you said you vould never approach me again."

McGunny ignored that. "I just got back from the infirmary. It's worse than I thought."

He handed Viktor a roll of papers, which he opened and skimmed through and immediately felt the blood drain from his face. It was Harry's medical records. There were records of beatings, of crucios, a broken bones, magical exhaustion, cuts, a life-threatening poisoning, Blue Pox, and a condition resulting from an unknown Dark Arts ritual that left the boy with permanent physical and mental abnormalities. He looked to McGunny, and by the tension around his eyes, Viktor could tell he was as outraged by this as he himself was.

"That's just what we have records of. There is no telling how many injuries he's self treated or were covered up by Snape."

"You zink Snape is involved in dis?"

"He's aware of it, at the very least. He's Voldemort's man and Harry's guardian. I can't see how he wouldn't know."

Viktor nodded. It wasn't unreasonable. What little he knew of Snape suggested he wouldn't be adverse to hurting a child if the Dark Lord commanded it or perhaps even if he didn't. He had a mean streak a mile wide.

"I don't suppose you know vat's going on vith all za Sentinels?"

"The Red Alert? No... I..." he started, then shook his head. "I'm looking into it."

"Vould you mind telling me ven you find somezing?"

"I will if it's relevant, otherwise you're on your own," McGunny said, and walked away, having nothing else to say. Viktor glared at his back, but didn't push the matter. Two could play this game. He continued on his way to the owlry to send out his letter.

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Harry fell asleep in the car. Despite all his worries, his guilt, and his company, he was still tired and the car was quiet. He woke up when the car stopped, as everyone moved to get up and stepped out. The sun was just starting to rise, the dark silhouette of a castle and slanting rooves against a bright pink and golden sky.

The moment Harry's feet touched the Irish soil, he felt his magic stir, the fine hairs on his arms and neck stood on end.

"Come on," Snape said, regaining his attention. They had stopped in front of a large building made of red brick and white columns, a bronze statue of a medi-wizard patching up a man who looked like

he'd gone a few rounds with a troll and lost badly. A plaque by the door, read 'St. Victivius Hospital for Magical Maladies'. A hospital?

Harry's mind boggled at the thought. Did anyone here really think a hospital was going to have what the Dark Lord needed? Any medi-wizard worth their salt would realize within five minutes that Voldemort's body resembled a human's body about as much as it did a wheel of cheese. It was just stupid.

Or desperate.

A line of Sentinels and Brass Cult soldiers lines the walkway and the hall and all the entrance ways, ramrod straight and saluting Lucius as he passed them. Harry trailed behind the party, wanting very much to turn around and leave, and the closer they seemed to draw to their destination the stronger his reluctance became. A nurse, looking terribly nervous and even more tired than Harry, led them through the maze of corridors that seemed to define a hospital to a single corridor. Every hall leading to it had been filled with guards, but this hall was completely empty. They all gave the nurse a suspicious look, and she looked ready to cry.

"He really really doesn't like people around him when he's unwell," she lamented, and scurried off.

They all gave each other a questioning look, then the Slytherins came together in a rare display of cooperation and turned to Harry.

"You go first. He likes you," Lucius said.

"Oh, screw you, Captain Courageous," Harry snapped.

The Malfoy patriarch drew himself out and looked ready to snarl out a command, but a small explosion down the hall drew their attentions. A half second later, a man, his hair and clothes smoking, bolted out the door as if his life depended on it, which it probably did.

"Don't touch me, you filth! Leech! Hashhh ssshnicth sssil wesssk!"

Harry actually blushed at the remainder of Voldemort's parseltongue insult. He had no idea a wand could be used for that.

"He seems pretty feisty for being on his death bed," Snape noted.

Lestrangle hissed at him, "Show some respect!"

Despite his defiance to Lucius, Harry did in fact 'go first'. Slowly, uncertainly, he made his way down the hall, terrified of what he might have done to the other man and that he might know it. He stopped a short distance from the door, half off its hinges from when the medi-wizard had been thrown out.

"My Lord?" he called, "May I come in?"

There was a moment of silence, then. "Enter."

Cautiously, he peeked his head inside first. Voldemort reclined in a small hospital bed, defiantly propped upright against his pillows, his hand still clutched his wand as if daring anyone to tear it from his cold, dead hands. And he did look very near dead. His skin was pale and sweat slick, reminding Harry of cave salamanders turned white in the darkness. In contrast, his eyes were blood shot, not helped by the fact that his eyes were already red to begin with. And he was bleeding. Not badly, but it trickled from his eyes, his nose, the corners of his mouth. His hands were smeared with it.

It was what Harry thought a vampire might look like if it were to die from a disease. Voldemort seemed to sense his thoughts and grinned, his teeth pink with still more blood.

"I hate to tell you this, but you don't look much better," Voldemort chuckled darkly. It was pitched just a little too high, indicative of the pain he was still suffering and the strain he felt trying to hide it. What had he done to him?

"What a scary thought," Harry said, feebly trying to smile back, and came into the room.

There were sitting chairs in the room, but they had all been destroyed, and he was feeling too timid to draw attention to this fact by actually fixing one. Voldemort's red eyes tracked him closely. He stopped at the foot of his bed, afraid to approach any closer.

"I will not die," Voldemort informed him, studying his reaction. Harry nodded, but he didn't feel relieved. The Dark Lord might not die, but that didn't mean he would return to what he had been. That had been the point of the ritual, but this couldn't have been farther from what he had wanted.

"Is there anything I can do?" he asked, because he had to. He caused this, and he needed to know he could fix it somehow.

"My gods could do nothing for me, what do you think you can do?" the Dark Lord hissed.

"I don't know... but I do know your gods aren't the sort you turn to for healing."

Voldemort's expression smoothed, and he rested further back into his pillows. Something of his former smugness returned. "True. While we're on the subject of gods, how did your sacrifice go? Was your god pleased with your gift?"

Harry felt a spike of fear. Dare he say Her name? Would he know Her and what Harry had Her do? But he couldn't not answer. It was a surer sign of guilt than anything else.

"Ah... I... I don't know. I think She burned down the lodge house."

Voldemort chuckled. "Perhaps She mistook the whole thing for Her shrine. They can be rather presumptuous."

That was a very good possibility. Harry quickly tried to change the subject before it got any further into the fact he might have killed or crippled his own mentor.

"How did this happen? Can anything be done?"

Voldemort ignored the question, and flung out his wand. Harry flinched. He ignored that too, and simply began fixing up the room. It appeared whatever was wrong with him hadn't affected his magic any.

"No, or if there is, no one here has the skills for it. Why the bloody hell they don't hire some half-blooded elven folk in an Irish * hospital is beyond me. I've already sent for Diana, Fenrir's little moon goddess. If I don't have a cure, I will at least have answers. This was done with old magic. Who ever it was used the Solstice as a means to boost their power, just as we did. I think I will have them explain the entire ritual to me in detailed before I have them boiled alive."

Harry's mouth went very dry. Voldemort saw his expression, but luckily misinterpreted it.

"Do you feel sympathy for everyone?" he asked, annoyed. "I suppose you have forgotten that you hate me already?"

The Gryffindor floundered for a reply and caught himself twice from blurting out something incriminating, and finally settled on, "I have not!"

And stalked out. Voldemort called after him.
"Send in Malfoy while your out there."

He was shaking as he left, and he couldn't hide it from the other Slytherins. Their reproving stares were palpable, but he didn't care. He had gone first, knowing what he knew, and he still he had gone first.

"Your turn," he said to Malfoy, and then just kept walking. To keep Snape from stopping him he added, "I'll be in the car."

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Hermione received Viktor's letter shortly after lunch. She was alone with Draco in the mansion, their father having left before they woke up that morning and their mother leaving immediately after she had woken them for breakfast with instructions not to leave the house.

They were both more than a little unnerved to find two Brass Cult cadets at both the foyer and in the kitchen, but Dobby had reassured them they were there per the Malfoy patriarch's orders.

"Who is it from?" Draco asked, looking up from the game of chess they had been playing.

"Viktor," she said, her expression softening ever so slightly. Her brother scowled.

"What does he want?"

She opened the letter and skimmed through, her expression gradually darkening.

"There are Sentinels at the school, as well. They've been told we're under a Red Alert. Why didn't mother mention that before she left?"

Draco frowned thoughtfully. "I don't know. Maybe she didn't want us to worry. Does it say anything else?"

She read through the rest of the letter, and by the time she was done Draco could tell there was definitely something troubling her.

"What?"

She looked at him, uncertainly. "He says that he was told both Uncle Severus and Harry left the castle together on an errand."

"So?"

"Draco, the castle is on lock-down. Uncle Severus can't leave the castle without a Court exemption, and neither can Harry. They never would have gotten one so quickly if it were just an errand. I think they both may have been summoned."

"What? Like by the Dark Lord?"

"I don't know who else would have the authority or the inclination to summon them both."

"Very good, my dear. It appears sending you to Hogwarts wasn't a complete waste of money," drawled an arrogant voice from the doorway. They both spun around to see Malfoy Sr. standing behind them, his black uniform making him even more imposing than usual.

"W-welcome home," Hermione managed, setting aside the letter and hoping he would forget about it. It was futile. He ignored her greeting completely, and snatched up the letter. Skimming through it, his face remained arrogant and condescending, and she felt her cheeks burn. When he was done, he folded the letter, and placed it in his pocket.

"Your little tryst with Mr. Krum is over. You will not write to him, speak to him, or so much as look at him from now on. Is that clear?" he said evenly, addressing her with all the familiarity and affection he did his house elves. Her heart constricted. He wasn't ever suppose to know. When ever he found something or someone she cared about, he tried to take it away from her. The only exceptions had been Draco (who could hardly be sent away), Hogwarts (Narcissa had demanded her husband to let her attend), and Harry (who was a political morsel Lucius wasn't stupid enough to throw away just yet). Now he wanted to take away Viktor, but she wasn't ready to let him go without a fight.

"He is only a friend. You have made very sure that I can't have anything more than that from anyone," she said, adopting an air of arrogant sophistication. The more emotion she showed, the worse he would make it for her, and she had become adept at maintaining this mask in front of him.

"This isn't a negotiation."

"Come now, father. This is unreasonable. He's my friend too, and I make sure they are never alone together. It will hardly hurt her reputation," Draco jumped in, lying easily. He despised Viktor, but what he despised more was his father tormenting his sister, and when it came to choosing sides on that particular battlefield he knew where his loyalty lay.

"You will also avoid him," Lucius snapped, his previous reserve disappearing in an instant. Both children flinched away. That had

been unexpected. He never yelled at Draco unless he was genuinely worried about him. He recovered quickly, but it was too late. Both were wondering what was going on, because now it was obvious this didn't just have to do with preserving Hermione's honor. "Mr. Krum and his associates are currently under investigation for attacking the Dark Lord. I will not have my children associating with potential criminals."

"Attacking the... are you serious? Someone attacked the Dark Lord?" Draco said, as if it were the most incredible thing he had ever heard. It probably was. "That's why we're under a Red Alert? Is it serious?"

Lucius seemed to consider the matter, and grimaced.

"He is not going to die... but he is not well. This is a matter of national security, so neither of you will repeat it to anyone else. The Foreign visitors are officially under investigation and you will stay out of the way. Is that understood?"

They both nodded, and for the moment he had to be satisfied with that.

"I must return to London to organize my men in order to help keep the peace once the news is finally released. Businesses have all been closed today in the expectation of riots, but we are prepared to handle the situation. I have spoken with your godfather, and he will be coming to stay here until the matter is settled as I won't be able to return for some time and your mother will be out more often than not."

"Is he bringing Harry, then?" Draco asked, knowing it was better if he asked rather than Hermione. His father tended to clam up when she tried questioning him. His father looked annoyed.

"He will. Draco, you will be responsible for him. If he gets into trouble, you will be the one to pay for it."

This didn't make the Malfoy heir too happy, but in a way it was a compliment. It was Lucius' way of saying he was confident enough of his abilities to entrust him with this responsibility. Or something like that. He nodded.

“Good. They will arrive this evening. Make sure they are made comfortable.”

With that, he left to do what he had originally come to do. It was true that the foreigners were under investigation, but then so were nearly two dozen other factions per the Dark Lord's orders. Lucius could not help but allow his respect for the man to grow. He had spoken with him for nearly an hour, and it was perfectly clear that he was in excruciating pain, but he still had control of his thoughts and his magic, as he outlined his plans and suspicions. Lucius would organize the army in case this assassination attempt was the forerunner of a larger attack, and even if the fear turned out to be unfounded they would have a clearer understanding of their army's strengths and weaknesses. Only a few Sentinels and Court officials would be used to keep track of possible suspects, while the Dark Lord worked his own magic to discover the culprits. What exactly was wrong with Voldemort was anyone's guess, as the man didn't know himself and refused to let any of the doctors examine him. Lucius admired his paranoid secrecy too.

With things settled on the home front, he went to his office to gather some things and leave additional instructions with the house elves, confident that his orders would be obeyed by servant and child alike.

He completely forgot, in his usual disregard for muggleborns, that Hermione was a Gryffindor.

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McGunny felt sick. Worse than sick, in fact. He felt as if he were dying. The headache potion he had taken as an excuse to be in the infirmary, was useless. He had managed to sneak into Pomfrey's files and make copies of Harry's record, and then deliver them to Krum, but now he felt too exhausted to move. His thoughts were scattered and slow, his limbs sluggish, and a fever left him swimming in his own sweat. He climbed into his bed, buried himself in his blankets, and prayed he wouldn't die as he drifted to sleep.

Almost an hour later, Tom opened his bright green eyes and got to work.

[illegible]

Harry said nothing on the drive back to the castle. Part of it was the presence of Lestrage, but mostly he didn't want to acknowledge the white elephant. He listened as Lucius and Snape discussed his staying at the Malfoy Estate until they could be certain the danger had passed and Lestrage sneered at them both, but he had nothing to add to the conversation. He didn't want to lie, but anything honest that came out of him at this point would lead to them killing him where he sat.

He fell asleep again at some point, and when he woke up Lucius was gone.

“How long have I slept?” he asked, turning to Snape who was already studying him.

“Apparently, not long enough. Go back to sleep.”

Still tired, he decided to comply and closed his eyes. Before he was truly asleep again, however, he heard Lestrage address the potions master.

“Today, I'll have to mark my calendar as the day Snivelus Snape finally resorted to molly-coddling. He's made you weak.”

There was a moment of silence, and then.

“You do realize the irony of you saying that he has made me weak. After all, you traveled all this way, but in the end you were the only one the Dark Lord didn't call upon.”

She let out an evil hiss, but to Harry's parseltongue ears what he heard was 'there is water up my mouse' and barely managed to keep himself from smiling. Remembering that at any moment the Dark Lord might find out the truth and boil him alive helped.

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Hermione told Draco she was going to go take a bath before their guests arrived and not to disturb her. In Hermione-speak this was translated as a polite 'I need to be alone so I can vent all my feelings without anyone watching so could you bugger off for a while?' This gave Hermione approximately two hours to do what she needed to do. Sneaking out of the Malfoy mansion and passed the guards was simple enough with Dobby's help, as was apparating to Hogsmeade. Getting from Hogsmeade to the castle without being noticed was a bit trickier, but once there Draco's broom proved invaluable in getting her straight into Gryffindor tower. She ended up in the seventh year boys' room, but luckily none of them were there for the holiday. The rest of the tower appeared empty as well, and passing Harry's bed revealed his trunk still sitting at the end, which meant Snape and Harry probably hadn't arrived yet or at least weren't ready to leave for Malfoy manor.

She went to her room and created a charmed note, then sent it soaring. She couldn't afford to be recognized as she wandered the halls, so she would need Viktor to come to her. However, if he were under surveillance, neither of them could afford the note being intercepted. She had to get clever.

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Colin Creevey received something of a surprise while he was developing pictures for the next edition of The Hogwarts' Herald, when a paper airplane flew straight into his developing solution. He fished it out with his gloved hand and read it.

Colin. Get this to Viktor Krum, swiftly.

There was no signature and he didn't recognize the writing, but the writer obviously knew who he was and that he was staying at Hogwarts for the holiday. Why they wanted him to play messenger

boy, he had no idea. Should he comply? For that matter, why was he getting a note to Krum that only said he had to get a note to Krum?

Well, it was an adventure, he supposed, and he was a Gryffindor. So he finished up with his pictures, hung them up to dry, and went in search of Durmstang's champion.

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Getting weird notes delivered to him by Creevey was not the strangest thing to happen to him that day, but it was the most suspicious, particularly when Creevey had no answer as to where it came from or what it meant. The young Gryffindor looked genuinely disappointed when Viktor said he didn't know either and sent him away. After a few minutes, he finally decided it had to be McGunny again. Perhaps he had learned something relevant, but didn't want to risk contacting him directly again.

A Revealing charm caused the letters to rearrange themselves.

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Viktor. Get to history Class now. Y

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He cast a few few spells to check for spies and to prevent himself from being noticed and went to find Professor Toure's classroom. He saw no one on the way there and no one when he arrived. For a moment he thought he had been the victim of a prank, yet once he left the class he found Hermione standing in front of him. She nearly had him jumping out of his skin.

“Viktor.”

“Hermione? Vat are you doing here?”

She looked around as if she expected someone was following her, and pushed him back into the classroom.

"Viktor, you have to tell me right now, and be completely honest, did you or anyone from Durmstang attack Voldemort last night?"

He blinked at her stupidly, then shook his head.

"Vat? Vat are you talking about?"

"You swear you didn't know?!" she demanded, her voice cracking, her entire expression strained.

"I swear I didn't know he was attacked until you just said it! Is dat vat all dese Sentinels are here for? Is a var starting?"

She let out a shaky breath, relief washing through her. She shook her head.

"I don't know. The Dark Lord was hurt, but I don't know how or how badly. Lucius says you and everyone else in your party is being investigated for the attack. He said I couldn't reply to your letter or even speak to you, but I had to know for myself. You swear you had nothing to do with it?"

"I svear. I svear on de blood of my ancestors, I had nothing to do vith it and don't know who did."

She nodded. "I believe you. Oh Viktor, I don't know what to do. I don't know what you should do. I don't think you're guilty, but I don't know if that will be enough. I think Lucius wants you to be guilty, and with the Dark Lord hospitalized he may have the power to manipulate it so it looks that way. If you tried to leave now though, it could make things worse."

Viktor said nothing for a long moment, and as Hermione watched him she saw a sort of resolve come over him. She had seen similar looks on Harry, and knew enough to be scared.

"Hermione, there's something I need to tell you."

Tom stepped away from the classroom door. So, his elder half was attacked and weakened? That was good. Very good, except for the fact he wasn't in any position to take advantage of it. He didn't even know where the other was.

Should he abandon his plan and come up with a new one?

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“Professor.”

“Yes?” he replied curtly.

"I..." his words died. He didn't have the courage to speak them. He didn't have the strength for the kind of confrontation it would cause. "Never mind."

"Are you ill, Potter?"

Harry looked up at him, but the man was watching the road to make sure neither of them wandered through one of hundreds of sloshy pools that littered their course.

"No. I'm just tired."

There was a thoughtful moment of silence.

"Does it take a lot of your magic... to do what you do..."

"You mean... the rituals?"

"Yes."

"... Depends on the ritual. Sometimes I feel really strong afterwards. Other times, I can barely move. This last one... it was hard."

They walked a little further in silence, and then, out of the blue, and out of character, Snape said, "He's going to be fine. You're both going to be just fine."

Harry stiffened under his hands, and suddenly stopped moving. His bright green eyes found Snape's black ones, and there was such maelstrom of emotions there that the man couldn't identify even one. Was it hope? Horror? Disbelief? Anger? He couldn't tell, and if tried legilimens to find out, he was sure his own mind would be bashed to pieces. Then Harry turned away, and just nodded.

"I hope so."

They continued up the road towards the castle.

From Voldemort's office, Tom watched the road as Snape and Harry slowly made their way to the castle. Their timing was perfect. He had just finished his letter. Turnis was waiting impatiently on the Dark Lord's desk, shuffling from foot to foot. Tom had chosen him specifically, know he was the most talented of the Hogwart's owls.

And with that, he opened a window and the owl flew through it before the creepy boy simply tossed him out. He flew straight to Hogsmeade, and if he had been a less experienced bird he would have simply followed the railroad tracks from there straight to London, but instead he flew straight to the Sentinel's station and through the window, which, like with most wizarding building, popped open just long enough to let him in.

He stomped over to it, and took a peek at the letter on it's leg. What he saw made him pale. The envelope was black and on it there was a large golden V. It was an official letter from the Dark Lord himself. But how? Last he had been told the Dark Lord recovering from injuries somewhere... but then, perhaps he had returned to the castle without anyone knowing? Hogwarts was the man's home away from home after all. He looked the letter over and cast a few charms to see if it was legit. It checked out, and more importantly it was addressed to Chief Commander Malfoy.

No way in hell was he going to be held responsible for holding up the Dark Lord's instructions to the commander of the entire British army.

"Fine," he muttered and tossed some floo powder into the fire place. It immediately changed color. "Go on then."

Turnis flew past him, straight into the fire. He did not like floos, but he liked flying in winter even less and this was certainly the most expedient route. A bit of floundering and a lot of soot later, and he was spat out straight into Lucius Malfoy's office. And immediately was hit by a Stunning Hex.

He really hated wizards.

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1. Ireland is thick with Fairy Folk. In my universe, Ireland was basically pulled out of the sea specifically by the Fae so they could live on it and claim the land their own. People eventually moved in, and gradually so did wizards, but it's a very dangerous place for them. If a witch or wizard isn't careful and doesn't protect themselves or their children well enough, they can get snatched away or cursed or killed by Fae who are still the dominant race. Mixed-bloods are common, usually conceived through trickery or rape, and are persecuted as untrustworthy, unstable, and even evil but in other ways greatly admired for their power and often times for their beauty and charm.

Book IV:

Chapter 18:

Lucius stared down at the owl currently trying to right itself on his office floor. It was not one he recognized, though even if he had he would still have stunned it. Owls did not come into his office. They dropped their letters off with his secretaries or some random lieutenant, who in turn checked his mail (without opening it) for curses, jinxes, poisons, portkeys, and various other potential hazards.

Now was not the time for his security to become spotty.

“Cooper!”

His office door swung open, and slightly chubby little lieutenant rushed inside, simultaneously saluting and looking for danger.

“Sir!”

“This thing just came through my floo. My restricted floo. Find out who sent it.”

“Yes, sir!”

And like the lemming that he was, Cooper went straight to the fire place, cast a back-tracking spell, and threw himself inside without thought to the potential danger he had jumped straight into. Lucius sneered.

“Moron.”

He cast a few more spells on the bird, to see if it posed a threat, but it was perfectly ordinary owl with a less than ordinary letter. More spells, and he was getting quite bored of casting them at this point, and finally he snatched up the letter. Now wasn't this a curiosity? It was definitely written on Voldemort's personal stationary, but the Dark Lord had no reason to write him after their meeting. Who would have access to it, or even know how to use it? It was rumored you couldn't even write on it without special ink made of Dark Lord's own blood.

The handwriting was not Voldemort's and did not even make an attempt to disguise itself as such. Quite the contrary it was written to conceal identity, little more than well spelled out chicken scratch. What it lacked in elegance it made up for in content. After the first three sentences, he was spurred into action.

"Nixon!"

Another lieutenant lemming shot into the room as briskly as the first.

"Si-"

"Get me a physician."

"Are you ill-"

"Now!"

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"This place reeks ," Greyback grumbled as he stalked into Voldemort's room. He was agitated, being summoned like some sort of pet dog from his forest and his pack, but he knew the situation was too grave for him to stand on pride. It didn't make him any happier about it though. "And you look like shit."

Voldemort managed a sickly grin, shining white teeth bared against his presumption. He had finally stopped bleeding an hour ago, but he knew the werewolf couldn't smell it over the sinus burning stink of antiseptic. There was no need to inform the dog just how sick his master had truly been, or perhaps might still be.

"Poor baby," he mocked, reclining as if on a chaise rather than a hospital bed. "Did you not get your nap today?"

Greyback let out a warning growl, but it did nothing against the dark wizard. The alpha gave up with an annoyed snort and walked to the nearest window. Diana, who had remained hidden behind his

massive bulk came to the Dark Lord's bedside. She was dressed completely in white rabbit furs, her curly brown hair held up in white bone pins, rough and magnificent all at once. They stared at each other for a long moment, no need for words between them just yet. He didn't need to speak for her to know his questions.

"It is quite remarkable..." Diana said at last, "I have never seen a spell like this before, but then... I've never seen a soul as damaged as yours before either."

"What do you see?" he asked, barely restraining his impatience. He could not rush her if she didn't want to be rushed, but he could hope for her indulgence. She tilted her head from side to side, looking him up and down.

"You are... stable now."

"I know I am not going to die, but-"

"Not your body. Your flesh is meaningless. You are complete... more so anyway."

He still didn't understand what she meant, and his frustration was growing. He was tired and still in pain, bed ridden and anxious about letting Lucius run his country. If his body was still broken then what was she talking about?

"What precisely was done to me, who is responsible, and can it be fixed is all I want to know."

Diana's blank expression suddenly became vaguely amused.

"Fixed? Too late, it's already been done. Your soul has been mended."

Voldemort's frustration melted away into disbelief. Impossible. The Earth would never allow such a thing. He had been made incomplete for a reason and sacrificed too much for it simply to be undone. Who would do it? Who would have the capability? His first thought was Dumbledore, the old coot was loony enough to try something so

indirectly devastating, but then he realized the man didn't have the capability to summon a goddess at that level of power. He had turned from the Old Magics a long time ago. A druid of some kind must have been responsible, perhaps even one of those he had seen in the glen?

"Who?"

Diana's amusement melted away, and she said nothing. Unease crawled into Voldemort's gut.

"Who?"

She looked towards Greyback, who was looking at her just as expectantly.

"He did not mean you harm."

The Dark Lord felt his world tilt. No... it was inconceivable. Harry would never have raised a hand against him, out of fear or respect or a warped sense of attachment or even patriotism, and if he had the will he didn't have the means. He was just a child, fourteen, and his skills and knowledge were rudimentary at best, not even near the level necessary to summon a goddess such as Madris, whatever sort of goddess she was, and certainly not without hurting himself.

But...

Diana did say Harry hadn't meant to harm him, that the spell had been intended to heal his soul. It was a reckless and naive, and a very Gryffindor thing to do. Brennan had been there though, surely he would have stopped... now he was being naive if he didn't think the man wouldn't go along with such a plot or even come up with it himself. Harry had to have had some sort of idea of what he was doing since he was one who would have sacrificed the dragon's heart and requested the spell, but was he truly aware of the consequences? Brennan had to have designed the ritual, so perhaps he had tricked Harry or neglected to mention the dangers? Did it even matter? What right did that boy have to meddle in the very essence of his being?

And he had lied to him. He had stood right beside him, and had the audacity to ask what he could do to make it better, when he should have been on his hands and knees begging forgiveness.

Anger and betrayal began to simmer in his gut, his magic stirring under his skin felt like pins and needles, the only form of release being to hex someone. There were two meddling wizards that came to mind.

"Do not be hasty."

His red eyes flashed to Diana, but even he wasn't foolish enough to lash out against her. Not the Daughter of the Moon, and certainly not with Greyback tense and ready to defend them.

"He has betrayed me..."

"You deserved to be betrayed. Were you not the first to meddle in another's soul?"

"He made that decision himself."

"You made the situation in which the decision had to be made, and there were instances even before that. Even now you force his hand."

"I never tried to kill him!"

"Nor he you, but you are both guilty of carelessness. As things stand, you are equals in this regard."

To Voldemort that was hardly the case. He had protected Harry as best he could, nurtured him, taught him powerful magics, and taken him into his confidence, and how had he been repaid? Had magic carelessly cast against him. Magic that changed him in a way he had never asked for or wanted and which very nearly killed him more effectively than any curse sent his way before it. Did this little mock-goddess really think things even between them?

He was ready to argue his case, but Lucius' sudden appearance forced him to stay his tongue.

"My Lord!"

"What is it?!" he snapped, his dark magic pulsing with irritation and barely contained rage, making the Malfoy patriarch flinch away.

"I-I have uncovered a plot, My Lord. A plot orchestrated by the Germans."

Voldemort was still irritated, but it was far easier to deal with wizards than it was with goddesses, and turned his full attention to the other man.

"Details?" he asked, refining his voice to something more welcoming.

Lucius pulled a vile out of his pocket, and after an awkward moment of trying to move around Diana without touching her or coming in between her and a glowering Greyback, managed to get close enough to hand it to his master. Voldemort took it. The vile was empty but for a tiny insect, wiggling its legs, uselessly trying to climb up the slick glass prison.

"What is it?"

"It's some sort of surveillance insect. This one was pulled out of the flesh behind my left ear."

Voldemort looked up at him quickly, understanding perfectly what sort of trouble they could be in if any number of Lucius' duties had been uncovered.

"It's worse. I have reason to believe I am not the only who has been infected with one of these things. They were delivered during the first challenge of the Triwizard Tournament, when several important and minor officials, yourself included, were exposed to them. I am having my men draw up the guest list for that day, and track down everyone in attendance for an emergency examination. I've contacted Coventry

College for an entomologist to uncover exactly what these things are and how they work.”

“Good, but how did you uncover all this?”

Here Lucius' expression became closed, and Voldemort knew he was revealing something he had grave suspicions about. He reached into his robes and pulled out a letter, written on familiar black paper and gold ink.

“I received this about an hour ago. An owl came through my restricted floo caring it. When I sent one of my men through the floo to track down its origins, they returned few minutes later and said it came from Hogsmeade. It is likely the owl's origins is from Hogwarts as well, and the materials here were taken from your office.”

“Snape? Lestrangle?”

“Maybe, but I doubt either would bother to conceal their identity. We can't afford to guess at this point. I have already sent two squadrons of Culties and two squadrons of Sentinels to Hogsmeade to capture the suspects, one set of each for the village and the school, but I can't order the arrest of foreign dignitaries without your approval.”

“You have it. I want them all alive for interrogation, unless the resistance becomes too violent. Detain the French dignitaries as well, and every man, woman, and child in the castle. I want to know where this letter came from and how long this information was kept hidden.”

“As you command, my Lord!”

Lucius turned sharply to go, eager to begin the first steps of a long awaited war. If the letter was truthful, and the Germans really had intended to illegally spy on them, they would be more than justified to retaliate and no other country would try to interfere. Germany was the first step to claiming Europe.

“And Lucius...”

He stopped sharply, tensing.

“... I want you to find Harry. I will need to speak with him as quickly as possible.”

There was threat in Voldemort's words, but whether it was directed at him or at Potter, Lucius was unable to discern.

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“Oh Merlin...” She slowly sank into a nearby chair, unable to believe what she was hearing. Viktor was a spy? Harry was in danger? From Voldemort and not Dumbledore? “I don't believe you. It's impossible. Harry would have told me.”

Viktor shook his head. “Even if it put you danger? Vat if he can't talk about it? Zere are a lot of vays to force silence.”

Hermione's expression twisted in anguish, thinking on it now she knew things hadn't been right with Harry since the first challenge. She had assumed it was stress, and it probably was, but had that stress been a result of his increased publicity and school work or the anxiety of knowing too many secrets and trying to keep people safe?

“You don't have any proof.”

“I do,” he insisted, relentless in his pursuit to make her understand. “I have copies of his medical records. Zey are a nightmare.”

“A lot of that is from being attacked by Moody or accidents.”

“Dere's a lot of it dat's completely unexplained and vorse zere are some notes dat lead me to believe he vas being experimented on.”

Hermione's hand flew to her mouth, but it wasn't enough to muffle the whimper that escaped. Horrible images sprang into her mind, pieces of nightmares she'd had from overhearing Lucius and his cronies speak of the war, and interposed was Harry's face, determined and kind and suffering it all as quietly as he could. Tears formed and fell, even the possibility of it being true was too heartbreaking.

"No..."

He knelt down in front of her, taking her fisted hands into his, and looked up at her beseechingly.

"Listen to me," he begged, "I am going to try and take him out of here, to somever he can be safe and happy. I vant to know if... would.... would come vith us?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Do you vant to come too? To Germany? To Europe? Zere is so much zere for someone like you, Hermione. You can go to school anyvere you vant, vork anyvere you vant, date and marry anyone you vant, travel, and study, and just live how ever you like. Please, come vith me. Dis place vill tear you down before it lets you free."

Hermione could feel her heart begin to race. Was he really asking her this? To run away with him? Well, him and Harry, but to run away nonetheless? To some unknown place where she knew no one and didn't even speak the language? Abandoning her brother and Narcissa and almost all of her friends and country?

"I can't... This is my home."

"You can have better home," he pleaded, but she shook her head, her tears falling even harder.

"That's not how it works, Viktor. This isn't a perfect place, but this is where my heart is. I can't just abandon it, and I don't think Harry could either. Have you even asked him?"

"I..."

Well, shit. He had forgotten to do that. He hadn't wanted to even ask Harry until he knew he could actually take him to Germany, and then Harry had all but disappeared. There simply hadn't been any opportunity to ask.

"I'll ask him when he returns. As soon as I see him, I promise. Please, don't give up on the idea just yet? If he agrees, won't you at least consider it?"

She looked at him so sadly that when she opened her mouth he knew whatever she said, she wasn't going to change her mind. Hermione was a kind and loyal person, be it to friend or country, and she would not simply abandon it. He felt like a fool for ever thinking she would.

"Viktor!"

Viktor and Hermione's wands were both in their hands and ready for attack at the first sound of intrusion, but both were taken back by McGunny's sudden appearance. The Ravenclaw was deathly pale and sweating heavily, as if he had suffered under Cruciatus. He looked taken back when he saw Hermione there, but not so much by her wand.

"Granger, what are you... forget it. It's not important," he said, and turned to Viktor. "You have to get Harry and get out of here, RIGHT NOW!"

"What are you-"

"They know. They know, and they're going to arrest you and everyone else, unless you can get out of here now."

Viktor and Hermione shared a panicked look. He had to try at least once more.

"Please come with me..."

"I'm sorry, Viktor, I can't!"

"Somnebus!"

Hermione went limp, slumping bonelessly over her desk. Viktor snarled at McGunny, but he snarled right back.

"You don't have time for this! You have minutes at the most. Do you understand that you could die if you stay any longer? That all of your friends could die?"

Viktor turned away, down at Hermione fast asleep and helpless. She was beautiful, her expression serene and her eyelashes glittering with her tears. Should he just take her with him now? This would likely be the last time she would ever be presented with opportunity again. Could he let her turn it away without truly knowing what she was losing?

"Come on, damn you!" McGunny shouted, breaking him from his trance. "I'll make sure she gets out safely, so just come on already?!"

Viktor let out a scream of frustration, physically throwing one of the desks across the room before storming towards the door. He couldn't force this decision on Hermione. It was her decision and she would never forgive him if took it away from her. So he ran, his heart grieving with every step he took, but he knew what he had to do. He had to get his classmates and Harry out safely.

"How did they find out? How do you even know about it?"

McGunny shook his head, his entire body trembling, and it was amazing he could even stay upright let alone run. Viktor had never seen McGunny anything other than cool and composed, and annoying as that was this was definitely worse. The other boy had seen something or done something traumatizing to end up in such a state.

"I have sources. Old classmates who joined the Court or who have parents there. We like to keep track of what really happens behind closed doors. The alert is over an hour old. They're just positioning themselves to catch you all unaware. No, wait, there are Sentinels down there. They don't know what's happening yet, but I can't afford for them to spot us together. We'll take a secret passage."

They ducked into the shadow of a column which turned out to be a hidden corridor with narrow stone steps leading to the upper levels.

"My friends-"

"Are all in their dormitory. They got tired of being gawked at by the Sentinels. You have to get Harry before you get the others."

"Vere is he?"

"He just returned. He's in his dorm."

They exited the passage two corridors from Gryffindor Tower, and McGunny looked both ways before speaking.

"I can't go any further. If I'm caught, I'm dead. Just go to the tower and get him. The password for the portrait is 'Tannenbaum'."

"Fine. You go back and make sure Hermione gets out of here safely, or so help me I'll find you and all ze sources in ze world won't keep you safe, do you understand?"

"Whatever. Just go!"

Viktor ran the rest of the way to Gryffindor Tower, barely taking time to make sure no one was behind or ahead of him. The Fat Lady was in her portrait gossiping with the Shepherdess, and barely so much as rolled her eyes as he bit out the password, and pulled it open. The common room was empty and leading from it were two sets of stairs. He tried to recall which one was the girls and which was boys, knowing if Hogwarts was anything like Durmstang there would be an alarm in the girl's dorm. He made his best guess, and took the left, jumping the stairs three at a time. When he heard voices he stopped. There were two and one of them definitely wasn't Harry.

"I didn't want that to happen. He nearly died!" Harry was shouting.

"But he did not, and you have what you wanted," another voice, this one older but not one Viktor recognized.

"He's going to kill me."

"You knew that might happen too."

“Oh Madris, what am I going to do?”

“That's a good start. The gods are surprisingly generous to those who pray to them, and she was particularly generous last night.”

“This isn't funny. I don't know what to do.”

Viktor wasn't exactly sure what he was hearing, but it was highly suspicious. Harry had obviously done something last night, and he was in trouble... well, they were both in trouble right now, and he didn't have the time to wait for either of them to sort things out. They both had to get out of there and quick.

He stepped through the doorway and into the room. Harry turned to him, his eyes widening with terror. Beside him was a man Viktor only vaguely recognized a teacher, gray haired and dressed in white robes, the only sign of his surprise his silence. At least, they seemed too startled to have hurled a hex at him.

“Harry, I'm leaving for Germany. Right now. Do you want to come?”

The Gryffindor simply stood there like a stunned deer.

“If someone is trying to hurt you, don't you think you should come with me? To Germany? We can protect you there.”

Harry blinked. “Huh?”

Brennan let out a small laugh. “Well, there you go. Prayers really do work. Come on, I'll shrink your trunk, you grab your schoolbag.”

The boy only looked more lost, and Viktor certainly didn't envy him. He was feeling confused himself, and he had expected this to happen eventually.

“Wait! What is going on? Why are you leaving? Why do you want me to come along?”

“Reducio!,” Brennan went on about his task, the most prepared of all them it seemed.

“The Dark Lord is going to come here and arrest me and all of my classmates if we don't leave here soon, and I need to know right now whether you want to come with me to Germany or not.”

Harry just blinked at him again, and Viktor despaired of him ever reaching a decision. They were both spared the act, but Brennan who pointed his wand at Harry.

“Imperio!”

Viktor flinched away at the spell, his own wand raised to ward off the perceived attack, but Brennan was already pocketing his wand again. He turned to Viktor, his expression grave.

“It is too much to ask a child to give up everything and everyone they have ever known in an instant. As an adult and as his teacher, I am making the decision for him. To save his life and possibly his very soul, I am entrusting him to you Mr. Krum and your associates. I will tell no one what I have witnessed here, but I recommend you hurry,” then he turned to Harry, who was staring dazedly out into space. Placing the shrunken trunk in Harry's robe and his school bag over his shoulder, he continued, “Follow Krum, do as he tells you until you are safe, then wake up.”

Viktor's first instinct was to argue, but he really didn't know how much time he had left. He headed for the door.

“Come on, follow me.”

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McGunny stared down at Hermione's unconscious form for a long time, alien feelings of hatred and disgust fighting to regain control over him. He couldn't let it happen again. Already, he had put the lives of dozens of people at risk including someone who had come to trust him and called him friend. Insanity wasn't the issue. He was well

read, he knew the basics of abnormal psychology; split personality disorder, schizophrenia, sleep walking... and knew none of these fit.

Something was inside him, and it was trying to take him over. A spirit? A demon? He had never taken metaphysics, and incidents of possession were so rare he had not thought it relevant to read up on. What ever it was it was smart and powerful, and had been oh so subtle until it had seized control a few hours ago. It was exhausted now, but how long before it regained its strength?

So much damage had been done already, and now he felt murder in his veins whenever he looked to Hermione. He didn't dare touch her for fear that his hand might slip and he'd strangle her. He couldn't leave her here either, as that might have the same result if anyone found her and believed she had warned Viktor. Or if she were interrogated, the Court and the Dark Lord would learn of his involvement and come for him.

Kill it. That's the only logical solution. We can make it look like Viktor did it. Used and discarded it like the muggleborn trash it is.

McGunny snorted, and muttered aloud, "Logical? Like making up convenient excuses to have Harry kidnapped? Like feeding me paranoid delusions so I'd go along with it? Go away, whatever you are. Go torment some other fool."

He moved away from Hermione and headed for the exit.

Where are you going?

"To get Snape. I can get him to take care of her. He's her godfather, he won't let anything happen to her."

You're stupid if you think that's true. He'll sell her out in an instant, just like he did Harry.

McGunny paused in the doorway. "Don't call him 'Harry', you parasite. He isn't your friend."

There was an amused chuckle that made the back of his neck itch.

Obliviate it. Save yourself, at least.

He honestly didn't even know what he meant, but it sounded painful. There was another annoying chuckle.

And you call yourself a Ravenclaw? It means 'erase her memory'.

"I don't know that spell."

I know... so we know.

And there it was. The words, the wand movement, the effects, and effectiveness of the spell, all there as clearly as if he had known it all along.

"How did you do that?"

Do it, and I'll tell you how.

"Why should I trust you? For all I know this spell will kill her."

I need your cooperation more than I need it dead. I am proposing a truce.

"To hell with you! This is my body."

And you can have it, but I am not leaving until I have a place to go. Give me what I want... or I'll find the means to take it.

"I'll kill us both before I let you control me!"

He spun around, looking for any sort of weapon he could find. He had never considered himself particularly brave or tolerant of pain, but if necessary he thought he might be able to inflict it on himself, perhaps just enough to convince the thing inside him that he was serious.

Don't be such a melodramatic Gryffindor. Obliviate it, and then let us negotiate. You're a logical person and I am not unreasonable. I am certain we can find a compromise.

He turned back to Hermione, uncertainly. She lay there helplessly, but instead of violence he felt only severe irritation. It had given up trying to take control and kill the girl, which meant he still retained enough will to over power it. He just needed to figure out how to get it out of him, and that required time... which he was running out of.

“Fine. Don't try anything fishy or I'll... I'll obliviate us both!”

The chuckle of before burst out into all out laughter.

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“Stupify!” Viktor shouted, flinging out his wand. The spell was a direct hit and the first Sentinel fell to the ground, but the second Sentinel's reflexes were faster than Viktor's recovery time.

“Stupify.”

The second Sentinel fell to his knees. The Durmstang champion looked behind him at Harry, who remained as blank faced as before but his wand was up and ready. Was he waking up already? He had told the boy to follow him, not help subdue the guards. He waited a moment, but the boy just stood there and stared off into space.

“Come on.” He entered his common room and the boy followed obediently behind him. Inside, all of the boys and even some of the girls seemed to be gathered, talking excitedly to each other about something. Everyone turned when they stepped into the room, and Jophery pulled away from the group address.

“Did you hear? Oblitz says the Dark Lord was att-”

“Everyone has exactly one minute to get what they need. We've been found out. We're leaving NOW!”

“Wait- what? Fuck! You heard him! Let's go! Is anyone missing?”

"Elsa and Sabrina are in their own room. I'll get them!" one boy shouted, and rushed out.

"I'll get your trunk! " another called after him. "Reducto!"

"Oblitz isn't here!"

"He can handle himself."

"But who'll manage the ship? Does the Ambassador even know?"

"Worry about yourselves first. Is everyone ready?"

"Shit, where's Hugo? Here kitty, kitty."

"I have him... where's my rat?"

"What's Potter doing here? What's wrong with him?"

"Forget it! Time's up!" Viktor ordered, and their chaos dissolved as quickly as it had formed, and they fell into two perfect lines and followed Viktor out into the hall, wand in one hand, brooms in the other, and all their belongings carefully stored in the folds of their robes.. "Jophery, take care of Harry."

"On it." Jophery broke ranks to herd Harry along behind the others. There was obviously some sort of spellwork done on him, but he didn't have time to question it or risk taking it off, or even question why exactly they were taking the boy with them. Judging by the unconscious Sentinels and the pace at which Viktor was leading them towards the tower, they had already run out of time. Cautiously, he peeked behind them, expecting men and women in black robes and leather to come bursting out into the hall, shouting at them to stop.

It was ironic then the first sign of resistance wasn't from behind, but from within. As they made their way up the tower stairs, Harry suddenly stopped. Jophery nearly fell on top of him.

"What is it?" he asked, but Harry said nothing and his face remained blank.

“Jophery! Hurry up!”

“Coming!”

A little more nudging and the Gryffindor started moving again, albeit with some sort of reluctance. Was he waking up? If he didn't want to come willingly, should he just leave him here? Viktor would kill him, but what was Viktor up to anyway?

They reached the top of the turret and exited out into the cold, open air. Winter wind whipping at them. Everyone remained towards the center as Viktor went to the edge to check for danger.

“Shit. They're starting to surround the school. Fifty at least. Wait for my word and we'll all make a fly for it. Spread out as soon as you're in the air and keep high. When we land, keep alert. They may have already sent some people ahead to secure the ship. Understand?”

“Yes!” they all barked in unison.

“Yes,” Harry said evenly right after, earning him an unnerved look from the others, who still had no idea what was going on.

“Harry, ride with Jophery.”

“Yes.”

Jophery didn't like the situation. If he put the smaller boy in front of him, he'd have a harder time maneuvering but if he put him in back, he was afraid he'd fall off the back. There was nothing for it. They didn't have time to figure out something better.

“You're riding at my back. Hold on tight and move as my body does. Don't try keeping balanced, that's my job. Understand?”

“Yes.”

“That's what I like about you, Harry. You're a real go-getter.”

“Hurry up, Jophery!”

“Yes, mum. On we go, my little baby monkey.”

It was an awkward fit. The boy fit against his back just fine, but there was nowhere for either of them to tuck up their legs. And since he hadn't planned on flying today, he hadn't worn a cup. Erk. At least the grip on his back seemed firm.

“Alright, now!”

Everyone moved forward in a burst of speed, except for Jophery, who opted to fly straight up first making them a harder target even though he knew he'd be the slowest and largest, and then hurried after the others. They had all gotten far ahead of them, but angling the broom down again gained them enough speed to close the distance. Behind them they could hear the faint sounds of shouting, but the cold wind swallow up most of it. They made it to the edge of the lake before they were fired upon.

Streaks of red and yellow shot out at them, and everyone began to spread out for more room to dodge. A large white streak shot right in front of Jophery and exploded in a blinding light, shooting sparks at them. There were screams of surprise and one of pain and then fear. Jophery was blind but unhurt, and unable to see ahead of him, he moved straight upwards again. There was another scream and it sounded as if someone had fallen.

“Wingardium leviosa!” Jophery nearly dropped out of the sky himself when he heard the spell shouted right behind him.

“You awake back there?” he called, still unable to open his eyes to look behind him, but he could feel one of the boy's arms had left his waist and must have been holding his wand. Around them now, he could hear counter curses and blocking spells being thrown up by his classmates, and the occasional sizzle and snap of spells going off too close to him. It sound as if they were falling behind again.

“I got her! Keep going!” he heard Viktor shout. “Harry, fly for Jophery. He can't see.”

The arm returned, but both the hands shifted from his waist to the broom handle, and the broom shot forward as if from a cannon. His own hands flew to the handle to steady himself, the fear of flying very fast and very blind causing him to shout.

“AAAAAAaaaahhhhhhhh!!!! OH SHIT CAN YOU EVEN SEE BACK THERE?!!”

And suddenly they started to slow, and he gradually forced his watery eyes to open to star-speckled reality. The Durmstang ship stood before them, a looming refuge of heavily warded wood and steel and magic. They dropped onto the deck, and Jophery's wand was immediately in hand, prepared for enemies. No one immediately jumped out to stop them. Of course, if anyone had tried to board beside its listed passengers, they likely would have been killed or deposited into one of the tiny cells below deck.

Speaking of which... Jophery had only taken a few steps, when there was a loud 'click'. He spun around to see Harry falling through a trapdoor. He couldn't even reach it in time to stop it from closing again.

“Harry? Harry? Are you alright? Don't worry, I'll get you out of there in a minute. Just sit tight.”

“Move out of the way!”

The warning didn't come quite quick enough. He managed to move aside a bit, but still caught one of his landing classmates in the shoulder, knocking them both over. All around him, others were only just catching up. How fast had Harry moved them?

“Get the wounded below deck!” Viktor shouted, “Ten of you stay out here and put up the strongest shields you can. The rest of you prep the ship!”

“What about the Ambassador and Oblitz and the others?!” Elsa shouted.

"If they're not captured already, they'll be able to portkey into the cargo hold, but only if we can get this boat far enough from the castle's wards, so hurry it up! Move, move, move!"

Everyone sprinted into action, the defense party casting shield spells and reflection spells around as much of the ship's massive bulk as they could while the others pulled up the anchor and lowered the sails and unfroze the rudder. Viktor found Jophery on his way to the pilot cabin.

"Where's Harry?"

"The ship tossed him in the brig."

"Good, he'll be safe there for now. Did he wake up?."

"I don't know. What is going on? Why the hell are we kidnapping him to begin with?"

"We're not kidnapping, we're- forget it. If we live I'll tell you all about it. Get below deck and check on the wounded"

"Aye-aye, Captain!"

He sharp, mocking salute, he slipped below deck. Although the exterior of the ship was dark and foreboding, the inside was bright and warmly lit with light colored woods and off white paint, portraits of ships and sea creatures hung on the walls, their subject matters moving about from sea to painted sea. The infirmary was at the end of the hall, and once inside Jophery went to work assessing the damage.

He was by no-means a medi-wizard, but if there was one thing that Jophery excelled at it was patching up his friends after duels and quidditch matches. And truthfully, he'd seen worse than what he was seeing now. He just hadn't seen so much of it at once.

The infirmary itself looked like any other cabin, except with six pallets instead of four bunkbeds, and large cabinet of medical supplies and

books. Usually it smelled like wormwood, but now it smelled like blood and burnt flesh. There were six boys and one Sabrina, and she was definitely the worst off. If he were to guess he would identify her as the one who had been knocked from her broom. The right side of her robes had been burned clean off from arm to shoulder and partway down her side, and what remained was black and blistered skin. She had already passed out from the pain.

The others were minor gashes and bumps, which he treated with the store of antiseptics, salves, potions, gauze, and the odd doo-hicky he could work but not pronounce. With the simple cases taken care of, he turned his attention to Sabrina. If he was quick and careful, he might save her from permanent scars. With medication manuals on potions and counter-curse texts, he sorted out a course of action and went to work. In the midst of his deep concentration and the utter silence of the infirmary, he took for granted that they were in the middle of a life and death battle, and it wasn't until he felt the ship shift beneath him and begin to sink that he realized they were escaping.

They had done it.

The ship began to rock, and he jumped to Sabrina's side to secure her from rolling off the table. Things hadn't even settled yet when more patients arrived.

"Jophery! I've three more for you!" someone called, before shoving the door open and dragging in an unconscious person. Two others limped in on their accord. It was getting crowded.

"Alright, anyone who thinks they can rest comfortably in their own room, get out. Unless you want to help, then by all means stay!"

A few shuffled out, but even only a few minutes passed before even more shuffled in. It seemed at least half of his classmates had been hurt in some way. He worked as quickly as possible, but he was more than a little overwhelmed.

At least news circulated quickly. They had managed to submerge the ship below the ice and were moving it out through the lochs and

towards the ocean. Viktor was manning the helm, but mostly letting the ship sail itself. Within ten minutes they had moved out of range of the castle wards, and those not actively helping to secure the ship waited anxiously near the cargo hold for those with portkeys to make their appearance... or their enemies so that they could blast them to pieces.

Twenty minutes after they moved out of the wards, Oblitz portkeyed in. He was a bit singed in the corner of his robes, and covered in blood but none of it appeared to be his own. He paid no one any mind and went immediately to find Viktor. A few minutes later Schwartzmann appeared, completely unfazed, but his aide was screaming hysterically, and had to be stunned to keep him from hurting himself or anyone else. After four hours, another aide made it through... but he died before they could even get him to the infirmary. Jophery was secretly relieved. The man had obviously been tortured, and whatever had been done hadn't been something he could fix or even understand.

And then he remembered Harry was still in the brig.

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Book IV:

Chapter 19: Voyage

“What is going on, Lucius?”

The Brass Cult General turned away from the lake where the Durmstang ship had disappeared beneath the ice. Sentinels and Brass Culties hovered over the broken ice, trying to track the direction it was heading. It was impossible. The ice was too thick and the tracking charms had bounced off the shields encompassing the ship. There were three lochs leading into this lake, and any of them would eventually lead into the sea. Even if he set his sentinels to guard all three, they probably wouldn't be able to find them.

If it all wasn't such a damn nuisance, Lucius might actually have been impressed with the Durmstrang students' ingenuity and foresight.

Severus had finally shown up, quicker than expected with all of the security now swarming the castle, and didn't look pleased.

“The Germans have escaped,” Lucius said blandly.

“Yes, I noticed that. Why precisely are they escaping? We're they some how responsible for the Dark Lord's condition?” he asked, his impatience blatantly obvious. Lucius was in a bad enough mood, that he saw no reason to indulge him.

“Maybe. Probably. That's not why I'm here.”

“Do I have ask you a questions for every answer I want? Do you really want to waste both our time with that?”

“I received a letter informing me the Germans were spies, and there was enough evidence presented to convince both myself and the Dark Lord. Obviously, the information was legitimate,” he said, then began walking back towards the castle. He still had men there who would need instructions for the arrest of the French students and Madam Maxime. Snape followed him. “I'll be honest, though, Potter

caught me off guard. I hadn't expected him to be involved in this scheme."

Snape tensed, but he was disappointingly inexpressive.

"Now what are you talking about?"

"He is with them. I thought he had been captured at first, but then he helped fight off my men and rescued one of the little saboteurs. Some how they must have convinced him to join their cause. And after all our Lord has done for him. The little ingrate."

Snape said nothing, and when Lucius looked back at him he was surprised by how pale he had become. And for Snape, who was pale to begin with, that was something.

"Are you alright, my friend?"

For a moment the potions master said nothing, and it wasn't until they entered the castle that he finally shook his head. "No, I am not. Potter was my responsibility. If he had thoughts of defecting I should have noticed, but his moods and behaviors have been so erratic lately with the tournament I hadn't thought anything suspicious about it."

"Yes, well, I fear I am in a worse position than you. Lord Voldemort seemed to know Potter was up to something last I spoke to him. He ordered me to take him into custody with the rest of the Germans. Now, I'm sorry, but we'll have to discuss this later. I have to try and salvage this whole mess."

Lucius moved away to the Great Hall. Snape wasn't sorry to see him go. His mind was buzzing with this latest information, and fear was starting to sink its fangs into him. He needed to find a quiet place to think everything through before he faced Lucius or the Dark Lord or even Bellatrix.

He headed towards his private quarters. There were Sentinels searching the dungeons, which was rather foolish, since at least half of them would likely be hopelessly lost before they were through, but no one stopped him.

His rooms would be exactly as he had left them, which seemed the only thing at the moment that hadn't changed. Harry, his ward, had run away after supposedly conspiring against Britain... that sounded completely ridiculous. The boy wouldn't have run away. He loved his friends, his school, his godfathers, and possibly even cared for Lord Voldemort, though why Snape hadn't the foggiest. Yet, Lucius had said even the Dark Lord had suspected his defection. Should he believe him?

"Aminitas," he muttered, the door to his room popped open noiselessly to allow him entry and immediately closed behind him. His wand jumped into his hand. It appeared he had assumed too quickly that even his rooms could provide him sanctuary. Someone was there.

His living room was exactly the same, dark furniture and glinting silver in the candlelight, but he sensed a presence amongst the shadows and after all these years he knew to trust his instincts.

"Come out with your hands in the air, or I will kill just to be safe."

"Please, don't fire," came a familiar, feminine voice. "I swear I only hid because I thought you might be a Sentinel."

"Hermione? What are you doing here?"

She moved out from the shadows of a book case, her notice-me-not spell slipping away from her like a discarded cloak. Head-to-toe she looked the frightened rabbit, pale and shivering and large eyes wet with tears. He lowered his wand. What was happening now?

"I'm so sorry, Uncle Severus, I swear I am, but I had to come. I had to ask him myself. Please, please, don't tell Lucius I'm here. He'll kill me."

He could tell she truly believed that, and he suspected she was right, or at least that Lucius might find some way to shove his failure to catch the Germans and Harry on to Hermione, and let the Dark Lord find a suitably deadly punishment. He shuddered at the thought.

"Calm down. I won't tell Lucius if you tell me what happened and why you are here. If I sense even a single falsehood, by lie or omission, I will drag you before your foster father myself, is that understood?"

She nodded, sniffled, and wrung her hands nervously. He wondered if she had come to confront Harry about his defection. Had that been what brought her so quickly? If she had answers, he wanted them.

"Go sit down. I will make us some tea."

"But if I'm found-"

"The only reason you managed to get into my rooms is because I have given you the passwords and set my wards to accept you and Draco. Anyone else, and that includes Lucius, who tried to enter uninvited would find themselves in a rather nasty little room on the other side of the dungeons. If you're honest, I will find the means to take you home undetected. Now is not the time. The school is swarming with his men."

She nodded, but didn't look any less nervous. He thought she must be as nervous to be noticed missing from home as she was about being found here, and decided he should probably make this quick. He set a kettle on the stove and added some chamomile tea to the water, thinking of how he should conduct his interrogation before leaving it all and entering the living room. He found Hermione anxiously chewing her thumbnail.

He sat directly across from her, and crossed his arms.

"Firstly, is your brother here?"

"No! He doesn't even know I left the house... at least he didn't. He might have noticed I'm gone by now."

He nodded. Good. Draco's lack of involvement was one less thing to worry about.

"Now, tell me, from the very beginning how you ended up here and what exactly you have done."

"I... It started when I got a letter from Viktor..."

She told him everything. The letter, Lucius' threat, her escape to Hogwarts, and confronting Viktor, his confession of being a spy, his invitation to leave. He stopped her briefly to asked, "Did he extend this offer to Harry?"

She was silent for a long moment, then said, "He hadn't offered, but he said he would. He said... he said the Dark Lord was experimenting on Harry..." Here she wiped the tears from her eyes, and sniffled again before she could continue, "... and he wanted to take him somewhere safe. But he hadn't asked yet."

So Lucius had been wrong. There was no conspiracy. That or Krum had lied to her.

He gestured for her to continue, and she went on to tell him about denying his offer and then being hit with a spell. Here she seemed a bit confused. She didn't remember Viktor casting the spell, but she also knew no one else had been with them up to that point. The next thing she knew she woke up on the floor of the classroom. She had tried to sneak out again, but found there were Sentinels everywhere. She was afraid, and ran into the dungeons and hid in Severus' rooms. And that was when he had found her.

"Did he find out?" she asked when she was done. "Did he find out about me coming to find Viktor? Is that why all those people are out there?"

"No-" The kettle in the kitchen began to whistle, and he stood and when to take care of it. He came back with one cup of tea for her only, as he didn't want anything deadening is wits at this point. She took a few tentative sips, and watched him expectantly, waiting for him to continue.

"No. He found out your friend Krum was a spy and ordered a raid. You may be relieved to know that as far as I can tell, both he and his classmates all escaped."

She was definitely relieved, if the tension flowing out of her was anything to by.

"... You will be less pleased to know that they took Potter with them."

Luckily, he had the foresight to levitate her tea cup before she dropped it on herself.

"...No..."

He sighed. He still didn't know the truth about Harry, and perhaps that was less important than what was going be done about it. Harry was practically a prince in the eyes of Britain, and to have him runaway or be kidnapped... he had no idea what might happen, but war seemed mixed in there somewhere.

In the meantime, he had to figure out what he was going to do about his misadventurous goddaughter before she picked up Harry's bad habits.

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"Are we under arrest?" Fleur demanded, snapping at Lucius Malfoy who stood blocking the door, staring down at her imperiously. She, along with her headmistress and classmates, had all been herded into their common room at wand point by some of the very same witches and wizards who had been telling them not worry only half an hour ago. Their wands had also been taken, and that was by the far the greatest violation they had performed so far.

"No, my dear, not yet," he said, as if it were inevitable that they would be.

“What iz all zis about?” Madam Maxime said evenly, doing a stunning job appearing unaffected by the whole ordeal. Commander Malfoy gave her a polite nod, but it came off as mocking.

“We have uncovered a plot to kill Lord Voldemort and sabotage our country's defense infrastructure. It appears this plot originates from Hogwarts itself, no less. I am sure you understand why I must be extremely cautious. Several conspirators have already escaped and taken one our students with them already.”

Fleur and the headmistress turned to one another, sharing looks of mutual concern, before turning back to Malfoy.

“I 'ope none of your people were 'urt, Commander,” Madam Maxime said, “and zat you recover your student quickly and unharmed. My students and I will do anyzing zat we can to assist you. May I ask who it was zat was taken?”

The man's smile was utterly serpentine, a little too wide and with eyes stone cold.

“On behalf of the people of Britain, I extend our appreciation for your concern and even more so your cooperation. Mr. Potter was... taken. Rest assured we will exercise every possible resource to bring him home. If you don't mind, I'd like to have some of my people ask all of you some questions. It maybe that you unwittingly came across some information that will help us and of course, clear you of any wrong doing.”

There was a moment of utter silence.

“... Very well,” Madam Maxime conceded.

“Excellent. Any volunteers?”

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“I don't see why we should let him out,” Oblitz grumbled, as he followed Ambassador Schwartzmann below deck, Krum following at

his heels. "I'd feel a lot safer if he remained where he was. Won't do him any harm either."

Schwartzmann shook his head.

"Absolutely not. Herr Potter is our guest, not our prisoner. It's bad enough that we left him here as long as we have."

Viktor felt a pang of guilt at that. He had been so busy trying to run the ship, he had assumed Jophery would take care of Harry, forgetting that Jophery would be even busier than himself. His guilt only grew worse as they entered the underbelly of the ship, and the air cooled so that their breath misted in the air. It had been hours since they had launched the ship, and he couldn't even begin to imagine how betrayed and terrified Harry might be feeling right then.

The hallways were dark and narrow below deck, as gloomy as any dungeon. There were six cells, each one numbered. The numbers above each cell two through six were glowing white. Cell one glowed red. Schwartzmann knocked.

"Herr Potter, this is Ambassador Schwartzmann. I've come to let you out. Please step away from the door."

Oblitz tapped his shoulder. "Perhaps I should go first... in case he's a bit upset."

"And greet him with a Stunning Hex? I don't think so."

"I should go in first," Viktor said. "I'm the one he's most familiar with."

"That is probably a good idea," the ambassador agreed.

There wasn't enough room to switch positions so the two adults moved a little further down the hall to give him some room.

"It's Viktor, Harry. Hold on just a second," he called, and unlocked the door. Carefully, he pushed it open. The cell was tiny, only four by five feet, with nothing but straw and a bucket by way of comforts.

Harry had tucked himself into tight little ball in the far corner, his black cloak wrapped tightly around him to fight the cold. Bright green eyes watched him cautiously.

“Harry.” He knelt before the frightened boy and gently placed a hand on his shoulder. “I’m sorry. The ship’s defense system didn’t recognize you, so you were sent here. In the chaos of escape, I completely forgot about you. I am very sorry. Come with me. I’ll get you something warm to eat and drink, and find a room for you to sleep in.”

Harry’s wide eyes remained fixed on him, but it wasn’t distrust he saw in them, but disbelief and outrage.

“Viktor... what have you done?”

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There were riots in London, Glasgow, Aberdeen, Coventry, and Edinburgh that afternoon when news broke that the Dark Lord had been hospitalized and the Germans had fled, the papers passing their escape off as a confession of guilt. Harry’s defection hadn’t been released to the press yet, as much to prevent further outrage as the fact that everyone lacked any real information about why he ran. The Brass Cult had been dispatched to aid the overwhelmed Sentinels with crowd disbursement and arrests, testing their mettle against British citizens rather than foreign invaders for their first engagement. There had been looting, fires, assaults, and nearly a dozen deaths.

Lucius desperately wished he could be at any one of those rioting cities, rather than standing in subdued little Hogsmeade as the Dark Lord arrived. His physical recovery was remarkable, his foul mood was more pervasive than ever.

Voldemort stepped through the floo, pale as death and just as sinister in his black robes and glowing red eyes. The soldiers guarding the floo all flinched away from him, and Lucius didn’t blame them one bit. The Dark Lord glanced briefly at Lucius, then moved passed him without saying a word. There was a carriage waiting for him just

outside, but he ignored it in favor of a one the Sentinel's horses, immediately spurring it into a hard gallop. Lucius was forced into a rather undignified rush to find a horse of his own and chase after the man. He had been summoned with that glance, and he was already in enough trouble as it was without making his master wait.

They both abandoned their horses at the castle keep, and made their way towards Voldemort's office.

"Where is Morgan?" the Dark Lord asked, his voice clipped.

"London. He and his men are protecting the Court offices from rioters."

"Severus?"

"On his way. He left earlier to check on my son and foster daughter, and to ask them if they had noticed anything odd in Potter's behavior lately."

"What have you learned so far?"

"All of the Germans were in on it. Every single one, including the students. They were very well prepared to escape in an emergency. Nothing important was left in their rooms, and they carried at least two portkeys on themselves at all times. We've tried using the portkeys of the suspects we captured, but they won't activate for anyone but their owners. We sent the body of one of our prisoners on ahead. As a message."

"The French dignitaries?"

"So far, nothing, but I haven't employed the more... effective methods. I wanted to wait for your approval first."

"Denied. They weren't involved, and persecuting them would be counterproductive. Right now we have the political benefit of being the victimized country, but it won't mean anything if we torture uninvolved bystanders. When we're done here, cut them loose."

Lucius wanted to argue, pointing out they could simply blame both countries, and take credit for capturing the French, while the cowardly Germans ran away, abandoning their allies. He didn't dare protest though. His Master's tempter was already short.

They stepped into the Dark Lord's office.

"Crucio!"

Lucius fell to the floor, clenching his teeth against the agony that ripped through him, but he couldn't smother his moan. It seemed to last for eternity, but then it always had.

"You failed Lucius. You failed miserably. If it weren't for that anonymous letter, they would have succeeded in taking away knowledge of our entire military force! As it is, they've almost all escaped, and with my protégé no less! Crucio!"

This time he couldn't clamp his teeth shut fast enough, and pain forced him to cry out.

"Oh, do shut up. Harry didn't make such a racket when he was a First Year. Crucio!"

He clenched his teeth again, pride aching almost as much as his body. At last it stopped, but he didn't dare climb to his feet, knowing his Master might take it as a sign of defiance and start up all over again. He didn't even know if he had the strength to rise. It had been a long time since he had to endure this particular punishment.

There was a knock at the door. Afraid to let anyone see him so reduced, Lucius forced himself to rise with wobbly legs, half expecting another curse. Voldemort ignored him entirely, his attention focused on one of the baubles on his desk, checking to see who had disturbed them.

"Get out. Come back when Severus has arrived. And send for Morgan."

"Yes, my Lord," he said, bowing stiffly.

His worst fear was that it was Lestrangle at the door, there to gloat and further enrage Voldemort against him with exaggerations of his failure, but his fear was unfounded. Instead he found a man in white robes, one he didn't recognize. He regarded him coolly for a moment, but the man's sole focus was on the Dark Lord. He left without being acknowledged.

Brennan turned to Voldemort, lifting a brow.

"I see even with a complete soul you are still quite monstrous. A pity."

"You have a lot of nerve to mock me, the one who is going to kill you."

Brennan shrugged. "I knew this was inevitable once I had made my decision to go through with it."

"So you came to me on your own accord. No denials? No excuses?"

"Do I need an excuse? Did you not provoke this with every act of murder, torment, and cruelty?"

"When have I ever been cruel to you, Brennan? Have I ever been anything other than indulgent and generous?" he asked, staring over his locked fingers, his red eyes burning with accusation.

"And there is where you lack your basic humanity, believing that justice is only sought by the victim of a crime. Empathy for a victim, hatred for an injustice on principle, and love were all things you never did understand, and at least one of them will be your undoing. Unless you learn of course. You are capable of it now."

"You fool... do you think it makes any difference? That I might somehow weaken or die? Or did you think this stunt would suddenly make me a kinder, gentler person? A firm scolding and some cookies and milk when we were all done? My hatred is as strong as ever and if anything you have made me more powerful. Worse than your betrayal and your stupidity however is the fact you deluded my pupil into going along with this futile mission."

Brennan chuckled at that.

"It's funny that you should say that... it was his idea after all. Not the killing you part, of course, that was just wishful thinking on my part."

"He was naïve, and I will delight in relieving him of that particular failing when he returns. You, however, knew exactly what you were doing."

Voldemort stood, drawing his wand. Brennan watched him quietly, folding his hands in his lap and waiting. This wasn't how he wanted to go, but he could face it with some level of peace. He had sworn on his teacher's grave that he would see Tom Riddle complete or see him dead, and though it had taken nearly fifty years it was finally done. The rest was up to time and Voldemort himself.

"Oh, no you don't. This isn't going to end with a simple Killing Curse," the Dark Lord growled. "You made me bleed. I intend to return the favor. Serpensortia!"

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"What the hell were you thinking?" Harry shouted, his angry voice filling the tiny cabin, amplified by its inability to escape through the Silencing Charm he had erected over the space. "We held out our hand to you and you accept it with a knife hidden behind your back? How could you possibly justify that?"

Viktor scowled. This wasn't how he pictured things turning out. Harry was suppose to be grateful he was rescued, not fuming mad about the whole spying bit. He was being ridiculous.

"We had to know. We didn't come to start a fight, be we had to know what the Dark Lord's real intentions are, not we he says they are."

"That's bollocks! You wanted the information so you could go to war!"

"In case he started one! And you know he's perfectly capable of it! He's been building a formal army for the last year and raised taxes twice in the last three! He's been preparing for war. He wants it."

"But you started it, Viktor. Spin it all you want, but you struck the first blow."

Viktor fumed under the accusation. How could Harry be so closed-minded? Hadn't he seen the evidence himself first hand of what Voldemort's intentions were, and he still he had the nerve to wag his finger at them. Germany wasn't prepared for war, not like the Dark Lord. They had needed the information their mission would have provided, a way to fight smarter when they couldn't fighter harder.

"For someone who was just rescued from death," he ground out, "You sure are damn critical of the people who saved you."

That shut Harry up fast. In fact, it looked like he had swallowed Viktor's words and they settled badly in his stomach. He looked ill, and he turned away from Viktor to stare out the porthole. Beyond it he could see schools of shimmering silver fish dash by his window before they disappeared into the murky gloom of ocean. Or were they in the Channel by now?

"... Those are two different things."

There was guilt in Harry's expression now, and Viktor was suddenly reminded of what he had overheard in the Gryffindor dormitory. Everything had been so chaotic he hadn't had time to think of it before.

"I didn't want that to happen. He nearly died!"

"But he did not, and you have what you wanted,"

"He's going to kill me."

"You knew that might happen too."

"Oh Merlin, you did it," Viktor blurted, realizing now exactly what they had been talking about. "You're the one who attacked the Dark Lord! Jesus, Harry are you really snarking at me for a little surveillance after that?"

"I didn't attack him," he said, but it sounded weak, a plea to be believed rather than a demand for it. "It was an accident. The magic... it didn't do what I thought it would... well it did, but Brennan never told me that it would hurt him!"

"What did you do, Harry?" Because it was inconceivable that the boy before him, small and kind and so very young could possibly have come closer to killing the Dark Lord than anyone else since his rise to power. The fact that the Gryffindor actually looked guilty about it was mind-boggling.

"You wouldn't understand. It's not the sort of thing they teach you in school or in books. I shouldn't have messed with it. I didn't understand it either."

"Dark Arts?"

Harry shook his head but didn't elaborate. He moved to the farthest bed and sat down, his previous anger slipping away as he dropped his head into his hands.

"Please... you can't tell anyone about this. Not Jophery or Oblitz, but especially not Ambassador Schwartzmann."

"Why not? Harry, do you realize what you've done? You've done what most people thought were impossible. You proved the Dark Lord isn't invulnerable. You'll be hailed a hero."

The words did nothing to comfort Harry, and in fact his expression only became more pained.

"A hero? For what? He's not...he wasn't my enemy. He was my mentor and my teacher... my friend. He could be cruel and selfish, but what I did was reckless and selfish too. I nearly killed my friend, Viktor, and if you tell anyone they might try to make me do it again."

The older boy was stunned into silence, and slowly he sat down on the bunk across from Harry, trying to grasp at everything that was being said. Harry had the power to kill the Dark Lord, and he was right that if it was discovered he could do this others might try and force him. Force him to rid the world of murdering warmonger and tyrant... to make Harry a murderer in the process.

"Does the Dark Lord know this?" he asked.

"... I don't know. If he doesn't yet, he probably will soon."

"If you don't kill him, he'll kill you. He can't risk letting you run free with that kind of ability."

Harry shook his head. "Please, don't tell anyone. You owe me this, Viktor."

"I've already repaid that life debt," he said stiffly, the opportunity Harry presented was not something he wanted to so easily slip by, even as his insides squirmed at the moral implications of it.

"Yes," Harry bit out, and Viktor flinched at the venom behind. "... and stole my will away to do it."

"That was the old man..."

"You could have ended that spell at any time. You took me away from everything and everyone I cared about without so much as a by-your-leave.. My home, my family, my friends, all gone, and now you want to force me to help you kill someone? I'd rather die than let you turn me into your assassin."

"He's a monster, and he's going to kill you!" he snarled back, jumping to his feet.

Harry looked away.

“Just don't tell anyone. Whatever I choose to do, I deserve to be able to make that decision myself. Please Viktor. You said you did this to help me. Prove it.”

The older boy clenched his fists and his teeth, trying to reign in control of his frustration. Why was he defending the Dark Lord? Why was he going out of his way to protect that monster, after everything he had done and would do? He didn't understand, especially when he knew Harry wasn't a coward.

“Fine...” he bit out, “But one of these days you're going tell me why.”

He stalked out of the tiny cabin, slamming the door behind him.

Left alone, Harry fell back onto his bunk. It had been less than one day, and he had managed to nearly kill the ruler of wizarding Britain, been kidnapped by German spies, escaped almost certain death and also everyone and everything that held meaning in his life, and was now heading to another country and another school and another life completely.

How was he supposed to feel about that?

At the moment, all he felt was tired. He tried to think of what his life would be like. He tried to think of Durmstang, the massive fortress in a frozen wasteland, but his mind drifted to Hogwarts during Christmas time, snow balls fights with the Weasley twins, and Elsbeth. He tried to think of life with a foster family in the country... but ended up with memories of summers with Snape, snipping at one another all the time and random visits from Hermione and Draco. Life with a foster family in the city... he thought of the Reichers, gathered together in the family room, reading story books to Alyssa and Morgana, Kyle reading the newspaper over Robert's shoulder.

Finally he gave up on predicting his future, and wondered what everyone was doing right now. How many people even knew he was missing? Snape and Voldemort definitely would. Did they know about him nearly killing the Dark Lord, or had they passed the blame off onto Viktor and his cohorts? Did they hate him now, thinking he ran away with the enemy? McGunny would also know, but he didn't

honestly know the Ravenclaw well enough to know how he would react. Hermione... she had to know by now too, and she would have told Draco.

Everyone else... they would hear of it through the papers. No doubt they'd be screaming bloody murder, calling him a traitor and a coward and maybe even an attempted murderer. He was so stupid! Hadn't he promised he would be there for them the way they had been there for him? He'd broken that promise, to himself and to them and for what? To make the cruelest, most arrogant, and inhuman man in the world...

Less cruel. Less conceited. More human.

He sighed. He couldn't regret that. He didn't know if it would work, but what if it did? How many lives would be spared by sudden moments of compassion? How much suffering avoided with the ability to empathize? He didn't expect to be forgiven, but at least he knew Voldemort was capable of forgiveness.

Then again, if he never saw the man again, would it really matter?

Finding the answer to that was way too depressing. Things were out of his control right now, so he'd take advantage of that and try to stop worrying or thinking in general. He kicked off his boots, stripped down to his pants and undershirt and slipped beneath the covers of the bed he had been sitting on. He closed his eyes, cleared his thoughts, and listened to the soft creaks and groans of the ship and the muffled putter of footsteps in the hall. As sleep began to descend upon him, a new sound came to him, a familiar ticking sound. He reached into his pocket, and pulled out his watch. Even in the low light of the cabin, he could clearly see the Hogwarts' coat of arms. Impulsively, he flipped it open.

To Harry

Hope this keeps you on time and on track

-Hermione

If only.

Gently, he closed it and hugged it to his chest, squeezing his eyes shut. It couldn't be over. Not without so much as a goodbye. Not again.

He didn't know how or when, but some day he would see his friends and his godfathers again. If he had to slay another dragon and make another sacrifice to Madris to make it so, he would. She was the Goddess of the Hearth, of home and family, and with her favor he knew it was possible.

"Please," he prayed, "Look after them, keep them safe for me, until I can find my way back to them. Please, look after them, keep them safe for me, until I can find my way back to them. Please, look after them..."

He repeated his prayer, over and over again until at last he fell asleep.

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Snape re-entered Hogwarts with a sigh of relief. He had safely smuggled his goddaughter out of the castle in his luggage and taken her home, and no one the wiser. Even Draco didn't seem to realize his sister had been missing, but he did seem suspicious when she barely reacted to the news that Harry had been taken by the Durmstang students. Snape thought he probably shouldn't have added quite so much chamomile to her tea. The foster siblings would likely argue about her oddness while he was away, but whether she decided to trust Draco with her secret or not he would leave up to her.

Now he just had a Dark Lord to contend with.

Fun.

"You took your sweet time," Lucius muttered, appearing beside him from seemingly out of no where. He was unusually pale, and Snape watched him from the corner of his eye carefully, trying to see if his hands were shaking from the after affects of a pain curse or if he had been subjected to some other form of torture.

"The children were understandably upset. It took some time to reassure them," he said, not sounding or really feeling the least bit guilty.

"Reassure them of what? Potter ran away. The world isn't ending."

"He didn't run away."

"I was there. He helped them escape. He was with them. He ran away."

Snape said nothing more. He didn't have any evidence to present to the contrary that wasn't self-incrementing and even if he did Lucius would only call him a fool for believing it.

"Commander!"

They both turned to see a young Brass Cultie scurrying towards them. He stopped only long enough to salute.

"What is it?" Lucius demanded impatiently.

"Sir, Chief Sentinel Morgan has arrived and is heading for Lord Voldemort's office."

"Dismissed."

The cadet hurried off again to do whatever it was every other soldier was doing in lieu of a battle that was never finished.

"Come with me. Our Lord has requested our presence once you arrived."

That didn't sound particularly promising, but the potion's master had no say in the matter. He followed Lucius to the highest tower and into the Dark Lord's domain. He had expected Morgan to be there, but he hadn't factored in Professor Brennan.

What was left of him, anyway.

Even Lucius looked taken back by the sheer amount of blood. Every step they took made the carpet squish beneath their feet, and they dared not touch any wall or surface for the lines of sticky redness that stripped the entire room. The only part that made the man at all recognizable was the tiny patches of clean white robes the hints of beard beneath the gore.

Snape took a deep breath, and turned the Dark Lord sitting quietly at his desk, writing rapidly on some plain white (and red speckled) parchment. One side of his face was splashed with blood, but he didn't appear to notice it, and continued as if the body was nothing more than an extra piece of furniture.

He felt a well of pity for Brennan, whose crime he couldn't imagine warranted such a fate, but most of that pity was overshadowed with the very real fear that he might be facing a similar fate himself. Potter had been his responsibility after all.

"He tried to kill me," Voldemort said by way of greeting, not looking up from his parchment. "They both did."

"My Lord?"

"Professor Brennan and Harry," he clarified. "They performed a ritual, the result of which you saw this morning."

Lucius and Snape shared a look of surprise. Neither of them had conceived of Harry being responsible. Aware, possibly, but not responsible. It was completely out of character. They looked to Morgan, but he remained as blank faced as ever, taking it all in. Voldemort continued.

"He came straight to my office to confess. Very upright of him, if I do say so myself. Saved me the trouble of tracking him down. It is a pity Harry couldn't be so obliging."

Snape felt his heart sink at the thought. If Harry had not escaped, it could have been his blood staining Snape's boots. It still might.

Suddenly, Hermione's revelation that Harry didn't know about Germany's plot seemed completely irrelevant.

"What would you have of us, my Lord?" Lucius said, cautiously. Voldemort appeared much calmer after having exerted his vengeance on Brennan, but a calm Dark Lord was craftier and therefore harder to predict than an angry one. He set down his quill and sat back in his chair, looking at his three loyal servants.

"I have been thinking... it seems a waste to simply kill Harry just yet. Especially when he's set up such a wonderful opportunity to exploit his popularity for the good of Britain."

Severus didn't have a clue what he meant, but a part of him eased. Assassinating Lily's son didn't seem to be a part of the Dark Lord's immediate plans.

"I think it would be best if we leave out dear Harry's betrayal when addressing the public. All they need to know is that Harry was taken against his will by Durmstrang after their failed attempt to kill me."

It suddenly clicked for Severus, and he felt a twinge of admiration for the cleverness of his master's plan.

"So when the Germans attempt to rationalize their illegal investigation to the nations of Europe, they will also have to justify attempted murder and kidnapping. The people of Britain, who love Potter as their own personal prince, will be outraged and practically demand we go to war with Germany."

"Yes," Voldemort said, smiling darkly.

"But if Harry tells the Germans what he has done..." Lucius started, then realized the most obvious solution. "We can say he is being forced to lie by his kidnappers. After all, who would believe a child capable of trying to assassinate the ruler of Britain?"

"Yes."

"We'll have to demand his safe return," the potions master continued. "If they refuse we'll use it to further our cause and incite anger against them by both Britain and the other nations. France is already fond of him for saving Delacour, and even the German public might become suspicious of their own ministry's agenda. If they return Potter..."

Here, Snape couldn't conceive of what would happen. He would definitely be punished, but how? He couldn't be killed or the public would question it, and torture would likewise be obvious. He looked to Voldemort, who was staring directly at him now, measuring his reactions. Snape felt an inkling of fear. Did the Dark Lord suspect his loyalty might somehow lean in Harry's favor?

"I made him a prince, my student, my..." Voldemort faltered here, his eyes sliding shut as his expression turned to a grimace, the closest to true pain they had seen since that morning. After a moment, he opened his eyes again and continued., "If he is returned... he will suffer as my slave until the day his usefulness to me ends."

Well... that was better than being killed instantly... maybe... hopefully.

"In the mean time," Voldemort said, his tone changing with the topic to something less sinister. "Severus, I don't know what Lucius told you already, but we received an anonymous tip about the German's scheme in the form of a letter originating from my office."

Snape frowned. "I was not made aware of this."

"Lucius will give you the full details as he was the one to initially receive it. I want you to track down who in the school sent it. It shouldn't be too difficult with the limited number of students and teachers who were actually present at the time."

"It will be done, my Lord."

He turned to carry out his orders, barely believing that he was getting out of there with all as parts. Lucius had actually managed to escape out the door, before Voldemort called him back.

"Oh, before I forget, Severus..."

The potions master froze, his hopes of escape dashed. Reluctantly, he turned around.

“...in regards to keeping track of my protégé, you have greatly disappointed me. Crucio.”

Optimism really was for idiots.

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It took two days to sail around Britain, during which Harry spent most of his time primarily trying to sleep and watching fish swimming passed his cabin window. Viktor or Jophery usually came to deliver his meals and tried to engage him in conversation, but it was awkward at best and just plain frustrating more often than not. Schwartzmann too had come to talk to him about what he should expect when he arrived in Germany and the process of granting him political asylum. He was told political asylum was granted to those who were being persecuted, and if he had any readily available evidence of being mistreated or a specific event he was willing to describe under veritaserum, it would make the process much quicker. The idea of it left Harry feeling unclean.

There were dozens of incidents he could describe where he had been threatened, hurt, manipulated, and harassed, but as far as he was concerned that wasn't Schwartzmann's or Germany's business. He wasn't a victim. He had fought back, the result of which was his being forced to flee. As long as Voldemort lived, he thought of things as even between them, slandering the other's name wasn't the sort of petty game he wanted to play. He had to tell them something though, and he wasn't entirely sure what would satisfy their definition of 'persecution'. He told Schwartzmann to give him time to think it over.

As much as he tried to sleep, he found true rest elusive. His dreams were plagued with nightmares of being hunted by Voldemort, of Voldemort killing his friends, of his friends accusing him of being a traitor. Late at night, when the other three boys he shared the cabin with were fast asleep and his nightmares had woken him, he would

open his watch and lay it beside him, listening to it ticking away through the night and thought of home.

On the final morning aboard the ship, Viktor came to wake him.

"Viktor?" he asked sleepily, as the older boy gently shook him awake. It had been a bad night, and he must have only drifted back to sleep an hour or so ago. Nevertheless, he put on his glasses and sat up.

"We are almost to Durmstrang. Some of the other guys pitched in to get you something suitable to wear. Most of what you have won't be warm enough, but your fur cloak should work and your boots if you wear an extra pair of socks." He placed a folded pile of clothes in Harry's lap. "Come to the galley when you're dressed."

"Okay. Thanks."

The clothes were a typical Durmstrang uniform, which was just about as warm as full winter ensemble back at Hogwarts. It was light brown and militaristic, stuffed with goose down and lined in wolf fur. It was also too big in the shoulders and too long in the pants. He put on his boots, and carried his cloak in his arms on his way to the galley.

He tensed when he saw Oblitz coming towards him. Harry hadn't seen the man since he had been taken from the cell, but that had been more than enough time to figure out that the Dark Arts' professor thought of him as the enemy amongst them and would happily have thrown him off the ship and straight into the mouth of a hungry shark if he'd had his way.

"Potter," he snapped.

"Professor."

Oblitz stepped closer, invading his personal space so that he might loom over him. Harry recognized it as an intimidation tactic, and forced himself not to back up and to look directly up into the man's eyes. Eyes that narrowed angrily at his defiance.

"You may have the others fooled, but I know what you really are. You won't be able to hide behind Krum and Schwartzmann forever. Once in the school, you will be in my territory," he growled.

That was indeed a bit scary, but nearly as much as the man thought it was and Harry let him know it. He glared right back at him.

"I have faced murders, madmen, werewolves, grindylows, a dragon, and monsters you've probably never even heard of. I have had tea with the Dark Lord himself, and stood toe-to-toe with his Death Eaters, and lived with Severus bloody Snape for the last two years. If you honestly think you could intimidate me then you need to go back to school for a little more educating. Now if you'll excuse me..."

He stepped around him, but Oblitz lashed out and grabbed his arm in an iron grip. Harry flinched, then glared up at the man, who glared back just as fiercely.

"Beasts and wizards are not the same thing, and standing beside a wizard is a lot different than standing against them."

Harry's grabbed Oblitz's wrist with his free hand and squeezed. The man grimaced, tried to maintain his own grip, but ultimately failed as Harry tore his hand free. Harry leaned in close, Oblitz grimaced but held his ground. He had made the mistake of grabbing Harry with his wand hand and now had nothing to defend himself with.

"It is the exact same thing where I come from."

He shoved the man away, and watched as he backed away, his eyes glaring pure hatred at him. It was a display of an uncommon strength on Harry's part, and one he had not had to use since he had held Larousse's lifeless body on the castle roof. How far it extended, he had never tested, but he suspected it came and went as necessity dictated, as yet another form of wandless magic. Apparently, it had been necessary now. He wondered if Durmstrang would be any different from Hogwarts in regards to the inordinate number of people who wanted to kill him.

In the galley, he found Viktor and several other boys having breakfast. They all looked up to greet him as he sat down.

“We'll arrive in about an hour. The Minster of Magic will probably be there to greet us, along with some aurors. They'll want to ask you some questions, and they might get a bit... intense, but don't worry. You're protected under the Turner Act, which means they can't send you back to Britain if you request asylum,” Viktor stated, the undertone being that he should be careful, and not just because of his secret.

“What can they do?”

“Since you're a minor? Not much. They have to have a legal guardian present or the permission of a legal guardian in order to interrogate you, which you don't have yet and since you have committed no crime they can't hold you for more than twenty-four hours. The worst they can do is drag their heels with the foster care process, which doesn't mean anything since you'll be at Durmstrang anyway. Listen, I don't want you to worry about it. I just wanted you to be aware of your rights.”

“Which are what exactly?”

Jophery threw in his own view on things. “They can't send you back to Britain. They can't threaten you with much of anything but twenty four hours of boredom. You're entitled to an education per governmental law, as well as food, shelter, clothes, and basic health care until you are the age of majority and then you can get a job and pay the government back with a twenty percent income tax over the next one hundred years. Sucks, I know, but there it is.”

“... I think I can live with that,” Harry said, because frankly it seemed he didn't have any other choice.

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Book IV:

Chapter 20: Distant Lands

As far as travel went, magical ship was one of the best, aside from the magical car. It was smooth, quiet, and aside from being rather dark under the water, generally a pleasant atmosphere. Surfacing, however, was one of the most nauseating experiences not related to poisoning Harry had the misfortune of experiencing, not unlike riding a fast moving elevator for way too long.

“Oh hell,” he groaned, leaning back against the wall. He was sitting on his bunk, like the rest of his roommates, holding onto the edge of their beds to keep their balance as the ship crashed through several feet of ice and then landed heavily on top of it.

“Don't you dare spew, Potter,” the largest boy in the room threatened. “I'm not meeting the Minister of Magic smelling like your vomit.”

“Your objections are noted. I'll take them under consideration,” he sniped back. Really he was in an all around bad mood. He was tired, depressed, anxious, and now sea sick. The only thing that could make the day any worse was the possible interrogation by some German aurors once he was on dry land.

“All hands on deck!” rang through the ship, and everyone got up and put on their cloaks and gloves and went out into the hall, lining up with everyone else there. Viktor and Jophery were up ahead with the ambassador and the rest of the adults, and gave him a nod.

The door leading out onto the deck was opened, and a blast of icy wind rushed into cabin, popping his ears and biting his nose with its chill. Instantly, Harry started to shiver.

“Just wait,” the boy behind him said. “It gets worse.”

Swell.

They filed out onto the deck, and Harry quickly learned that the boy had been right. It was frigid cold, hovering well below freezing and

with a nasty wind. It was near blinding white, stretching the entire length of the lake and eating away at the edges of the sky, so only the lightest shade of blue shown directly above them. They had broken through the ice near what had to be the shore. The lake itself rested inside of a crater, surrounded on all sides by towers peaks of snow capped rock. As far as Harry could see there was no way in or out that could have been connected to the sea, but that was the sort of magic Harry was familiar with. At the nearest shore was a road, black and shiny with melted snow, winding its way further up the stone walls of the crater, and at the very top Harry could see Durmstrang.

The fortress was black and glassy and composed of hundreds of thin towers and walkways and floating buttresses, a dark fairytale castle made entirely out of obsidian glass. It stood in stark relief, its size and grandeur in perfect silhouette against the surrounding white. The only sign it was not merely an elaborate two-dimensional shadow was the faint glow of light that could be seen emanating from inside, hinting at the dozens of different structures that composed the fortress.

“Wow,” Harry breathed out. He had never thought he would ever see a place that rivaled Hogwarts in beauty or magnificence, but this certainly came close.

No one wanted to stay out in the cold any more than Harry, so they worked quickly to lower the gang plank and get everyone off the ship and onto the road. The road itself was warm, and Harry could feel the heat of it rising up into his cloak, fighting against the surrounding arctic chill. There was a line of carriages waiting for them, pulled by animals with white hair so thick Harry couldn't tell if they were equine or bovine or something else altogether. They squeezed in six to a carriage, glad for the extra body heat rather than annoyed, and the beasts guided themselves up the steep sloping road to Durmstrang.

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“Welcome home!”

There was a thundering rush of applause, and Harry felt himself flinch away. The entire party had been dropped off in the stables which was connected to the castle itself and Oblitz had lead them straight to what must have been Durmstang's equivalent to the Great Hall. It was an amphitheater, divided by four sets of stairs and twelve tiers of tables and chairs from floor to ceiling, every railing and table leg and chair back decorated with medieval representations of the fiercest beasts and monsters. The ceiling was slightly domed and fully mirrored, making the hundreds of floating candles above them appear like thousands.

The amphitheater was full to overflowing with students, and government officials, and reporters who were flashing their cameras unceasingly. Harry turned away from reporters and tried to ignore the speech from what was probably the Minister of Magic, and looked to his future classmates, trying to get a feel for what life was going to be like there.

They were mostly boys he noted, with short cropped hair and serious faces. The girls looked the same, their long hair pulled back into tight braids or buns and nothing soft or particularly feminine about their expressions. They did look genuinely pleased that their classmates had returned safely, but he felt his heart sink at the lack of variation.

“- and we extend our hospitality to Herr Potter, who at great personal risk aided our Champion and all of Durmstrang in returning home safely.”

At the mention of his name, he turned to the minister even as the other students burst into another round of applause. He got a full face of camera flash for his effort. Someone put their hand on his arm, and he turned to see a man he didn't recognize in some sort of dark gray uniform. Harry thought he must be a German auror.

“I'm Auror Grantz. If you would come with me, please?” he asked politely, but his hand was all firm authority. It made Harry nervous.

“Is something wrong?”

"No, you just need to be debriefed and sign some papers. Legalities and what not."

"... Okay."

He felt a little better when other students began to follow other aurors, but not much. His situation was not the same as theirs and everyone there knew it. They left the amphitheater and moved deeper into the school. The entire fortress seemed to be made of obsidian like material, and as they made their way through the halls, Harry could see vague shapes and lights through the walls, but rather than reveal anything it made everything that much more mysterious. What was that moving there? Was that a person or a suit of armor? Why was that room completely dark when the rest had at least one candle?

The amphitheater had been warm, as warm as Hogwarts in winter at least, but the hallways seemed to hover just above freezing. The echo of their footsteps against the high vaulted ceiling and a constant chill gave the place an air of abandonment despite the presence of people.

Mausoleum, Harry decided, it was like a beautiful mausoleum where people were very quiet and serious when they visited.

Or maybe he just missed home.

"Where are we going, sir?" Harry asked, after nearly four minutes of walking and no destination in sight.

"Here." Grantz pointed at a door, large and adorned with bronze fixture like everything else. He opened it and stepped inside. Harry made a mental note of his wand being securely up his sleeve, and cautiously followed behind him. There was a medi-witch with gray hair and a bony face inside, along with a much younger assistant standing by her.

"Good day, Herr Potter," she said pleasantly, her tone kindly despite her prickly expression.

"Good day to you, Madam?"

“Madam Wells. I'm going to perform a routine examination and ask you a few health related questions, if that is alright.”

Harry wasn't entirely sure that it was. The last routine examination he'd had was when he was ten, which had been bad enough when he didn't have anything to hide. But then, what would she do if he said no? She seemed to sense his hesitation.

“It is all strictly confidential,” she assured him. “The only people who will have access to this information will be yourself and your personal physician, who just happens to be me.”

Harry nodded, but turned a questioning look to the auror standing nearby. He took the hint as well.

“I'll just wait outside.”

“Thank you.”

He was glad for the his cooperation, because the first thing they did was have him take off his clothes. The room was warm, but it was embarrassing and intimidating having two people hover over him with their instruments and their questions. It didn't help that they seemed particularly interested in his moon tattoo.

“Is this scar from a curse?” she asked, pulling out a small orb from her medical satchel. The orb was clouded white, but it turned dark blue when she placed it near his mark. “That's strange. It's never done that before. Never dark blue at least.”

“What does that mean? Dark blue?” he asked, to avoid her first question more than out of curiosity. He knew what the tattoo meant.

“It's saturated in magic, but not regular wizarding magic. Curse scars usually turn it red or black. Tell me, have you had any run ins with fairies?”

“Not that I know of.”

“Do you remember where you got this?”

“...”

“It's alright, you can tell me.”

“... I'd rather not...” ... because I don't know that I can trust you. “It doesn't hurt.”

“That's not the same as being harmless. If this is the result of a dark spell, there are any number of things it could be doing to you, physically, mentally, or magically. It would be best to remove it if at all possible.”

Harry shook his head, placing his hand protectively over the mark. It had caused him a great deal of trouble, but it was tied into his body and soul and he couldn't risk anyone tampering with it. “Leave it alone. It's not a curse.”

He wasn't going to tell her what it was though. Unless she was a pagan herself, she would never understand the difference between a goddess' blessing and a Dark Arts spell. With power of this sort, it was often hard to tell the difference. She looked ready to argue, but he cut her off.

“Can I get dressed now?”

She sighed, but nodded. He scurried back into his clothes. She gave him some paperwork to fill out, some potions to help fight off pneumonia (a necessity in Durmstang) and ordered him to eat more red meat and whole grains to help bulk up, but said he was otherwise in perfect health.

She called the auror back in, who escorted Harry to yet another room, where additional paperwork waited for him to fill out and sign. Most of it had to do with either his admission into Durmstrang and his previous course work or his application for political asylum. It was the other forms that left him hesitant.

They were written in tiny print, but were several pages long by themselves, the only legible sections were the places where it asked for his signature. Having had bad experiences with magically binding contracts, he set them aside for last.

"What are these?" he asked Grantz, once the regular forms were out of the way. The auror shrugged.

"I don't know. I've never done a political asylum case before. Most of them were done before I ever graduated from the academy."

Harry cast a quick charm on his glasses so he could actually read the tiny gray print, and as he did he understood that they had definitely wanted him to sign without reading them. They were waivers. Waivers of his rights of asylum, of medical privacy, of his civil rights for interrogation purposes. He looked back to the auror, but the man didn't seem to think anything was wrong.

Harry tore the waivers in half. Grantz looked vaguely amused.

"That bad, huh? I wondered if Seibligg wouldn't try something."

"Why?"

The man shrugged. "The minister is in a tight spot. He is up for re-election this fall, and since he is pretty much responsible for provoking a fight with the Dark Lord, he needs a way to justify it or he might find himself the scapegoat for the next electoral candidate. Your his best option? Everyone knows you were the closest person the Dark Lord has to an heir, but you still ran away. If he can get you to vouch for his decisions, then he stands a good chance at re-elections. It helps that you're pretty popular over here after you helped save Krum's life. Getting your support can only help him, but if you don't cooperate he has no legal recourse."

"So he can't make me?"

"... I don't know. I am sure he can make you damn uncomfortable if you don't."

Harry sighed and ran a hand through his hair. He had hoped that, at the very least, he had left his life of politics behind in Britain. Yet here it was dogging his every move, only here he had few allies to call upon.

"You're awfully forthcoming about all of this," he said.

Grantz shrugged.

"I voted for the other guy."

Harry smiled at that. "I'll keep that secret, at least."

"I'd appreciate it."

They dragged their feet for as long as possible, chatting about Quidditch mostly, but were eventually interrupted by a prim little witch summoning them to meet the Minister of Magic. She didn't look happy to find Harry had torn up some of his paperwork.

"That was uncalled for," she chided.

"That goes both ways, lady."

She huffed, and stalked ahead. She lead them to one of the towers, up a ridiculous number of tightly winding stairs. It opened up into solarium, surrounded by exotic ferns and large tropical flowers, and dome of glass held up by metal cage. It reminded Harry of the the indoor exhibits at the zoo he used to go to as a child.

The Minister sat directly in the center of the room, a small garden table with a coffee set placed on it, seeming to admire his surroundings. Six of his aids and two guards stood out of the way, waiting to fulfill his smallest whim. Harry hadn't gotten a good look at him before, but he was struck at how... unimpressive he looked in comparison to Voldemort. For one, he was a little short and on the hefty side, and he held an air of perpetual disinterest and boredom like some spoiled aristocrat. Very unlike the Dark Lord who looked ready for anything, ready to fight, ready to negotiate, ready lead a nation, and ready to enjoy a moment to himself.

And he really needed to stop comparing this place with home.

And to stop calling it home, since it wasn't anymore.

"Good day, Herr Potter.

"Good day, Minister Seibligg."

"Have a seat," he offered, gesturing to the only other chair available, directly across from him. Harry did as suggested. The witch that had escorted them, came up and whispered something in the minister's ear that he couldn't hear, but could guess at by the frown on the man's face. When she finally moved away to join the others, the minister turned to him.

"Do you doubt my hospitality, Herr Potter?"

There was an accusation in his tone, but Harry knew it for a manipulation. He was good at spotting them these days. The minister was expecting him to want to be helpful and polite as any guest should. He either hadn't been informed or forgotten that Harry hadn't chosen to come here.

"I do when you try cheap tricks like you did with the paperwork... and the medi-witch. What did she tell you?"

He honestly didn't know if the medi-witch had been set up to betray his confidence or not, but this seemed like a good time to find out. The minister's eyes regarded him appraisingly, and he looked him over like something new and shiny whose worth he had underestimated. His slow smile left Harry feeling unclean in ways, Voldemort's leering never had.

"Interesting things. Of course, your school medical records were far more informative. Tampering in some of the more interesting Dark Arts, have we?"

Harry tensed. When had they gotten those? Had Viktor taken them? Why hadn't he said anything? He forced himself to lean back in his chair.

"Wouldn't you like to know?"

"I most certainly would. I'd like to know every little dark secret that dark man taught you behind closed doors. Every dark thing he did in front of you, to you, for you in lurid detail. However, that would probably take a few days, so I would be satisfied with a brief outline of two or three of his more heinous acts."

Bile rose up in his throat, the feeling of uncleanness spread. The minister was a sicko freak, and worse he was a sicko freak who seemed to feel confident enough unload his perversion on him, a fourteen year old boy with no where to go. This could go very bad, very quickly.

"You would be disappointed," Harry said evenly, looking away from him and up at the blue sky above them. "The only thing he ever taught me was how to defend myself... from a variety of unsavory and powerful things."

A bluff, but he hoped the man believed it.

"Except for himself," the minister said knowingly.

"No... but I've learned a thing or two on my own."

The man chuckled darkly. "You're a fascinating young man, Herr Potter. I can see why Lord Voldemort took such an... interest in you. You're versatile. Charming when you want to be, ruthless when you must be, and you don't back down. I could use someone like you in my service."

"No."

"I'm giving you a choice now, but don't think I can't make you, help me. You undoubtedly have more than your fair share of Britain's national secrets and secrets about the Dark Lord himself just

swimming around in your head, and I need it. Our mission failed to give the necessary information we needed, and war with Britain is inevitable now. You can either cooperate and earn the gratitude of both myself and Germany... or I can make your life a living hell and take what I want."

"No."

Now more than ever Harry was unwilling to give up his secrets. It wasn't just about him and Voldemort anymore, it was about Britain. If it was true that Germany was going to war with his home country he wouldn't help them do it. If anything he gave up lead to any of his friends or classmates being hurt or killed, he wouldn't be able to live with himself.

"I can charge you with spying you know. Lock you away in some little concrete box with no light and only a hole to shit in."

Harry stood up. "This isn't Britain. You're not a dictator. You are held accountable by your voters for what you do, and I am told they like me more than you at the moment. Isn't it about time for your re-election, Minister Seibligg?"

Harry didn't look at the man. He didn't think he could stand making eye contact with him without gagging or without his fear giving him away. It was a struggle to keep from running out of the room and his presence, but he had to control himself. His hold on the situation was as tenuous as spider silk, and all the man had to do was order any one of his aids or guards to stop him and Harry couldn't afford to defend himself unless things became truly desperate. What if the minister accused Harry of attacking him? What if he really were accused of being a spy?

The long tense silence that hung in the air was broken by an abrupt round of clapping. Harry couldn't hold back his initial flinch.

"Bravo, Herr Potter, bravo. Very well done. You got me. I can't do anything to you... not yet, but wait for it. When people start to die, they are going to demand your cooperation. Your publicity will make

you a target for their frustration, and the longer you dilly-dally the more they will take out their anger on you.”

Harry swallowed thickly. Was that true? He was vulnerable and he knew it, but could the man only be bluffing in an attempt to force his hand? Yes, but he could just as easily telling the truth.

Sensing his uncertainty, the minister continued.

“You have until July 1st. It would be better for you if you just gave in now, and worked to gain yourself a little more-”

“Why July 1st?” he interrupted, not wanting to hear the rest.

“That's the date given on Voldemort's ultimatum.”

“What ultimatum?”

Here Seibligg tone became congenial.

“The ultimatum to the German public to have me turned over to him to be tried and executed or face his considerable wraith. ”

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The Weasley farm house spelled like cinnamon, and for that alone, Draco was willing to overlook the fact that it was little more than a dilapidated shack out in the boonies. It was everything his own home was not. Small, crowded, and warm. He might very well have gone his entire life without ever realizing it existed if it were not for Hermione dragging him and Uncle Severus there on New Year's Eve, the day all the Weasley siblings gathered together at their ancestral home to celebrate with their blood family.

The entire Malfoy line was probably rolling in their graves, and if his father knew exactly where they were he probably would have sent all three of them to join his ancestors.

The entire Weasley family, sans the still imprisoned Arthur Weasley of course, plus their aunt and cousin, were gathered around the table. Those who couldn't find a chair, sat on the available counter tops or on the nearby stairs or leaned in a doorway. Snape was with Molly Weasley, playing the polite guest and keeping himself from boredom by helping her peel vegetables, although there was an underlying tension between them that was hard to miss. No one was speaking. For Draco, it was all too surreal.

"Someone say something," he bit out at last, tired of the quiet and tired of their blank faces.

"I don't believe it. Why would they do that?" Ginny said first, her expression twisted into fear and anger and confusion all at once. "He even saved Krum. Why would they kidnap him?"

Percy chipped in. "Well, he is the Dark Lord's protégé. As far as hostages go, he's ideal."

"So, they might send him back once the Durmstang students get back home safely?" Ginny said hopefully.

"More likely in exchange for the prisoners father did manage to catch," Draco said.

Charlie shook his head. "They won't just send him back. He's the only source of valuable information they have on the Dark Lord."

"They won't hurt him, will they?" Ginny asked. There was a silence, which was surprisingly enough broken by Snape.

"They will not hurt him. According to my sources, the papers are reporting Potter as being 'rescued', not kidnapped, which makes good explanations for torture a little bit hard to come by."

"Rescued?" Fred laughed humorlessly. "Who do they think they're kidding?"

Ron rolled his eyes. "You give him too much credit. I bet he went with them willingly. He probably even asked them."

“What the fuck Ron?”

“Watch your language, Fred! And mind your words, Ronald,” Molly warned from the kitchen, pointing her peeling knife right at the both of them.

“I'm just saying,” the youngest son protested, “... Merlin, you think he'd want to stick around after all the shi- stuff he's been through? Every other week he's in the infirmary, his foster mother gets killed right in front of him, his ex-girlfriend treats him like the plague, he's stuck at the beck and call of the Dark Lord, and he's got summers with Snape to look forward to ... no offense, Professor.”

“Detention the Monday you get back.”

“I'm just saying... hey, maybe he saw a way out and he took it.”

“He wouldn't have done that,” Hermione said. “He wouldn't have left everything. His life wasn't perfect, but he wouldn't have run away.”

Ron shrugged. “Everyone has their breaking point. Being roped into a life or death tournament was probably his.”

Bill shook his head and sighed. “That doesn't matter now. The tournament is canceled. I had to break the magical contract myself, and it was an ugly one. That could actually be the reason they took him. Both Krum and Harry would have died if we hadn't destroyed the contract before the end of the school year. The Dark Lord probably would have been fine with offing Krum, but Harry is another matter altogether.”

“That's right... I am sorry to hear about Fleur,” Molly said, sounding genuinely regretful. “I would have loved to have met her before she had to go home.”

“Yeah...”

Ron snorted. He still was no fan of Fleur Delacour or his brother's infatuation with her, even now that she was being sent back to

France with the rest of her classmates and political representatives. There was an awkward silence.

"Do you think," Ginny said at last, "That he could get back on his own? I mean, escape from Germany and get back to Britain? Or maybe the Dark Lord could mount a rescue mission?"

There were mixed expressions of hope and skepticism. In truth, though they were all worried for Harry in varying degrees and wanted him to be returned safely and unharmed, they were also avoiding a more serious issue than Harry's disappearance.

Britain was now in a cold war with Germany, and at any moment it could erupt into a full scale war. Preparations were already being made for the rationing of supplies, and papers were already listing precautionary measures to defending home and family, a call for the extension of the Brass Cult's authority in assisting national defense and local law enforcement, and rumors of a curfew to come into affect as early as mid-spring.

They were young, but they remembered enough to know sorrow and the heartache a war would bring. It had torn apart their country, widowed and orphaned friends and neighbors, and left them poverty ridden for nearly six years afterwards. They didn't want to face it again, but it seemed their was no way for them to avoid it. As afraid as the nation was of war, they were equally outraged by how they had been treated.

Snape in particular didn't want to get involved. Unlike the others, he had been a soldier, an assassin, and he might still be called upon yet again by his master to perform those tasks which still sometimes woke him up at night in a cold sweat.

He also didn't want Harry to return. He didn't delve too deeply in his reasoning for this, only accepted that he dreaded the possibility of the boy caught in his master's cold, merciless hands. He would feel the same way for any child caught in such a situation he figured. Years of teaching had made him soft.

“Mr. Potter,” he said, “Will no doubt make the most of his situation. I recommend all of you doing the same.”

There was a depressed silence, until after a moment Draco looked up. “...Since the tournament is canceled does this mean Quidditch season is back on again?”

“Draco!”

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Durmstrang was not Hogwarts, and the days that followed Harry's enrollment were wrought with rude awakenings and prolonged disorientation. The easy academic atmosphere he was used to was replaced with extreme discipline and barely controlled aggression. Everyone followed a tight schedule, waking up at five in the morning, eating at six, study hall from six-thirty to eight and then classes until one, followed by lunch, and then another two hours of study hall. By three thirty no-one could stand another minutes of books, and everyone usually dispersed to exert their energy on the variety of sports the fortress offered. It was too cold to play outside, but the school provided a variety of enormous empty rooms and corridors in which to play, including a quidditch pitch and pool twice as large any Harry had ever seen.

Dinner was at six-thirty, afterwards they had until nine to perform the variety of chores Harry had been used to leaving to the house elves. Laundry was a major one. He had learned the hard way to be careful to remember where he washed his school uniform in the student laundry room. He had accidentally run off with someone else's once and hadn't realized it until the next morning when he got dressed and discovered he had shrunk three inches. Ironing was tedious. Polishing his boots had never even occurred to him until his dorm captain had snapped at him about it. And every day the list seemed to grow.

Lights out was at nine. Harry didn't sleep well, the sound of wind against the windows gave him bad dreams of ice demons calling him out into the wasteland beyond the glassy fortress walls. And on those

rare nights the air was still, he dreamed he was drowning, pulled down into the cold darkness by things unseen.

This routine repeated itself six days out of the week. There were no weekend visits to local villages, no dances or balls, and no special events except for the monthly quidditch matches between the school's four teams. There were also no houses and no point system, and whoever you ended up studying with or rooming with was a product of chance rather than personality. The only things that separated any of the students was grade level and gender.

The girls studied, ate, roomed, and played sports by themselves. The only time a girl and boy might meet was in passing on the way to class or on Sundays. Sundays were their own, and Harry coveted them fiercely.

What Durmstang lacked in flexibility, it made up for in novelty. Harry had never encountered a place like it, and he spent his Sundays exploring. At first glance the entire fortress seemed uniformly colored, changing from black, to gray, to dark grayish-blue, and back to gray and black again as the sun rose and set, but Harry found splashes of color in the most peculiar of places. The bathrooms on the highest floor of the Eastern wing were tiled in dark red and orange glass so that when sun hit just right the room looked as if it were on fire. The corridor on the lowest floor of the Southern end had stain glass windows of a Norwegian Ridgeback stretched out across a grassy meadow, its emerald skin reflected against the walls and the floor, shifting as the sun moved and the dragon changed its position to get more comfortable. The astronomy tower was alive with illusions of stars and planets and galaxies, whirling around the room in sparkling masses of every shape and size.

Harry hunted the school for these little treasures, taking his sketchbook with him where ever he went. It was the first time he had drawn anything in months.

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"It's not that bad," Viktor said, his expression disapproving as he watched Harry sulk over his dinner. He had been given soup... again, for failing to follow some rule or other. Un-shined boots or doodling in study hall or something equally trivial. It was a first year's error, and understandable really, but Harry was taking it too personally.

"I haven't had anything but soup in three days," Harry sighed. "It wasn't even my fault. How was I suppose to know the West wing was restricted for teachers?"

"It was in your student manual..."

"It's over a hundred pages long! Besides, I was trying to get away from the Oblitz's snoop squad." At this, Harry threw a mutinous look over his shoulder, and several boys a few tiers up the amphitheater quickly turned away. "Is there a rule in there about follow people around?"

"... there is... but that's for boys following girls around."

"Think if I accused one of them of being gay it would work in my favor?"

"Harry," Viktor warned.

"Viktor," he sniped back, tossing his spoon into his bowl. He ran a hand through his hair, his short hair. They'd cut it, like everyone else's, but his hair was unmanagable and the only thing they had accomplished was making the nap of his neck look a little more tidy. They had gotten him his own uniform and boots too, the sort he had to iron and polish every night in the castle's absence of house elves. A five in the morning wake up call and a nine o'clock lights out were other things he was still struggling to adjust to.

"Sorry..." he said after a moment. "I'm just tired."

Viktor nodded. He understood where Harry was coming from. Every first year went through the same period of adjustment and homesickness, and Harry was facing other things that were weighing on his mind. After a week, a little crabbiness was hardly unexpected.

"It's fine. How is your homework coming?"

Harry shrugged. "Alright. Trying to figure out what ingredients the potion's master is talking about is giving me a headache, but it's nothing I can't handle."

"They're not giving you any grief, are they?"

"Not really. Frau Jetter treats me like I'll implode her head if she looks at me directly, and Herr Von Wargon seems to think I was taught history of magic by a nitwit and acts surprised whenever I answer correctly, but it's nothing I can't handle. Of course, I think I avoided serious injury electing to go into Curse Breaking instead of Dark Arts class."

The older boy grimaced. The entire school knew the Dark Arts professor had it out for Potter, and lines were being drawn to keep out of their way. Aside from Viktor and Jophery and a few of the older students who had been in Britain, everyone tended to avoid one Harry Potter, refugee and virtual unknown. Some seemed to believe Harry really was a spy, like those who followed him around in shifts, relentless in their pursuit to protect the school from him. Most just didn't want to be caught in between them. Harry already had a reputation from the Tri-wizard tournament that everyone was cautious about testing it. Oblitz was an old danger they were familiar with.

"You should join a quidditch team. The reserves, at least. The exercise helps fight off the fatigue."

"I'll think about it. I don't know if I can handle anything else at the moment." If anything, Viktor thought Harry had an over abundance of free time. It wasn't uncommon to find him sitting alone in the library, scribbling in his sketchpad or wandering around the fortress, but Viktor wasn't going to push it. The former Gryffindor was still upset with him, even if he didn't say it directly, he blamed him for taking him away from his home. Worse, Harry was too afraid to chase him away. He had no one else to turn to at Durmstrang.

"Hey! Look what my dad sent me! We're infamous!" Jophery said, coming out of nowhere, to sit beside Harry. He had a newspaper in his hand, which he proudly displayed to them. On the cover in giant letters flashed;

Durmstrang Student Rescues Rescuer!

There was a picture at the bottom with Harry looking around the very same hall they were eating in, Viktor near by looking directly at the minister. The younger boy blushed. He looked like a lost little kid next to Viktor, which was no doubt their intention.

"Dare I ask?" Harry said, about as enthusiastic to read a German newspaper as he was a British one.

"You dare, you know you do," Jophery laughed. "It's not too bad. Just loads about how you rescued Viktor from centaurs and he rescues you from a creepy Dark Lord. Apparently, you're both best of friends, which I have to say I resent. I saw him first."

Viktor sighed.

"But I'm in there too! Look- 'The rescue was an organized and well orchestrated effort by all of the students. Viktor Krum lead all the students to safety, while Jophery Hughes flew Potter himself to the sanctuary of the ship, and everyone- blah blah saved the ship from being blow up by angry Sentinels blah."

Harry shook his head, chuckling even though he didn't find it the least bit funny. He had heard the stories circulating around the school, and while he still had some serious misgivings about being imperio-ed and the German plot to spy on Britain, he wasn't going shout it out to anyone. Especially not after his talk with Minister Spieligg. It was so damn frustrating not to be able to say it out right.

"I would have thought this was old news by now," Harry said, instead.

"Oh, it is. This printed the day after we got back. Dad's finally run out of people he can show it off too."

That caught Harry's attention. The paper was from the beginning of this entire fiasco. It might still have the information he needed about Voldemort's ultimatum.

"Can I borrow it?"

Jophery looked a bit surprised, but just shrugged and handed it over to him. "Sure. Not like everyone here doesn't know how fabulous I am already."

Viktor smacked him upside the head. Harry took his newspaper and wandered off, as the two started to quibble over something or other. As he expected, some of the other students from before got up to follow him. He waited until he was in the Eastern end of the castle, just outside of the teacher's corridor and briefly out of sight before he caste the Sticking Charm Fred and George had taught him on the floor, then hurried around another corner to wait.

Sure enough the sound of footsteps abruptly halting and then a series of non-magical curses. He smirked to himself and hurried on to the Quidditch Pitch. The Quidditch Pitch was similar to the Hogwart's pitch except enclosed in a giant dome. It was sunny and open, and the closest to 'outside' any of them got until summer break. It was also deserted during lunch, which left him just ten minutes to find what he was looking for.

He didn't have to look far. There was a brief reference to the Ultimatum in the headline, but the real information came on page three.

"... with the students and their guest safely behind the Durmstrang fortress, the Dark Lord of Britain appears more desperate than before, launching his threats not against the students but the Minister of Magic himself, stating that if he does not hand over those responsible for the mission and his former protégé Harold Potter to the British Authorities, he will take violent and extreme actions against both Minister and Germany itself.'

“We will not be intimidated by terroristic threats, not from a foreign dictator or anyone else. We will protect our children, and that includes young Potter, from the heavy hand of tyrants...”

Harry stopped and took a deep breath.

“He wants me back...” he thought. “But for what?”

He found out two days later, when Jophery brought him yet another article, this one four days old.

Britain Accuses Durmstrang of Kidnapping!

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Morgana skulked into the living room, tossed herself onto the couch and let out an enormous sigh. Robert looked up from his ledger just as Alyssa followed her sister's example and slumped into a chair with a dramatic flair. He looked around in hopes of finding Kyle, who usually handled the girls' little melodramas. Alas, he was at the grocer's, he remembered. He tried ignoring them.

There was another loud sigh, shortly there after echoed by the younger.

He tried to calculate the cost of the mortgage and whether they should make a smaller payment in lieu of of yet another overdone Christmas.

Another sigh. Another echo.

“Is something the matter?” he ventured, not looking up from his ledger.

“Papa...” Morgana said, “Do you think Prince Harry will ever come back?”

Here Robert had to fight against a sigh of his own. They had learned of Harry's kidnapping the day after Christmas from Wizarding Weekly,

and like so many others had been outraged and terrified for him. They had to keep their calm with the children though, reassuring them that their prince would be fine. He was just on another amazing adventure. Kidnapped by pirates in a great black ship, but he was clever and brave and would escape or defeat them or teach them the error of their ways.

When the children were at school though, he talked with Kyle about what might really happen to Harry and what that meant for the rest of them. All they knew at the moment was that Harry was at Durmstrang Institute, an enchanted fortress perched atop a mountain in a place cursed with perpetual snow and cold. The school was as secure as any prison, and no one came or went without passing through a gauntlet of security checks and wards, creating such a hassle that the students couldn't even return home for the holidays.

Harry could not be rescued so long as he was there, and the more time that passed the more damage that could be done. He was the Dark Lord's protégé, after all. He would be interrogated and for someone as brave and loyal as Harry they would have to employ more severe tactics to gain any results. It gave him nightmares to think about it. He refused to give his daughters nightmares by telling them the truth.

"Of course. Do you doubt him?"

"No..." her tone contrary to her words. "But... he's been gone a long time. What if he likes it where he is?"

Robert looked up and smiled at her.

"Likes it there? You do know they kidnapped him and stuck him in an ice fortress. What is there to like about that?"

She twiddled her thumbs, thinking about it, still unconvinced.

"But it's a really nice fortress, isn't it? That's what Joel says. It's like Hogwarts, only it's made out of crystals and everyone wears furs and they're really good at quidditch. Harry likes quidditch."

“Yes, Harry likes quidditch, and I'm sure the Durmstrang knights and ladies are all trying very hard to convince him to stay and become one of them, but I know that he won't. Durmstrang isn't his kingdom. He'll come home to protect his homeland.”

Morgana fell silent and considered this, and finally nodded.

“Yeah, he wouldn't leave us. His daddy's the king, so he has to help protect us.”

Robert nearly choked at the mere notion of Voldemort being anyone's 'daddy' let alone Harry's, however similar their appearances might be. Alyssa turned out to be more skeptical.

“But...” the littlest Reicher began, “Why did they take him away? He's not their prince. It was a bad thing to do.”

He nodded. “Yes, it was very bad. It's wrong to steal, especially people.”

“So why did they?”

He had to think about that. Telling them he had been taken so they could torture him for information just wasn't going to cut it.

“They were jealous. Durmstrang doesn't have any princes, only knights and ladies and a very stupid Minister, so they decided to steal ours.”

Alyssa huffed at the notion. “That's dumb.”

He shrugged. “People do dumb things sometimes. We just have to wait for them to realize their mistake. It may take a long time, but Prince Harry will find his way home eventually.”

“He better. My birthday is coming up and he promised he'd come. I even told Joel, but he said I was lying.”

“No worries, poppet, I'm sure he'll be back by then,” he assured her, but inside he ached.

What would he do when her birthday came and there was no Harry? Would she finally realize things were much worse than he had told her? Alyssa already seemed to suspect, but she trusted him. He was digging himself into a hole with these fairy tales, and it just kept getting deeper.

But he still he refused to give them nightmares.

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"Where were you when the Durmstrang students fled?" Snape asked, his tone deceptively bored as he stared across his desk at Horace McGunny, who was also looking deceptively bored right back at him.

"I was in my room, sleeping. I wasn't feeling well."

"Why not the nurses office?"

"I didn't want to spend my ENTIRE holiday break in the infirmary just because I drank too much hot chocolate. No offense, but Madam Pomfrey is a bit of an alarmist."

"Was anyone there to confirm you were there?"

"Maybe. Some of the time at least. Colin came and woke me up."

Snape nodded, and wrote a note on his parchment. McGunny watched him, and subtly leaned forward.

"Can I ask what this is all about?"

"Information gathering for the case against Durmstrang. If you recall anything that sticks out in your mind, now would be the time say it."

"Why not a Sentinel? It's their job, isn't it?"

Snape's expression hardened, twisting his parchment out of reading range. "A Sentinel doesn't know the students of Hogwarts like I do. Underestimating you would be a serious mistake."

The Ravenclaw settled back into his chair and looked away, warned and chastise all at once. He rubbed his hands against his robes, the only sign of how nervous he really was to be stuck in Snape's office completely alone.

"I can't think of anything relevant. They kept to themselves, except for Harry but he was also their liaison, so I can't even begin to guess if they planned to take Harry or if it was just a matter of opportunity."

"It was planned," Snape said, but didn't elaborate. "One more question. Do you know where the Dark Lord's office is?"

McGunny tensed. "Why?"

Black eyes narrowed.

The boy relented and nodded. "Yes. I've been by there once or twice."

"What could possibly have led you to that particular section of the castle? Surely not to question the Dark Lord."

"No. I followed Harry there once. I wanted to ask him some questions for an article."

"Did you ever go inside?"

"No. I don't even know how Harry got inside and I never asked. Why?"

"You keep calling him Harry."

There was sudden deep and pervading silence, and Snape stared intently at the Ravenclaw's blank face and clenched fists.

"Am I not allowed to call him that?"

"It does seem inappropriate. The first name is usually reserved for friends and family, which I wasn't aware of you being either."

"We're friends."

"Also inappropriate. You run the school newspaper, and Mr. Potter is regularly featured. Isn't a certain level of professional detachment required in order to remain objective?"

"What are you implying, Professor?"

"Obviously, I'm implying that you're behaving inappropriately."

McGunny eyes widened..

"Sir?"

"You are dismissed."

Confused and somewhat flustered, McGunny stood and hurried out. Snape watched him go, his eyes like a hawk following his every move until he had disappeared. Once the boy was gone, he opened one of the drawers of his desk and pulled out a list of names. On it was everyone who had been in the castle the day the Durmstrang students fled, including all the foreigners and Harry himself. All the Beaubaxton students and headmistress and teacher's names had been crossed out, along with most of the students and Minerva McGonagall's. Beside McGunny's name he placed a little star.

The boy had been his most likely candidate so far. The Hogwarts' Herald editor and chief had a veritable legion of information gatherers and was himself highly resourceful and motivated. That he knew nothing or had no legitimate theories about what happened was highly suspect, and finding a way to enter the Dark Lord's office did not seem like such a mean feat with enough time and some inside information.

Like from Harry. Harry who apparently was friends with him, and never told anyone.

The only other name with a star beside it on the list was that of the infamous Gryffindor himself. Snape didn't understand the logic entirely, but Harry had access to Voldemort's office and it wasn't impossible that he may have uncovered the German's plot. Could he have sent that warning as a sort of apology for trying to kill the Dark Lord?

It was a theory full of holes, and he didn't put much stock in it. McGunny seemed more likely, but even that theory was pretty weak. His motivations were equally unclear. In fact, the more time he spent investigating the less convinced he was of the involvement of anyone in the castle. It was only a Hogwarts owl that had them concluding it was from Hogwarts. The paper could have come from any number of the Dark Lord's offices, the bird itself could have been stolen and used for the sole purpose of misleading investigators. The tipster obviously didn't want his or her identity known.

It wasn't the sort of answer he could give the Dark Lord and still walk away in one piece.

"Potter, I'm not sure how, but I know this entire thing is your fault."

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The full moon rose over Durmstrang, the first of the New Year and in the new life of Harry Potter. Strange energy welled up in him slowly, like a tide, washing away his fear and his uncertainty as the night settled over the school. It was a strong as ever. Madris had done nothing to lessen the Moon's influence over him, but then he had never asked her to. There hadn't been time or opportunity.

"Are you alright?" Jophery asked, eying him oddly. They were gathered in the amphitheater, eating dinner. For once, Harry had managed to earn something other than soup to eat, noodles and cream sauce with marble bread on the side, but he hadn't touched it except to move it around on his plate.

"Great," Harry said, his tone skating the edge of a snarl. "How are you?"

For once the full moon had not brought giddiness or detachment, but instead a powerful aggression he was struggling every second to contain. He was angry, the angriest he had been since his argument with Viktor on the ship, but now his inhibitions were failing and if he didn't find someplace to vent he knew he would end up hurting someone. In an hour two, when the moon was at its zenith, he doubted he would care.

"Great," Jophery replied a bit more uncertainly. "... Has something happened?"

Harry gave him a look.

"... I mean aside from the obvious."

"No."

"... Then why aren't you wearing your glasses?"

Because I left the set I use for the full moon in my nightstand at Hogwarts, he thought testily, but didn't say. He was still aware of the students behind him, watching his every move and listening to his every word.

"New spell I'm trying."

"Oh."

An awkward silence fell. Harry made an attempt at his dinner but quickly gave up. Food wouldn't satisfy him right now.

"Harry."

He looked up to see Viktor. The older boy tensed, recognizing the look in Harry's eyes as the affects of the supposed curse he had read about and experienced first hand.

“What?”

“The Ministry sent someone to speak with you about your living arrangements for the summer.”

“They couldn't have just sent a letter?”

“ ... ”

“Fine.” Harry got up, abandoning his food to follow after him. He made a point to cast a glare over his shoulder at the boys who looked ready to get up and follow, warning without a word how bad of an idea that would be with his sharp green eyes alone. Wisely, they reseated themselves. They moved through the cold hallways, Viktor pulling his cloak tight around him while Harry let his own billow open, unaffected. The sconces had been lit for the evening, making the interior of the castle glow like the inside of a lantern, firelight reflecting off of the glassy walls.

They moved to the higher floors, up tightly winding stairs and down through corridors where the ceiling rose several stories above them and chandeliers coated in candle tallow dripped down like stalactites from some ancient cave. They were near the Headmaster's office now, a place Harry had only seen once, but they turned right before they reached it and entered one of the many domed rooms of Durmstrang. The room was filled with trophies and plaques, some of them centuries old and others only a few months. Plaques covered every inch of the walls, but additional columns and display cases had been erected randomly around the room to accommodate the extra wards, turning the space into a forest of magical acknowledgments, shadows all around and unseen things lurking behind the cover of steel and glass and wood.

The setting was ominous, but Harry felt more at ease in this vaguely sylvan atmosphere, where his senses acclimated to things most wizards would never know. Viktor, who had said nothing and hadn't looked back at him since leaving the amphitheater, finally turned around to face him. He was silent for a moment, his tense expression telling Harry that he must be wondering at the torchlight reflecting off his eyes like the night shine of some nocturnal animal.

"You've seen it before," Harry reminded him, smirking at the older boy's obvious nervousness.

"He's waiting for you at the center," was all Viktor said before turning back around and leaving. Harry felt a suspicion rise in him at his retreat, and he drew his wand and took a circuitous route towards the center, carefully muffling his footsteps as he approached.

The center of the trophy room had kept a twenty foot diameter free of obstruction, allowing for a moderately sized circular table at its center, a small tea set on top of it. An elderly wizard sat there, his robes a garish blue with neon stars and moons dotting it all over and a long gray beard reaching down to his knees. Harry was used to odd fashions among wizards, but usually they were civilians. Court and Ministry witches and wizards had always been fairly conservative.

The wizard cleared his throat and took a sip of tea, then slowly turned his entire body towards his observer. His eyes were bright blue and twinkled behind his wire-rim glasses.

"Hello, Mr. Potter," the old wizard greeted in perfect English, his accent swallow in the gentle rasp of his age. "It is a pleasure to finally meet you. Would you care to join me for some tea?"

"I'm fine where I am," he said, feeling the beginnings of a game coming on. This wizard had instincts. He was interested in testing them against his own. He pulled back a little further into the column forest and began to circle. The old wizard turned back to his tea set, but he followed Harry with his eyes.

"Are you sure? I have lemon drops."

"Mother taught me not to accept candy from strangers."

"Yes, I suppose Lily would never skip over such an important lesson."

Harry paused. The wizard's eyes remained fixed on him, though Harry knew the shadows too deep to actually see him.

"You knew my mother?"

"And your father. Your godfathers, as well."

"You seem to know a lot of people, but I'm afraid I don't know you." He turned and began walking back in the direction he had come. The ruse did not work, the man still followed his movements perfectly.

"Ah, my apologies. My name is Albus Dumbledore, an old friend of your family."

Harry drew a sharp breath and instinctively drew even further back. This was Dumbledore? He did not fit the mental picture he had made of him. In his mind's eye, Dumbledore was similar to Voldemort, tall and regal with vitality that belied his years, ready to face dangerous enemies and conjure the sort of magic only found in legend. He certainly hadn't expected this grandfatherly figure, his entire countenance softened by age and gentle mirth. Could this really be the man that sent Moody to kill him only last year?

"What do you want?" he asked sharply.

"I wanted to speak with you before the end of term. I thought you should know as much information as possible in advance to better prepare yourself," the wizard said, his tone soft and soothing, cajoling him to calmness and enticing him out of the shadows. Harry wasn't biting.

"Prepare for what?"

"I have applied for guardianship of you with the Ministry, and given the circumstances of your stay in Germany I dare say I am one of the very few applicants qualified for it."

The moon's influence was beginning to strengthen, depriving him of any fear that he knew he should be feeling at this statement, but in fear's absence, defensiveness was taking root.

"You tried to have me killed."

"Never. That is a lie spread by Voldemort to further his political agenda and blacken my name. You must know him better than most. Does this not sound like something he would do?"

Harry thought about it. "Yes... but it could just as easily be the truth. Why should I trust you?"

"Your parents did."

"So did my godfathers, so did hundreds of other people and you left them behind in Britain while the Dark Lord tore through the country."

"Touché."

They were silent for awhile, each gaging the other but neither able to come to any conclusions. Harry broke the silence first.

"What do you want with me?"

"I want to protect you. Voldemort will surely attempt to kill you while here in Germany so that he may blame the Germans and further incite a war. Additionally, having nearly succeeded in killing Voldemort, he can not possibly allow you to exist. You are too much of a threat to him," Dumbledore said plainly.

Harry felt an upwelling of anger, but most of it was directed at Viktor rather than the man before him.

"He told you? Viktor told you about what happened?"

Dumbledore took a sip of his tea. "He told me what he believes happened. I would really like to hear your version of the event."

"No. I won't help you. Forget it."

"Harry-"

"Don't call me that! Don't you dare pretend we're familiar. You just want to use me like the Minister does to kill him, but I won't do it. The first time was just an accident."

"Mr. Potter, please calm down. You misinterpret my intentions. I would never ask you to murder anyone. I am not protecting you for that purpose, but as recompense for my own sins."

Harry was skeptical, but he hesitated denouncing him for the moment and let him continue.

"You were correct when you said I abandon my friends and allies, and it was a decision that has haunted me for many years. At the time, I saw it as the only means by which I could continue to lead the resistance, but now I live in shame of it, though my reasoning remains the same. You are one of those who were left behind, perhaps not in the traditional sense, but in all the ways that matter. More than that I see Voldemort's attempt to corrupt you, and your own attempts to remain untainted as failing. Please, I know that I can help you."

"Liar! If you were really sorry about what you had done you would have tried to save me before you knew I could hurt him, when I was still just one of hundreds of orphans with no special privileges or protections. You would have saved me from the Dursley's and that miserable existence. Just leave me alone. I don't believe you and I don't need your help!"

He made a break for the exit, not wanting to stay any longer and uncertain of what would happen if he did. He could feel his anger rising, magic shimmering against his skin like the heat of a fever. He hadn't made it far, however, when he was met with resistance. He ran straight into a column that he hadn't seen. He bounced off of it and onto the floor. Cursing, he climbed shakily to his feet, feeling like an idiot. His supposed foolishness was soon disproved as he tried to step around the column and a display case moved soundless to block him. Shocked, he could only stare as more columns and trophy cases began to rearrange themselves to block his retreat.

"What the...?"

"My apologies, yet again."

Harry spun around to find that the barriers behind him had moved aside completely, leaving him open and in the direct line of sight of the old wizard, whose wand was now in his hand and his tea forgotten. His eyes were still twinkling though.

Harry tightened the grip on his wand.

“You have no reason to trust me,” Dumbledore continued, “and I have no right to ask it of you, but time will reveal my intentions to be sincere. I have told no one what you have told Viktor in confidence, not the Minister or the press or even my own supporters. This is the first gesture I have made. Any others must occur after your release from Durmstrang this summer. I understand your reluctance, but I assure you it is for your own good.”

“What if I say no?” Harry challenged, spinning around to face him, but careful not to look him directly in the eyes. If Voldemort were a legilimens then Dumbledore could possibly be as well.

“You are still a minor, Mr. Potter, however mature you believe yourself to be and in the middle of several dangerous situations you only partly understand. You need help, however reluctant you are to receive it.”

With a snarl, Harry swung out his wand, “Don't underestimate me! Irritum facio!”

The old wizard had raised his wand to throw up a spell of his own, but stopped the moment he realized what the boy had cast. The Gryffindor spun away from him and back towards the barrier before him and unleashed the brunt of his rage.

“REDUCTO!”

There was a deafening roar and an explosion; glass, stone, and metal trophies and plates raining down and with it a cloud of dust. Dumbledore quickly moved himself beneath the table, fragments from the blasting spell pelting the barrier above him. When all the rubble had fallen and only a gray dust cloud remained, the only thing that

remained of Harry was the sound of his retreating footsteps. The old wizard let out a wry chuckle, and dragged himself out.

He was impressed. He had come mainly to observe the affects of the Full Moon Curse that Viktor had described, and uncover the true nature of the Dark Lord's protégé in the absence of his inhibitions and truly the child was something remarkable. Untrusting, yes, angry, sure, and with some seriously misplaced loyalty, definitely, but he wasn't cruel and he wasn't murderous and at least he had loyalty to someone other than himself.

The Nullification Charm had been particularly clever, summoning a invisible bubble around Dumbledore so that the wizard could send out no spells towards the boy but also making it nearly impossible for the boy to send any spells at him, giving Harry just enough time to escape. If the boy had simply thrown the Blasting Hex at him, he might have actually been in trouble, but Harry wasn't another Tom, thank goodness, even if he had just shown himself a force to be reckoned with.

The sound of footsteps running closer warned Dumbledore of someone's approach, and he wasn't the least bit surprised when Viktor came rushing through the haze of dust, staring around him in complete befuddlement. He looked to the elder wizard curiously, then around what remained of the trophy hall.

"Did Harry do this?"

"Indeed he did. Remarkable for someone his age," he chuckled, looking at the utter carnage. "And rather unfortunate for the two of us. I'm afraid I'm going to need your help cleaning up before the Headmaster returns. Getting our young friend sent to detention for the rest of the semester is probably not the best way to endear him to me."

Viktor looked around and sighed. This is what he got for telling Dumbledore the truth, he supposed. The man just had to test it.

"I take it things didn't go well?"

“About as well as I expected... though I have to say I'm glad they uphold the 'no wand policy' for summer breaks in Germany. Would you like a lemon drop? Harry didn't want any so I have plenty of extra.”

“Er... no, thank you, Professor.”

“Suit yourself. We had better get started, then. Reparo!”

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Book V

Chapter 1: The Lost Prince

As Horace McGunny stepped onto the Hogwarts Express for the last time, he felt a guilty relief he thought murderers must feel when they get away with their vile deed. For months, he had been convinced Snape had figured him out, and was now toying with him as some sort of petty revenge before he sprang his trap. Nothing had come of this paranoia but sleepless nights and Tom laughing at him.

School was a mess. The teachers did their best to reign in the chaos Harry's kidnapping and the sudden absence of nearly eighty students left, but they were powerless to stop the rumors and indignation. It had taken less than a week for the spread of 'Free Harry' merchandise to flood the school, aggravating more than a few educators with obnoxious flashing buttons and ugly themed parchment. McGunny suspected the Weasley twins, but his sources had been unable to confirm. Two weeks later, the even more obnoxious and frankly rather creepy 'Die Durmstrang Die' memorabilia hit the circuit and then things got ugly. There had been more than a few fires that had to be put out as students vented their frustration out on straw dummies in Durmstrang style uniforms. He had figured out Matilda Chutterly's responsibility rather quickly, but nothing had come of it. Lestrangle refused to suspend her for 'patriotism' despite the teachers insistence that she was only aggravating the students and risking school property for profiteering. McGunny wrote an article on it. Lestrangle made him tear it up.

Snape and McGonagall retaliated with dorm searches and crack downs on curfew and detentions handed out left and right. Eventually they'd gotten things under control, and Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff followed suite before they faced similar punishments. Weasley wrote an article on it. Lestrangle made him tear it up.

Even with the sudden rise in censorship, McGunny had been busy. Incredibly busy, not only tracking events in the school, which were numerous, but also adding national news to the school editions, a necessity since much of it related to the school and Harry to begin

with. To add to that chaos, he had his NEWTS and college applications and Snape's ever looming shadow to deal with.

And Tom. He could never forget about Tom. The bastard wouldn't let him.

"That's not fair," came the familiar croon in his head, and he quickly threw himself into an empty compartment and locked the door before anyone noticed. "If it weren't for me, you never would have aced that Transfiguration exam. You suck at it, Horace."

"If it weren't for you, my life wouldn't be utter shit right now and I would have had the time and concentration to actually learn it on my own." he muttered under his breath, then slumped into seat. "How much longer am I going to have to deal with you?"

"Don't ask questions you already know the answers to."

McGunny did know the answer. As soon as Tom had a new body, they'd both be free. Or at least Tom would be free. He was becoming increasingly suspicious that he wasn't suppose to survive long enough to appreciate the spirit's absence.

Finding a solution, however, was impossible. Any attempts to read up on exorcisms or discover Tom's identity resulted in horrific migraines and memory lapses. One such blackout ended with him standing atop the astronomy tower, one step away from falling hundreds of feet to the courtyard below. The warning had been clear. For all his threats of killing himself, McGunny quickly learned it was pointless. The spirit would only find another body and he would be dead.

He just had to wait for an opportunity, and hope he was quicker than Tom at noticing it.

Slumping against his seat, he looked out the window as the other students started to climb aboard. Seeing Diggory amongst the horde was a bit jarring, as it had been for the last month that he had been seen wandering the schools. The surgery to replace his damaged heart had been completed and he was now completely healthy, but the months of non-awareness had their affects on him. Under a

magically induced coma, he had not been aware of Harry taking his place in the tournament, nor of the betrayal of the Germans, and the events that had lead to a declaration of war; and waking up to find his world on its head had done nothing to help re-orient him. He was depressed and withdrawn, and not nearly as cheerful as everyone had remembered. But that was true of everyone these days. Well, Diggory had another year to get himself sorted out back at Hogwarts, the tournament being canceled and his own missed course work meant he would be repeating the year and take his final exams.

Granger had written an article on it, and submitted last second before Lestrage caught wind of it. Her nerve and her foresight reassured him that appointing her the new Editor and Chief had been a wise move. Tom ranting about him being a blood traitor and a fool had left him feeling warm inside.

And there was Granger and the young Malfoy heir beside her, talking to Snape, who was only half listening to them as he helped supervise the loading of students. The man spotted the Weasley twins slipping things into people's pockets while they were distracted, and a few deft flicks of his wand had the entire contents of the boys' pockets emptied across the platform. It was a rather embarrassing mix of candy, 'Free Harry' badges, half the inventory at Zonko's Joke shop no doubt, and some poor girl's lacey knickers. The students all burst out laughing, even Fred and George, much to Snape's annoyance, but they weren't quite as happy when the potion's master vanished the entire horde.

McGunny chuckled and heard Tom echo it in the back of his head.

Turning away from the window, he reached inside his pocket and pulled out a large seed, similar to a pecan but for its deep purplish-red color. It was *Corpus arborus*, the Body Tree, a very simplistic name for a very complicated plant... animal.... thing. For over a month, he had watched with his classmates as the fully mature tree had bloomed giant red flowers, into which Professor Sprout had dispensed three drops of blood. By mid spring the flower had wilted, but the 'fruit' ripened into Cedric's new, perfectly healthy heart. It had been a monstrous and beautiful thing to watch.

It had been pure inspiration to Tom, who had realized its potential almost immediately.

The research paper McGunny had turned in on the subject earned him top marks. It had also earned him Tom's silence for two weeks as they poured over book after book on the subject in the library. The nut had been made, as all Body Tree seeds were, in a cauldron, during the new moon with items ordered from different apothecary's across Britain and along the border of the Forbidden Forest itself. It made him shiver to think about what he was doing.

"It's a marvelous idea," Tom said congenially, "You should be happy. No one even has to get hurt or loses their body."

"Assuming you don't kill me the moment you have what you want..." McGunny pointed out tiredly.

"I won't kill you if you don't give me a reason to. I like you, Horace. You're a clever young man. If it weren't for the unfortunate incident that left me bodiless, I think we would have gotten along quite well."

"I certainly hope not."

Tom just chuckled darkly, before fading away into the back of his mind. He sighed heavily. When he had thought of graduation, and the newest chapter to his life, this definitely wasn't what he had imagined for himself. He had always sort of assumed he would be chasing stories, not becoming one himself.

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Harry strode off the Durmstrang ship and onto pier 6 and 1/8 like a soldier stepping onto a battlefield. Six months he had spent at Durmstrang Institute, and four of them he had used in preparation for this moment, when he would leave his uncertain sanctuary to face people and places he could only afford to view as hostile.

The sky was clear and hot, and the breeze across the water was cool but brought with it the stink of polluted water and dead fish. The pier

had been cleared to make room for the unloading of passengers and luggage, but at the far end Harry could see crowds of people gathered. Some of them obviously parents waiting for their children, but even more obvious were the reporters. He could feel their eyes on him, like starved dogs eying a discarded bone, barking out their questions before he was even close enough to hear what they were saying.

He searched the crowd for any sign of his new guardian, but he couldn't find him and frankly he doubted the old coyote would be elbowing and shoving his way through the media circus. Harry certainly wasn't going to try it. So rather than face the horde, he moved over to the piles of luggage and retrieved his trunk, found a space out of the way and sat down on it to wait.

"See you next semester, Potter!" a fifth year boy said, coming up to offer him a hearty whack to the back in typical quidditch beater fashion. Harry had joined a quidditch team shortly after his meeting with Dumbledore, not because he particularly wanted to play (although once he had started he couldn't believe he'd ever lived without it), but primarily so he could make his frustration known to Viktor in an innocuous and physical way.

"Thanks. Have fun this summer," Harry said politely. Several other boys followed his lead and even a few girls said their 'goodbye's and 'good luck's and 'see you this fall's, and he responded in the usual polite way. They weren't really his friends, not like Hermione and Draco and the Weasleys were, but they were alright. Once they realized he liked quidditch and therefore wasn't a complete mutant, some had actually been pretty nice.

"Harry."

His eyes slid over to Viktor, and they stared at each other a long moment. They hadn't spoken, really spoken since the encounter with Dumbledore, when Harry had learned of Viktor's betrayal. The animosity was far from one-sided though. The Bulgarian had his own bone to pick with him, and it revolved around the loyalty he still held towards the Dark Lord who more than likely wanted him dead. The older boy couldn't understand, and frankly didn't want to any more

than the Gryffindor wanted to understand his trust in Dumbledore or the purpose of tricking Britain in the first place.

It didn't help that Harry thoroughly trounced Viktor in the final game of quidditch and broken his perfect winning streak at Durmstrang.

"Viktor."

Still, they never got around to stop calling each other by their first names.

"Dumbledore sent someone to collect you. Come on, I'll point her out."

"Gee, thanks," he said, dripping with sarcasm. Why don't point out were you'll dump my body when your done while you're at it. Nevertheless, he gathered up his trunk followed after Viktor. The trunk was light, not because of any Feather Light spell but because it was almost empty. He had only left his school uniform, some text books he wouldn't mind loosing, Elsbeth's leftover owl treats, and anything else he could easily replace. Everything else he had shrunk down and hidden on his person using the runic spells he had been studying all semester.

The spells weren't for any class, there was no Ancient Runes class at Durmstrang, but at one time there must have been because the library had a treasure trove of books on the subject. Harry had been pretty good in the class at Hogwarts, but not particularly enthusiastic about it. Now that he was going to be deprived of his wand, however, runes had seemed one of the best ways to protect himself, since his wandless magic was pretty rudimentary and taxing on his body. Besides, they had proven dead useful in Curse Breaking.

If anyone searched his things they would find nothing useful, and if the opportunity to escape presented itself, he wouldn't have to worry about leaving anything important behind. He felt rather proud of managing it all on his own.

Harry thought Voldemort would have been proud of his progress too... and then remembered the man more than likely wanted him dead.

From the corner of his eye, he spotted someone else who wanted him dead. Oblitz was still standing on the deck of the ship, staring down at him like a hateful vulture. Harry glared right back at him, plotting revenge tactics on the off chance he survived the summer and had to come back to Durmstrang to endure his company yet again.

They moved up the pier to the main docking area, where the reporters and anxious parents gathered round. They weren't allowed on the pier for safety reason while the students unloaded, but they still managed to make a nuisance of themselves. Several photos were being taken, and Harry tried to convince himself it was mostly due to Viktor and his superstar status as a Quidditch champion. He was quickly disabused of that notion. They were proving just about equally famous.

"Harry! How did you like your first semester at Durmstrang?"

"Mr. Potter, do you feel safe now that you're in Britain?"

"Viktor, now that you have finished your schooling, will you be training full time with the Vratsa Vultures*?"

"Please, let me take a picture for my daughter! She's a huge fan!"

"Are the both of you good friends? Is it true you've sworn yourselves blood brothers?"

"If you could say anything to the Dark Lord right now, Mr. Potter, what would it be?"

"What made you decide to run away? Did the Dark Lord threaten you? How?"

"Can I have your autograph?! It's for my nephew!"

"Mr. Krum, have you considered the offer to play for the Heidelberg Harriers*?"

“Viktor, you've been renown for your support of social causes. Are there any you are actively promoting? Have you thought about a career in politics?”

“Mr. Potter do you think you'll return to Durmstrang for your fifth year or accept the offer of another school? How many offers have you received?”

With more than a little trepidation, they both waded into crowded and immediately became separated. Harry wasn't very tall, and as the people swarmed around him and blocked his view in all direction, he became disoriented. The day was already hot, and even in his cooler British clothes, the bodies around him radiated like a furnace and stank of sweat. They was more flashing bulbs and shouted questions and people grabbing him to gain his attention, refusing to let him through and he didn't even know in which direction to go anymore. He began to panic.

“How do you feel about your new guardian, Albus Dumbledore?”

“You were born in Britain but raised most of your life in Germany, which do you consider your true home?”

“When you were in Britain did you ever feel your life was in danger?”

“Were you persecuted because your parents fought in the resistance?”

“Tell us what happened when you escaped!”

Harry only shook his head, and shouted, “Please, let me through!”

“There are rumors that dark rituals performed on you while attending Hogwarts, is that true?”

“Please get out of my way.”

He tried to push himself through, but it was pointless because now they were following him and no matter which direction he tried the

crowd was just as thick. Where was Viktor? Dammit, did it even matter?

"What happened to the muggle relatives who were originally taking care of you? Do you know?"

"Did the Dark Lord force you to sign over all of your family's assets to him?"

"No comment! Leave me alone!"

"Harry!"

"The Minister has recently come under fire for his tactics in Britain. Do you have anything to say in his defense?"

"Are you assisting the Ministry in their case against Britain?"

"Shut up!" he finally snapped, and several cameras suddenly shattered and pens snapped. There was a moment of stunned silence.

"Harry!"

Someone grabbed his hand, he spun around to jerk it away but stopped when he saw who it was.

"Fleur?"

She was ruffled from squeezing and shoving herself through the reporters, but none of it damped her beauty, her shining halo of blond hair and her glowing smile. Having finally noticed her, her smile widened and she pulled him into hug that stole the breath clean out of him. There were a few clicks from cameras, but they were further back in the crowd. She pulled away, still smiling.

"Come on! Follow me!"

Still holding his hand, she started to running, knocking over people with incredible ease for someone so dainty and pulling him after her.

The reporters tried to follow, but with none able to block her or even slow her down, the two escapees managed to break through them and made a dash for freedom. Harry couldn't believe what was happening. Was he escaping? Now?

If that was the case... he dropped his trunk and forced himself to run faster. Together they ran off the pier towards some warehouses. At one point, Fleur spun around around and cast a shield charm. The thud of several people smacking into it made Harry smirk, but he didn't risk turning around. They continued running until they couldn't any longer and no one else was in sight.

An 'alohamora' later, and they found themselves slipping into a warehouse. It was filled with freight, but empty of people. Turning to each other, they burst out laughing, and hugged yet again.

"What are you doing here?" he asked, grinning like a fool.

"What doz it look lie? I am visiting my friend and rescuing 'im from ze mob."

"And this friend is very grateful, but why? How did you even know I would be here?"

"I asked Viktor. 'E zed zat you would be 'ere today, and I might 'ave a chance to talk. Chance. Ha! I make my own luck."

"Viktor told you?"

"I tried to write you directly but all my letters got zent back."

Harry nodded. He hadn't received a letter all year, and he figured like in Britain, his mail was being restricted for safety reasons... or because it was being stolen for intelligence purposes, which made him ill to think about. Her expression suddenly turned serious, and she looked at him intently.

"Arry, please tell me the truth. Did you run away or were you kidnapped? I 'ave been 'earing so many stories I don't know what to believe."

An ache rose up in him, the question she had presented one that still haunted him. Had he run away? Not exactly. Had he been kidnapped? Not exactly.

"It's complicated," he said. "I didn't want to go... but I can't go back. I made a mistake that I don't know how to fix, and Viktor pulled me out of the fire for completely the wrong reasons, but saved me just the same. But I'm scared Fleur. They want me to do things. Betray the Dark Lord and Britain, but I can't. I can't punish them for my mistakes. I don't know what to do. I don't have anywhere to go."

Fleur pulled him into another hug

"Ah! Mon petite chevalier, is zere anything I can do?"

Harry shook his head. What could he ask of her? The most she could do was let him escape on his own. She couldn't hide him, not after all those reporters had seen them run off together, and if he went to France with her there was no telling if they would keep him there or send him back to either Germany or Britain. Then he realized there was something she might be able to do.

"Do you... do you write letters to Bill?"

She blinked, and after a moment she nodded. "Yes, I 'ave been given special permission to write to Britain. I 'ad to apply for a special license, but I can do it. Why?"

"I... would you... would you tell Bill to let everyone know I'm okay? Hermione is probably so worried."

She gave him a sad look, but nodded. It was as clear to her as it was to him, that he wasn't 'okay'. Then she pulled her bag, a school satchel he hadn't noticed before, off her shoulder and set it on the floor.

"You are not ze only one who 'as made zis request," she said, "Your friends gave me something for you. Zink of zem as belated Christmas presents... or early birthday presents."

Harry's heart began to beat faster as she opened her back and started to hand him boxes. He sat down beside her, and celebrated the Christmas he had missed. The first package was from Mrs. Weasley, a woman he had not met directly, but whom he held a quiet affection for having given him some of his closest friends and respected acquaintances. Inside was a jumper, Gryffindor red with a golden 'H' on the front, which made him smile. It was awful, but strangely sweet at the same time. He had seen Ginny and the twins wear theirs in the common room.

Next came Clyde's gift, which held a fully illustrated play book for the Chudley Cannon's season, where the players zipped around the pages so quickly they looked as if they'd fly right out of the book at any moment. Ginny had made him scarf and glove set, black and sleek, with his initial anagrammed in even darker black. The Weasley twins gave him an entire box of wigs, of all things. Short red hair, long blond hair, curly white hair (and a mustache to match), spiky black hair, and wavy brown hair. Both Harry and Fleur burst out laughing when they found a hot pink mohawk buried at the bottom. It seemed the twins had gotten him started on his very own Incognito Kit.

Draco gave him a knife. It wasn't an ornamental one either. The six inches of smooth steel, the handle plainly crafted wood. He felt no magic from it, but that didn't make it safe. He carefully sheathed it and tucked it carefully out of sight in the back of his pants under his shirt.

Hermione had gotten him a Reader's Ring. It was an enchanted object made of silver that slipped over his entire finger, and was hinged to still allow him movement. Runes were carved on the inside, but on the outside it was shiny and smooth as a mirror. He had seen and admired it on Hermione before while she was researching for particularly complicated research papers. It allowed its owner to find the answer to any question as long as it was within a book within a hundred feet.

Hagrid had even sent him something, a baby dragon tooth, probably from one of the orphaned dragons left in his care. Most surprising of all, was the package from Natalie. They hadn't talked all year and she

had barely even looked at him, but she had still sent him a calligraphy set, the nice sort made with polished wood and interchangeable heads and three different colors of ink.

The last item was from Fleur herself it seemed, a large book, but an odd choice for a gift.

“Centurian Prophecies?” he asked, looking at her quizzically. She made a helpless gesture.

“Don't look at me, it wasn't my idea. Ze owner of ze bookstore I went to insisted it was for you. Don't worry, Bill checked it out. It iz perfectly safe.”

“Thanks, Fleur,” he said, genuinely grateful to her for coming all this way on an errand that more than likely should have failed. She just grinned.

“You are quite welcome. Now we better pack everyzing up. It wouldn't do to be found with all zis illegal contraband,” she said, with a wink. There were letters, four of them in fact, but those he wanted to read alone in private, and he made sure tuck those carefully away in his shirt. With his trunk gone, and not having enough time to work out runes to shrink and hide his gifts, Fleur transfigured his cloak into satchel and stored everything away inside it. Not as subtle as Harry would have liked, but it was better than just abandoning it all.

They looked around outside briefly to see if everything was clear and slipped out of their hiding place.

“You should go,” he said. “It's one thing to help me get away from a mob, it's a different thing altogether to help me run away.”

She sighed and nodded, “Ah, yes. I would definitely be expelled from Chevalier training for zat. Did you know I had gotten accepted?”

Harry's smile turned sheepish. “I don't even know what that is.”

She rolled her eyes. “I will be a private soldier to ze Royal Family. It's a very important and prestigious position. You only get in by invitation,

you know," she said, looking quite pleased with herself. Harry had seen sentinels with similar jobs for Voldemort, but it didn't seem particularly glamorous. But then, Voldemort had very little need to be protected by anyone.

"Congratulations," he said, hoping this was what she truly wanted. Before, he had thought she wanted to study in Luxemburg, but perhaps it had never occurred to her to even hope for this new career choice. He thought she would do wonderfully at whatever position she took.

"Thank you. If you want to get further into ze city, south is zat way. If you want to try to get back Britain... you know, just in case, you might run into a ferry if you head northwest. Other zan zat, I'm afraid I don't know zis city very well," she lamented.

"Don't worry about it. Go on. I'll be fine."

She kissed him on the cheek, making his ears burn. "Good luck, mon ami."

She hurried on her way, looking around cautiously before disappearing behind another building. Alone, Harry was at a loss about what to do with himself. He had gotten away so quickly and so suddenly, he didn't know where to go next or what to do. Should he try to hide in Germany, as muggle perhaps? It had been a long time since he'd played a muggle, and he wasn't sure if he'd be able to do it anymore. Plus he had no money and no where to stay.

He still had his wand though, which gave him a major advantage among muggles. Locked doors were meaningless, and a few charms would leave him completely unnoticeable to anyone who might think to question or stop him.

But if he were caught, he would be in so much trouble.

He was already in so much trouble, he decided and started heading south. He would find somewhere to lay low before he tried to come up with any long term plans. Perhaps he could even find a way to make himself look different and hide among wizards, and if that failed

a way to hide among the muggles like his parents did until he was grownup enough to move to the United States. They had no real wizarding government in the U.S. he had heard, so hiding there wouldn't be hard at all.

Walking south at a quick and steady stride, idea after ridiculous idea flitted through his head, distracting him from where he was going and from being completely aware of his surroundings. So he was just starting to entertain the notion of finding train to take him to Cologne, when a Stunning Hex caught him square in the back and knocked him unconscious to the ground.

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Bristol was humming with activity as spring faded into the heat of summer. A normally thriving community to begin with, the wizarding city was now packed to the gills with new Brass Cult recruits, eager young wizards and witches prepared to do their part for their country hustling through their registration, supplying, and training hectically, knowing the deadline for their first strike was drawing closer and no one knowing when they themselves would be called into action.

Hostels and private residents had been contracted to house the extra troops as they waited for their assignments at the various bases that were being constructed across the nation. The most famous of military brass were often seen wandering the streets or coming and going from various offices, drawing on the awe of the soldiers and citizens alike. Chief Commander Lucius Malfoy, Chief Sentinel Morgan, General Blackwell, Judge Devonhill, Admiral Lockhart (although what exactly he was the admiral of no one rightly new, but everyone admitted he looked damn fine in his uniform), and even Lord Voldemort himself could be glimpsed from time to time.

Not that anyone necessary wanted to glimpse Lord Voldemort. Not lately anyway.

It was generally agreed upon by the public (with the press' insistence) that the Dark Lord was deeply troubled by the upcoming conflict and the safety of the protégé he had come to see as a son, and that the

result was a very short temper and an unrealistic expectation for perfection.

Voldemort let them keep thinking that. The truth was too ridiculous to be made public. He was not concerned about the war, was even looking forward to it, and the boy was probably safer amongst the enemy than his former mentor.

The truth was he just plain missed Harry's company.

He blamed his new soul for the most part, and by extension the infuriating Gryffindor himself. He blamed Brennan for his deception. He blamed Snape for lack of vigilance. If he was feeling particularly irritated, he'd even blame himself for having failed to handle his apprentice properly. He was only a child after all. A damn nuisance of a child, who fooled him with his big puppy dog eyes and his stupid Gryffindor ideals and his supposedly inability to keep his thoughts to himself.

It didn't change the fact that he still missed him. Perhaps he even missed him more, knowing the boy was participating in a very adult game that he enjoyed playing himself.

Then he realized what an idiot he was being, and started plotting ways to torment the child upon his return. To his continued annoyance thinking of himself as the boy's master wasn't nearly as satisfying as thoughts of being his teacher.

"Potter is no longer at Durmstrang," Voldemort said, staring across his desk at Morgan who sat ramrod straight and unreadable. In the background a map of Germany was situated detailing strategic attack points, glowing red dots at varying brightness to indicate their importance.

"Yes, my Lord," Morgan agreed. They weren't saying anything most of Britain didn't already know. The German school year was ended, and Potter was suppose to be relocated from the school today although no one knew where.

"But he is with Dumbeldore now."

Also something the public knew was happening today, and were completely outraged by. They were familiar, or at least had been recently reminded, that Dumbledore had been accused of sending assassins after the boy. Morgan nodded.

"That simply will not do."

"No, my Lord."

"Have your spies turned up anything?"

Morgan nodded. "I received news half an hour ago. There was incident in Bremerhaven, when Harry left the ship. He met up with Fleur Delacour on the pier and ran away. She was picked up a few hours later on her way back, but Potter wasn't with her."

This was not public record. Not in Britain and not in Germany, and it peaked the Dark Lord's interest. Why precisely had Harry run away? Where had he intended to go? It had been months since he had been taken into Germany's custody, and Voldemort had expected all sort of sordid details of their shared time together to have been leaked to the press or used as a threat by the German ministry or to turn France against him, but there had been nothing. Could it be possible that the boy had said nothing?

He didn't see how, but all evidence suggested that he had, so far, kept silent. Nevertheless, he couldn't rely on Harry's discretion forever, especially now that he was in Dumbledore's power.

"Was he found?"

"The Ministry received a statement that Potter was in his guardian's custody, and had merely gone off to speak with a friend privately for awhile. This matched Delacour's statement. However, my informant had no way to confirm if it is true or a means to cover up a blunder on their part."

Voldemort nodded thoughtfully.

"Do you have anyone who might track him down?"

"Tried. He's either not using his magic or really was found by Dumbledore. My informant only knows what the Ministry knows, and if they can't find Potter neither can he."

Not what he wanted to hear, but there was no point in cursing Morgan over it. That the man managed to get an informant in the German Auror division at all was extremely impressive. Given enough time, he was certain Morgan could recruit additional spies within Germany, disgruntled citizens as tired of their ministry's incompetency as Britain had been of theirs. Besides, Voldemort thought to himself, I have been known to come up with a clever plan or two myself.

"If I were able to locate Harry," he suggested, "Do you think you could get a man to retrieve him?"

Morgan said nothing for a moment, as blank faced as ever, then finally nodded. "I can think of a few people who might be convinced to take the boy, if it meant asylum in Britain."

"Asylum is definitely something I can provide. How quickly can you get someone?"

Another moment of thought. "... a week... ten days at most."

"You have four. This will be at the top of your list until it is completed. Harry's represents a security breach of the highest level. We can not afford to let him remain in the wrong hands."

"Yes, my Lord."

"Good. Are you ready for tonight's meeting?"

"Yes, my Lord."

"Ms. Beadle as well?"

"Yes."

“Good. You are dismissed.”

Morgan stood, bowed and left, leaving Voldemort to brood until his next appointment. This could be it. In the next week, Harry may once more be in his grasp, and he wasn't entirely sure what to do about it. Part of him want to kill Harry, destroy the threat before he could turn into the next Dumbledore, and a larger part wanted to beat him down into complete submission, molding him into a blindly obedient tool just as he had told Lucius and Severus he would. But another part was making itself know, and had been growing like a weed despite the fire of his rage constantly trying to burn it to ash.

Part of him wanted to ask him how he had done it.

And why.

And if he regretted it.

Part of him wanted to sit down with a cup of tea, a pile of blank parchments, and recording quill and discuss everything that had happened from the moment Harry had decided to perform the ritual to the point where he escaped with the Durmstrang students. He wanted to compare ideas and theories, and learn what that sort of magic from that particular goddess felt like, what it required as far as sacrifice, if it was something he himself could harness. He wanted Harry to watch him with his wide, fascinated eyes as he explained the parts that he hadn't realized himself, and feel the tingle of their magic brushing against one another as their mere thoughts drew up the ancient powers, their intellectual and imaginative admiration a form of worship all its own.

Part of him wanted them reconciled, but all of him knew it was pointless.

They would never have what they had lost. The trust was broken.

His whole, willful, and completely illogical soul refused to listen.

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Sirius stood up and arched his back, working the crick out of it. Amidst the trees, he and over half his pack, including women and children, were stooping over the forest floor, searching for any sort of valuable plant they could find. The alpha scowled, his annoyance at his current duty only increasing along with the growing ache in his spine. Bide him, Remus glanced up with some amusement.

"It's honest work," his beta said.

"It's nothing of the sort. It's war profiteering," he snapped.

"It's for medicine. Not for weapons. These could save someone's life."

"Yeah, some dumb clod who'll just go out and kill someone else."

Remus rolled his eyes. Sirius had been in a surly mood all day, and Remus knew logic wasn't going to snap him out of it. He wanted to be angry, convinced it was somehow better than being worried.

"That's a very pessimistic thing to say."

They both looked up and turned, finding Luna. Her own bag looked full, though whether it was anything useful was questionable. She had odd ideas about what was important and what wasn't after all.

"Hello, Luna," Remus sighed.

"Hello, Slivermoon. Hello, Blackbone."

"Hmph."

She continued to smile dreamily, oblivious or maybe nonchalant about their complete lack of enthusiasm. They could be gloomy all they wanted, because she knew something that would make them feel better.

"Diana says Harry is out of the ice fortress."

Now she had their attention. They both dropped their bags and came closer.

"Where is he?" Sirius growled. Luna shrugged.

"I dunno."

The alpha grit his teeth and took a deep breath.

"Then what else did Diana tell you?"

She tilted her head, and squinted one eye as if trying to remember, though the meeting could only have been a few hours ago at most.

"She said he's being funny again, which I think is good. If he were in a bad way, that wouldn't be funny at all."

Remus nodded sceptically, "Yes, that's probably true. Did she say how he was being funny?"

She grinned, "He got rescued by a damsel."

The two men shared a look, and finally shook their heads. It was pointless trying to get meaningful answers from someone half mad who was talking to someone else who couldn't communicate her own omnipotence any better.

"Anything else?"

"And they lived happily ever after?" she offered.

"Luna," Sirius sighed, "Is he safe or not?"

"Yep. At least he was when I talked to Diana. He's crazy though, so who knows?" she said, and scampered off. Remus shook his head. She was getting odder and odder with each passing day, and unfortunately more social at the same time.

"Should I be worried that Luna thinks my godson is nuts?" Sirius muttered.

“No. Sane people always seem crazy to the insane.”

“Do you think anything she said was meaningful?”

“Sure. Harry's out of Durmstrang. It's probably the right time of the year for him to be out of class. There will definitely be more opportunities to rescue him now.”

“Or for him to escape. I bet he could, if he tried.”

They fell silent, and went back to get their bags and start harvesting, both of them deep in thought. Harry's kidnapping had come as a complete shock to them, and in a lot of ways they couldn't bring themselves to believe it. Harry anywhere other than Hogwarts or with them, let alone holed up in an ice fortress hundreds of miles away, was impossible to imagine. Like trying to imagine a polar bear in a barn or Greyback in a suit. It just wasn't clicking. The only evidence they had even seen of it was the absence of letters, and Greyback's single, gruff announcement half a year ago.

The upcoming war, however, felt very real. Greyback had already accepted commissions for the harvesting of medicinal plants, animal furs for the lining of winter uniforms, and crossbows. Their head alpha had also begun drilling them in what to do in case of an attack, digging out escape tunnels beneath their homes and random places around their camp, and holding council with the other alphas every few weeks to see how their own preparations were coming. One alpha had already been killed for not taking the threat seriously enough.

As they went back to their task, Sirius finally found exactly what he wanted to say.

“If he escapes... I hope he doesn't come back here. I hope he finds somewhere safe.”

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Vratsa Vultures is the Bulgarian pro quidditch team. Heidelberg Harriers are the German team.

Book V

Chapter 2: The Tavern

Harry awoke in an unfamiliar bed. Sitting up cautiously, he took in his new surroundings. The bed was small and covered in a green and yellow checkered quilt. The ceiling slanted sharply, and the room itself was long with a window at one end and a door at the other, all painted a clean white. It was empty but for the bed, a small bedside table and lamp, and his trunk with his satchel set on top of it.

He got up and quickly checked himself. His wand was still on him, as was everything else he owned. Had his kidnapper not bothered to search him at all? Draco's gift, still tucked in the back of his pants made him think this was probably the case, or at the very least no one wanted him to know that they knew he was armed. He checked his satchel and found everything in place, and just to be certain he looked through his trunk. The trunk had a rune on it that glowed if it was opened by anyone other than him within twenty-four hours, but it remained dark.

The window he found was open already, letting in a breeze from outside, and though the radiator beneath it made it awkward, he managed to get a look around outside. The view revealed a neighborhood of modest apartments and hotels, bakeries and cafés. The people walking the narrow street appeared to be muggles, with not a robe or broomstick in sight. A girl walking with her mother, looked up at him from the street and waved. Harry waved back, his uncertainty mounting.

Where was he? Some sort of safe house? What kind of hideout would a wizard leave visible to muggles? How had he even gotten here? He remembered walking towards Bremerhaven... was this even the same city?... and then everything after that came up blank. Searching the room for clues revealed nothing but a tiny storage hutch built into the wall and a tiny bathroom with a toilet and sink. It was all very spartan, but clearly not a cell.

With a bit of uncertainty, he tried the door.

It opened with a little groan. He grabbed his satchel and made his second bid for freedom.

A set of stairs lay directly outside his door, twisting downwards, and he followed it to the level below, and found a hallway lined with six doors with numbers on them and red carpet on the floor. A hotel then, he decided, and followed the stairs down to the next level and found a similar hallway but with green carpet. And so it went for another two floors, until at last he found himself deposited into a lobby.

It was empty. There was no clerk at the checkout desk, though there were several keys missing from board behind him, and no visitors sitting on the sofas or chairs. The lights were on, and the ceiling fan was running. It was ghostly quiet, but the place itself was sparkling clean and ready to receive, and he felt uneasy.

He tried the front entrance, and finally experienced his first obstacle. There was no knob on the door. He tried pushing it, but it didn't budge. With his wand, which he still couldn't believe he had, he tried a revealing charm, and then an unlocking charm, and after some mental debate a blasting charm. All three spells were swallowed up without so much as a rattle.

Throwing a chair at the nearest window had similar results.

Frustrated, he went in search of another exit. If he was forced to, he supposed he could figure a way to climb out his bedroom window and onto the street, but he wanted to see if could manage something less conspicuous on the ground floor. And perhaps find out what the devil was going on.

Searching the ground floor revealed an office, a break room, a coin operated laundry, and a kitchen. One of the laundry machines was running and the kitchen had food in it (Harry wasn't too shy to nick a cookie out of the pantry), but otherwise he found no evidence of anyone. He was starting to entertain the notion that he was going be kept like a pet hamster in a very elaborate cage, when he heard voices. He followed the sound out to the lobby, and to a set of double doors he had overlooked. Beside the door was sign.

Astrada Hotel Bar

Mon-Thurs. 6:00pm-12:00pm

Fri-Sun: 5:00pm -1:00am

There were muffled voices coming through the door, barely audible but Harry got the impression that someone was shouting or at least protesting loudly. Cautiously, he leaned in closer to listen.

"I still say you should have searched him! It's careless and naive Who knows what he's carrying on him? What if he's got something the Dark Lord can trace? Or even the ministry?" someone argued, a woman, he thought.

"Now, now, my dear, I didn't take on this responsibility in order to hold young Mr. Potter prisoner. He has had a very difficult year, and deserves patience and respect. I believe that will prove the best approach for everyone."

"Albus," someone else said, this time a man, "I can appreciate what you're saying, but this is a bit much. Viktor said it himself that the boy still felt loyalty towards the Dark Lord. Now, that's probably not his fault, and he's probably a very nice kid, but you can't expect us to put any trust in him. He wasn't off the boat ten minutes and he made a break for it! What happens if he manages to get out of here and gets picked up by one of Voldemort's men? Or runs off to find one himself?"

There was a moment of silence.

"That's a very good point," Dumbledore said at last, and Harry felt himself recoil. What were they going to do? Lock him up? Well... lock him up more? Cast the Imperius on him? Put him in a magically induced coma? Make him sign a fidelity contract? "Which is why I will be taking special pains to ensure he never meets any of you. Compromising a hideout is one thing, compromising the Order is another thing altogether. With that being said, I must ask you to all to exit through the back door, as Mr. Potter seems to have made himself comfortable at the front."

Harry leaped away from the door. There was the sound of cursing and moving chairs, the number of which suggested there were many more than just Dumbledore, the man, and the woman. His first thought was to turn around and run back upstairs to his room, thinking that if the others were truly leaving, then he might as well try it himself. If he waited for a few minutes, he might be able to escape without worrying about another sneak attack.

He was just a few steps up, when one of the doors popped open with an audible 'click'. He froze on instinct, and turned expecting someone to come out and shout at him for spying or order him to stop, but no one appeared. Looking back up the stairs, it seemed a lot further away, five flights of stairs he reminded himself. The old wizard was alone now though. Surely if he wanted to interrogate him, he would have made the others stay.

Turning back towards the door, he wondered if it were an invitation, and whether he should accept it. The last time he had faced Dumbledore, he had been half mad and hurled curses at him and blown up a room. Hardly the best first impression. Not that he cared.

It was just... that opened door seemed to taunting. I dare you come inside, it seemed to laugh.

Well, he thought, I did want some answers.

He flicked his wrist a few times, making sure his wand would pop out easily if necessary, and headed back and stepped inside. The bar was dark, as bars typically were, and only a few dim lights were on. It smelled of stale smoke and wine, and at the bar sat the old wizard, all alone, drinking what appeared to be...

"Lemonade, Mr. Potter?" Dumbledore offered, his eyes somehow managing to twinkle even in the dark. Harry was very tempted to just roll his eyes and stalk back outside.

"No, thank you."

"Suit yourself," he said, took a long sip from his spirally orange straw, sighed happily, and continued, "How are you feeling? I do apologize for your rather unorthodox arrival. My associates can be a little overzealous in their assignments. I trust you weren't hurt?"

"Not as far as I can tell..." he said, his tone doing nothing to hide his annoyance.

"Good, good. Now that you're awake, I thought we might discuss a few things."

Harry said nothing. In fact, he didn't even move. He itched to take his wand, stun the wizard, and make a break for it. Dumbledore took another sip from his glass.

"Ah, that's wonderful. Best thing about summer, without a doubt, is the lemonade. And ice cream. And fireflies. Those are good too."

Or maybe stun him and call on the nearest funny farm to come and take him away.

"I'm sorry...sir... but what did you want to talk about?"

"Oh, yes. About your stay here for the summer... well, temporary stay anyway. We'll likely move once or twice, but that's neither here nor there. I would like to hire you on as a personal assistant. My sources tell me that you have some experience working in an office."

Harry blinked. That wasn't what he had been expecting. Inquiries about his affiliation with Voldemort, questions about dangerous magics he had performed, and even his thoughts on the Minister of Magic, but not about a job. He was talking about a job, wasn't he?"

"I don't... what?"

Dumbledore didn't seem to find anything about the situation odd, and kept on as if they were long time acquaintances. "I've always believed remaining active during the summer was just as important for keeping the mind sharp as homework ever was, and it's excellent experience for after graduation. Don't you agree?"

“Er... sure.”

“So what do you think? A little part-time job, say, four or five hours a day? I'll pay you of course. That's half the fun of having a job... in some cases the only fun.”

“Uh... what would I be doing, exactly?”

“Filing, taking messages, tidying up, the usual. Do you know how to make tuna salad?”

“... Yeah...”

“Then making tuna salad on Thursdays, as well. I can never get it quite right.”

Harry bulked. He had just hired himself out to a loon. A loon who happened to be one of Voldemort's greatest rivals. Fabulous. Well, at least he hadn't asked for his wand.

“Good, now that that's settled... about your wand...”

Well, bollocks.

“Ministry laws, I'm afraid, and I should be in considerable trouble as your guardian if anyone knew you had cast some rather impressive spells at the front door.”

“How would anyone know?” he tried, then cursed himself for the desperate lilt his voice had taken. Stupid! Stupid! He had been close to begging. There was no way to win that way.

“I am sorry,” the old man said sympathetically, “I know it is disconcerting, but it's not something that can be taken lightly. I promise, your wand will remain safe.”

Harry said nothing, but his expression spoke volumes.

“Do you think I would tamper with it?”

Again, the boy let his expression do the talking, but added for clarification, "I'm more worried about myself."

"Ah, yes. Your trust is not so easily given, I imagine, and my words alone will not be enough to convince you. The only proof I can give you that you can trust me is if you don't have your wand and nothing ill befalls you, and the only way you would give me your wand is if you trusted me. We are at an impasse."

They fell into a thoughtful silence, and Harry found himself tired of standing and took a seat a little ways down the bar. Looking across the counter, he could see his reflection in the mirrored backdrop. He looked thin, pale, and tired, but his eyes were hard. It was a bit startling. The lighting was generally dim at Durmstrang except in the domes, and he hadn't realized his deterioration until now.

"Of course," the old wizard started up again, drawing back his attention, "I could have just as easily taken it from you while you slept."

Harry swallowed thickly, realizing that was very true. He could have taken his wand, and everything else he had on him, and locked him in his room or kept him unconscious or chained to the bed. A lot of things could have been done to him that weren't.

"Then why didn't you?"

Dumbledore's eyes twinkled, and he gently slid a glass of lemonade down the bar towards him. Harry caught it instinctively. "Trust, Mr. Potter, and respect. Before we can ever hope to reach an understanding, there must be a certain level of trust and respect... on both our parts."

He looked away, down at the glass. The outside of it was cool and wet with condensation, and he realized now that the room was uncomfortably warm and he was thirsty. It could be drugged though... but that wouldn't make much sense. He just didn't want to trust the old man. He had been preparing himself for a confrontation, for an interrogation, not conversations on trust and lemonade. It was ironic,

but he thought he would prefer his earlier supposition. He didn't know how to defend against kindness.

At the same time, he was sick of the fear and the paranoia, quite literally. His reflection showed the strain it had caused him. Cautiously, he took a sip of his lemonade, pointedly not looking at Dumbledore. He was afraid he'd see triumph there.

They didn't say anything further, and Dumbledore didn't rush him. When he had finally finished his drink, and his thinking, he was lead back out to the lobby and behind the check in counter.

"The hotel is empty," Dumbledore explained. "The muggles who own it have passed on, and I am watching it for their children until they sort out what to do with it, which should take another month or two."

"This is a muggle hotel?" It shouldn't have surprised him, not after looking out the window at the perfectly muggle-looking neighborhood. In the back of his mind, he had just assumed that's how German wizards lived and dressed. For the first time, the old wizard's expression sharpened a bit, into something more shrewd, but it quickly disappeared.

"It's been a while since you went about the muggle world, hasn't it? Five years almost."

"Longer than that," he said bitterly, before he could catch himself. He hadn't been out in the muggle world nearly at all since his parents death. The Dursley had kept him constantly at number 4, Privet Drive, never taking him to school, the store, or even to the park and never letting him outside to do anything except work on the garden. At the time, it had merely been depressing, but looking back on it now left him angry. He had missed out on so much because of his guardians' shame and greed, and that which he had seen and experienced with them was ugly and cruel.

"Then this shall be a rather novel experience. It will certainly be a re-education. Go ahead and pick a mail slot, and place your wand inside of it."

Harry hesitated, fighting the feeling of nausea over what he was about to do. His wand had been a part of him for years, and to be separated from it felt like willingly amputating a finger. The old wizard didn't rush him, and eventually he picked a slot that was eye-level to him and placed his wand inside. With a flick of his own wand, which made Harry flinch, Dumbledore cast a spell on the slot.

"There. Now it is quite safe from theft, fire, and flood. No one will be able to remove it, myself included, without canceling the spell first."

Nothing appeared to have happened. There was no glowing or sparks, and the wand continued to sit there in plain view. Curious, Harry reached up to try and take it back. His fingers missed the slot, and he felt the first tingle of magic. Another attempt and another miss. The third and fourth try yielded the same results. He pulled back his hand.

"Weird."

"Quite. Now that that is taken care of, if you would follow me to my office. I have a bit of filling that needs to be taken care of."

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Snape stalked through the Court of Military Affairs with the same looming quality he had mastered at Hogwarts, and for the most part it was just as effective among the Dark Lord's toadies and the toadies' toadies as it was on school children. Witches and wizards alike, in their suits and uniforms shrank back upon his approach, refraining from any attempts at flattering or networking they normally employed with those of superior rank. The potions master had a reputation as a former Death Eater, and any who came upon him were unfortunately reminded of it by his perpetually dark expression and intense black eyes.

This was good for Snape, certainly a morale booster after months of frustration at his own inadequacy. The Dark Lord had charged him with a task, a task he couldn't afford to fail at, but ultimately saw no way to achieve. Tonight, he was expected to deliver the results of his

investigation into the mysterious letter in front of the Dark Lord and a hundred of his colleagues, and he had nothing.

The Court of Military affairs was an ostentatious building for a place that dealt with the affairs of war. The style was Baroque, garishly over decorated in gold leaf and high ceilings, paintings of battles lined the walls, making the hallways unpleasantly noisy when just the images of battling sorcerers and sorceresses blowing each other to bits would have been unpleasant enough all its own. He arrived at the meeting hall and was stopped by Sentinels, suffered through the usual indignity of a search, and was permitted to enter.

He was not late, but he was one of the last to arrive. The meeting was being held in a large room, with no windows and no places to hide for the sake of security. Long tables had been set up in the shape of a 'U' with a shorter table above it for the most important attendees, including the Dark Lord himself. The room was crowded, and the noise of battles from the hallway was replaced with the noise of politicians who liked to hear themselves talk. Heading towards the front of the room, he could see Lucius and Morgan had already arrived. Lucius was talking with small group of important looking people, but Morgan's attention was focused on a woman he didn't recognize. She was in her early thirties, plain faced, though not unpleasant, sprinkled with freckles from getting too much sun, and her dark brown hair was pulled back into an equally unimpressive bun. She dressed modestly in a blue dress, and a darker blue robe was draped over it. Nothing about her suggested any significance, and her wide nervous eyes suggested she didn't think she should be there, but she had been placed between Morgan and himself, which meant someone thought otherwise.

He took his seat, ignoring inquiries from the few brave enough to address him, and waited. The woman beside him turned around, a nervous reaction, but when he turned back to her she quickly looked away. He rolled his eyes. He supposed it was better than being stuck next to talker, but her timidity was irksome.

"You could have just handed my report to someone-" she was saying to Morgan, a rather bold move since he was the second most

important person in the room at the moment. He cut her off with flat reprimand.

“You were requested by the Dark Lord himself. If you have objections, feel free to take the matter up with him.”

That shut her up quick, as such a threat usually did, and she spent the next few minutes staring at her hands clasped in her lap. Snape spent his time, trying to think of what he was going to say. Unfortunately, he kept thinking how he wanted to strangle Harry for getting him into this mess.

“All rise for Lord Voldemort, Sovereign of the Kingdoms of Britain and Ireland!”

The room fell silent, and anyone who had been sitting, Snape included, rose to their feet and turned towards the door. The Dark Lord strode inside, a party of six Sentinels followed behind him, but they broke away to station themselves around the room. The sovereign himself, went straight for the center table, and sat himself down. Everyone followed his example, and sat, waiting in silence for his instructions.

“We have much to discuss,” the Dark Lord said pointedly, “So we will refrain from the usual ceremonies and pleasantries. Please keep your testimonies brief and to the point. If anyone has questions or statements to add, wait until the end before presenting them. I shall begin with a explanation of what occurred the night I was attacked.”

Voldemort's story was a shiny little thing, polished after months of consideration and truths dressed in lies and political correctness. It went along the lines that the Dark Lord had been in Ireland, making nice with the local Druidic communities during their Winter Solstice holiday, when he had been attacked with a strange magic. The druids present had been skilled enough to save his life and bring him to the hospital for treatment, where under the excellent care of the doctors he had managed to recover relatively quick. Further investigation revealed the source of the strange magic to be Professor Eric Brennan, a teacher at Hogwarts who had been convinced or possibly coerced by the Germans to attempt an assassination. The Germans

had fled without him, and when confronted, Brennan had killed himself and taken his secrets with him. It was also believed he had a hand in Harry Potter's kidnapping, but this could not be confirmed. He has since made a complete recovery.

There was a rather telling lack of questions after he had given his account, and the Dark Lord turned over the hall to Lucius.

“Commander Malfoy will explain the events that led to the discovery of the German's attempt at spying. Commander Malfoy, if you would.”

Lucius nodded to the Dark Lord, and stood. Despite his own sense of self-importance, he kept his account brief. There was, after all, very little about the incident that showed him in a very flattering light. The discovery had been made by an anonymous third party, and most of the Germans had escaped, but for a few minor players, and a child had been kidnapped. The only positive point had been his quick actions, which had prevented the acquiring of confidential information via the parasitic insects. There were a few questions here, but no one dared point out his mistakes. Criticizing Malfoy wasn't as dangerous as criticizing Voldemort, but only because he didn't make you suffer in public before he killed you... usually.

And then it was his turn.

“Professor Severus Snape has been charged with investigating the mysterious letter from Hogwarts,” Lucius ended, taking his seat. Snape stood, careful not to fidget or take a drink of water, or appear anything other than absolutely confident in what he was about to say. He had no real answers, but he could improvise like the best of them.

“Having examined the letter, I can safely say that it did in fact originate from our Lord's office in Hogwarts, and the owl was also a tenant of the school. Further investigation of both the office's security and questioning of those present at the school during the event, I have reached the following conclusion.”

He was distinctly aware of Lucius and Morgan and, most unnerving of all, the Dark Lord's intense scrutiny; more interested than anyone else in the room on what he was to say next. They knew he had

reached dead end after dead end, and wondered how he was going to get out of the bind he found himself in.

"Professor Brennan, is in fact, the original author of the letter."

There were murmurs of confusion, but the Dark Lord quickly broke in.

"Silence! Professor, please explain."

"Certainly," he said quickly, but not too quickly. He had to be careful to come off as if he believed what he was saying and wasn't just making excuses. "I believe Professor Brennan wrote the letter in an attempt to protect Mr. Potter from harm, alerting Commander Malfoy of the spying insects as proof of their intentions so that he might stop their plot before involving his student."

"But Professor Snape," a woman towards the back objected, "Why would Professor Brennan aid in the assassination of our Lord, but then try to stop them from kidnapping Mr. Potter?"

Snape took a deep breath, and cast an accessing glance at the Dark Lord. He looked curious, but not convinced.

"Professor Brennan," Snape began, "Has a... history with the Dark Lord. One that may account for his willingness to murder him, but not one that would justify the abduction of Mr. Potter or the revelation of national secrets to a foreign government. Ultimately, we may never know why, but given the timing and the source of materials, only Brennan had access to the office and the foreknowledge of the plot to have sent the letter."

Not everyone looked certain, but obviously didn't have anything to contradict his theory or even an alternative theory of their own. He managed to re-take his seat, fairly confident he was not going to be horribly mutilated at the conclusion of the meeting.

"Thank you, Professor," the Dark Lord said, looking rather impressed, which didn't necessarily mean he had been fooled. Snape would have to hope he was impressed enough with his improvisation that he didn't curse him out of hand. "Most of you are unfamiliar with our next

speaker, Ms. Ira Beadle. She is a private researcher for the Oxford University of Magical Academia and Medicine, specializing in entomology and has been charged with examining the insects used to spy on us.”

Nervously, the woman beside him stood and faced the crowd, nodding in acknowledgment to the Dark Lord.

“H-hello. Ah... one moment please.”

She suddenly dropped down and after a moment of rather undignified groping beneath the table, pulled out box-shaped item. The Sentinels stiffened, but she was too distracted setting up her contraption to notice. After a few seconds of fiddling with some knobs on the side, the top of the box lit up and a faint hologram appeared a few feet above their heads. The holograms were of the bugs, but they were very difficult to see.

“Um... would s-someone please lower the lights?” she requested. Another moment passed and the lights dimmed, and the insects could be seen much more clearly, and she began. “T-these are not true insects, but ascari, more closely related to ticks. The one on the left... excuse me the one on my left, is a common a Western Imagi, easily found in any Northern European country, including Scotland and Ireland. The one on the right, however, is a completely new species...”

In the dark of the room, focused on a subject she clearly understood well, Mr. Beadle's timid demeanor melted away. With confidence and enthusiasm she explained the technique likely used to change the Western Imagi into the current form, and how the use of grinding the creatures up and mixing them in a potion and then a penseive would reveal everything they had seen and experienced. They had perfect memory.

“Very impressive, Ms. Beadle,” the Dark Lord said, interrupting her before she turned meeting into a course lecture. “You may sit down now.”

Chagrined, she dismantled her projector and quickly took her seat. There were a few more speakers, Sentinels in charge of interrogating the few Germans they had captured, Court officials investigating Germany's preparations and attitudes towards the upcoming deadline, progress reports on Britain and Ireland's security and the military recruitment campaign, and various other matters. It was almost midnight when the meeting was adjourned, and everyone was too tired to attempt another round of schmoozing.

The Dark Lord, however, being an inhuman monster, was still peppy enough for just a little more. Snape was among the privileged to receive a pat on the shoulder and a rather sinister, 'come with me'. He followed the Dark Lord through a back door, and down a hallway. Lucius and Morgan were with them. The guards were not. They stepped into an office and shut the door, Morgan throwing up anti-spying spells behind them.

Snape was rather surprised to find Nagini lounging on the couch, glaring up at them, daring one of them to try and take her spot. It was strange when he suddenly realized he hadn't seen the snake since Harry's second year.

"Hassshe messs ssseeessse," the Dark Lord hissed softly, and the giant snake slithered to the floor and made her way over to him, leaving the couch available to Lucius and Morgan. Snape remained standing, leaning against the doorway. Voldemort reclined in his chair, completely unaffected as Nagini climbed up his chair and laid her head on his lap. He started to stroke her reptilian head and spoke to them in English.

"There are a few matters I wanted to make all of you aware of before you leave. I have recently begun making direct correspondence with Her Majesty Queen Ophelia IV through letters, and she has expressed a willingness to listen to our complaints against Germany. Much of what was discussed today will be presented via representative, and will require you to make yet another formal report and submit it in a week's time for translation. This is an extremely important project, my friends. If we can convince the queen our grievance is legitimate, we may create for ourselves a powerful ally, one who will allow us a foothold on mainland soil. Your roles in this

will be limited, but I wanted you aware of what is going on so that you might facilitate this matter among your underlings who express reluctance in associating with a foreign country.”

If that was what this private meeting was about, Snape wondered why he was there. His 'underlings' included a couple hundred juveniles of no political consequence. At least, none of political consequence since Harry disappeared.

“I can see you are wondering about your presence here, Severus,” the Dark Lord continued. “Truthfully, that matter has nothing to do with you. I simply need to ask you a question.”

“My Lord?” he asked, cautiously. The dark wizard's expression was familiar, a casual cruelty that suggested he was going to curse someone out of boredom, rather than out of punishment.

“Chief Morgan and I have been discussing a means of retrieving my dear protégé from Dumbledore, and it seems we may have the opportunity in the next few weeks.”

Something unpleasant settled in Snape's stomach at the news, something that left him nauseous at the thought of participating in the child's inevitable punishment. Still, he managed to get out a 'congratulations'.

“Thank you. Now, however, I must consider exactly what I am to do with him. A few minutes under the Pain Curse just isn't going to cut it. I need him healthy enough to face the public and testify to Durmstrang's kidnapping and torture, but more importantly I need to know he will never again be capable of defying or attempting harm against me.”

Snape nodded, his unease beginning to spread. He didn't like where this conversation was going. “What would you have of me?”

“I need to know if you are capable of instilling loyalty in him, through potions or spells or a good old-fashion lashing. I don't care, as long as he remains sane and healthy enough to carry out his role as Prince. Can you do this?”

There were fourteen different ways Snape could think of to create artificial loyalty, thirty if one considered blind obedience the same thing as loyalty, and six methods that could maintain one's sanity and health. None he had ever considered using on a child, even one as obstinate and infuriating as Harry.

"... Yes, I can," he said, because to deny his ability would not only endanger him, but leave the boy in the care of someone else, most likely Lestrage or someone else of questionable skill and intent.

The Dark Lord nodded, tension they had not even realized was there, slowly leaving him. In his lap, Nagini closed her eyes, conveying the contentment normally reserved to highly spoiled house cats.

"Good. I recommend making preparations as soon as possible."

"I shall, my Lord... but if I may ask... why me? I have... failed," he bit out, hating to remind the wizard of such a touchy subject, but needing answers just the same. "... to handle Potter properly the first time, and surely you are more than capable of handling him yourself."

He stiffened, waiting for a Cruciatus or possibly something more bloody, but Voldemort merely made a dismissive gesture with his free hand.

"I have two reasons. The first being that I want to maintain the appearance of normalcy upon his return. No one should know of his defection or the retribution that will be exacted on him, not the public in general or his closest associates, including your goddaughter and godson. Removing him from your care would raise questions, and you are too conveniently placed for me not to use you. The alternative would be Lestrage, who lacks the... sensitivity... this situation requires, or Professor Toure, who lacks the skills. The other reason... I do believe he betrayed us both, Severus. You have as much reason to be angry with him as I do."

Snape was surprised, not only by the Dark Lord's reasoning, but also by the realization that he had never felt betrayed. Angry, yes, but not betrayed. Harry's retaliation had seemed perfectly natural, albeit

foolhardy and inconvenient. He was a Gryffindor forced to play Slytherin games, and ultimately had lashed out and broken free. Harry's actions were unbelievably reckless and extreme, but not unjustified. Snape himself had often fantasized of ways to put Lord Voldemort into an early (long overdue?) grave.

"Thank you," he said, trying to sound sincere but coming off more than a little perplexed. "You are too generous."

"Aren't I?" It was said with an ironic lilt, a strange sort of joke for man who only seemed to get stranger with time. "That is all, Severus. You may go, I still have a few more matters to discuss with the others."

Snape bowed respectfully and left, aware of the other wizards' intense scrutiny. They had said nothing the entire time, and he would happily have forgotten their presence during the entire awkward and nerve-wracking debacle, but it seemed they would be privy to his every word and subconscious gesture to examine and question on their own once their meeting concluded. His summoning and premature dismissal left him vulnerable to their criticism behind the closed door, but there was nothing he could do about it now. The only true way to redeem himself was to do as Dark Lord requested and-

"Professor Snape."

Ms. Beadle was in the hallway, sitting in a chair like a child waiting to be called into the headmaster's office, her little projection box beside her. She was clearly tired, and he couldn't imagine why she was still there.

"Ms. Beadle... shouldn't you be on your way home?"

She looked up at him with wide gray eyes, then timidly down at her hands again.

"Chief Morgan is my escort," she said, softly, and offered nothing more. Just as well, he decided, since he wasn't particularly interested. And yet some how, he still ended up asking a question.

"A friend of yours?"

She shook her head. "My stepfather."

"Ah." And then he completely lost interest, and started on his way.

"Professor..."

He paused and turned back towards her. She was looking at him directly now, still nervous, but with intent. "Yes?"

"I... I just wanted to say... I..." she stumbled, "You have my condolences... about Mr. Potter, I mean. Like everyone else, I guess... We're all praying for his safe return."

Snape said nothing for a long moment, decoding her ramble into something he could adequately interpret. When he finally figured it out, a laugh jumped straight into his throat before he could swallow it. He laughed, hard and long. Oh, what a ridiculous thing to say, he thought. Never mind he had heard it a dozen times before. To have someone say it sincerely and to his face was just too funny.

It didn't help that her wide eyes had gotten even wider and she was now left gaping, like some sort of deer-eyed fish. His laughter wasn't subsiding, and as it continued her mouth finally closed and her eyes narrowed, but she had also turned beet red, bringing a completely new level of hilarity to the situation.

"Honestly, sir!" she protested indignantly. "What is so funny?"

The laughter finally faded away as he considered her question, and ultimately decided it wasn't funny at all and he needed to get some sleep. He rubbed his eyes, turned and walked away, ignoring her and her question altogether. It would be for the best if he left before Lucius came out and requested a word with him in his usual attempts to prod a situation until he found some benefit to himself in it.

"Goodnight, Ms. Beadle," he said offhandedly.

"Good riddance, sir!" she snapped at his back, unknowingly eliciting a smirk from the utterly disagreeable man.

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Harry sat at the window, looking down at the empty street below. It was late, or very early morning depending on how one thought about it, and he could not sleep. His life had just taken a dramatic new turn again and his mind was still reeling. In a day, he had gone from Durmstrang to Bremerhaven, was briefly reunited with Fleur, attempted an escape, was recaptured, relocated into a muggle hotel, surrendered his wand to his former mentor's greatest enemy (not to mention possibly his own greatest enemy if he truly was responsible for the whole Moody debacle), and was now working for him as an office assistant.

The day hadn't gotten any less strange once he was lead to Dumbledore's 'office', which resembled office only by the fact that it had a desk and a filing cabinet. And papers. Lots and lots of papers. In fact, it looked as if someone had set a bomb off in the post office. They were stacked on his desk, on the floor, tacked to bulletin boards, behind the radiator, under the rug, and even in some of the hats on the hat rack. Despite this, the old loon insisted he knew where everything was... except his coffee pot... and his type writer... and Fawkes, who turned out to be a phoenix taking sanctuary in the adjoining bathroom. A wise move, since a lovely as the creature was, he was also a definite fire hazard with all the kindling just laying around.

Harry had spent hours just trying to find all the scattered papers, which could have been done in minutes if he'd been allowed his wand or even if Dumbledore had done a few spells himself, but the old wizard had busied himself typing up letters on his type writer, after it had eventually been excavated from under some old tax forms that had never been filed.

It turned out that Dumbledore was a philanthropist, who ran almost a dozen charities and organizations almost entirely by mail. The Refugee Scholarship Fund, set up to help refugees and children of refugees pay for school tuition. The Three Tongues Program, volunteer-run classes designed to teach refugees the language of

their new home country. Universal Rites, a legal assistance charity that provided legal counseling and representation to British families without citizenship. It went on and on, and even though he wasn't reading through every piece, he was getting the gist of what life was like for those who had fled during the war. And perhaps an idea of why his own parents preferred living as eccentric muggles, rather than outcast wizards.

They could have gone back, Harry thought. Most of them, anyway. Did it really seem so awful, that they would prefer to live like third class citizens in a foreign country than as first class citizens under Lord Voldemort?

That seemed to be the case, but he was suspicious. Had no one gone back? He couldn't recall ever hearing a case where someone had left Britain and then returned after the war. Perhaps it had been impossible? The international embargo could have prevented their return, but what sense did that make? Why hold on to people you didn't really want?

He decided he should ask Dumbledore in the morning. Given the man's occupation, it seemed he would be the most likely person to know, and in his case the only person he could ask. Sighing, he moved away from the window and climbed onto the bed. It was too warm to bother with blankets, so he simply curled around his pillow and closed his eyes.

Sleep evaded him for a while, pestering him with ideas of escaping out the window and disappearing while the strange old wizard slept oblivious, but such a silly plot wasn't enough to pull his tired body from his bed. Finally, the world fell away and dreams came to him.

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The maze at the Sianach Lodge was far different in the summer than in the winter, and even in the misty gloom he could see the hedges lined in vibrant greens and flowering bursts of color. Somewhere in the distance he could hear a raven call. He made his way towards the center, following the familiar path and nodding to the gods and

goddesses perched on their altars, and they nodded back or ignored him in their turn.

The maze opened up at the center, and standing there was the Dark Lord himself, using his staff to burn a diagram into the grass. Harry watched him silently for a while, idly wondering what it was for, not bothering to question why he was there to begin with. When the diagram was complete, Voldemort turned and looked at him.

His expression was cold and blank, and Harry was suddenly reminded that they were not friends any longer. He didn't run though. It hadn't yet occurred to him to be afraid, and when the man extended his hand to him in invitation, he entered the circle without hesitation.

"What are we doing?" he asked, looking down at the burnt lines in the ground, runes running out from the center or into the center depending on one's point of view.

"Where are you, Harry?" Voldemort asked, ignoring his inquiry.

"I am here."

A hint of amusement flitted across the Dark Lord's expression, but just as quickly disappeared.

"No, you are not here. You are only dreaming of this place. Where are you?"

Harry thought about it.

"Germany."

"Better... where in Germany?"

"Westerly Street."

"A city? A town? Are mountains nearby?"

"A city. I don't know its name. In a hotel. There are muggles outside my window."

The Dark Lord considered this for a while, and while he was thinking Harry watched the lines in the grass as they started to shift. Gently, the man lifted his chin with his hand, and drew back his attention.

"Have you told Dumbledore anything?"

"I told him how to make a tuna salad."

Voldemort grinned, but fought it back, trying to keep his expression serious. He seemed to be having a hard time of it, particularly since Harry was grinning up at him.

"Has he asked you about me?"

"No, but I told him I wouldn't tell him anything when we first met."

The elder man cocked his head to the side. "Why not?"

Harry cocked his head to the other side, mirroring him. "Why would I?"

"You betrayed me once before."

"I never meant to hurt you. I just didn't want you to hurt anyone else... just because you could."

"It is my right."

"But it isn't right."

"You're one to talk about morality after what you've done."

"Fine, I'm Mr. Kettle and your Mr. Pot, and we're both too black to criticize each other. I still didn't tell him anything."

Voldemort let out an irritated snort. "Are you with him now?"

"He's somewhere in the hotel... if he hasn't snuck out. I wouldn't know. He took my wand."

And that was a good old-fashioned sulk right there, and he threw in a shoe scuffing for effect. As he was looking down he noticed the diagram had shifted some more, and had warped so that its center was starting to edge towards his feet. He took a step back and watched as it slowly changed directions.

"Weird. What's it do?"

"Hold still and you'll find out," the Dark Lord suggested. "Has he told you anything about me?"

"Not really. You've made a lot of people miserable, but I knew that already."

"Ha ha."

"I want to come back." He stated, seemingly out of nowhere, but it was the only thing he had really wanted to say since he saw the Dark Lord. The rising humor drained away, leaving the dark wizard expressionless once again.

"Then you shouldn't have run away."

"I didn't. Viktor kidnapped me."

Voldemort snorted derisively.

"Alright, so I let him kidnap me," Harry admitted. "You would have killed me though if I had stayed."

"I still might."

"I really am sorry."

"I really don't care."

They fell silent, Harry staring up into his former mentor's blood red eyes and Voldemort staring into his verdant green, communicating in a look what they had ready said in words and just a little bit more.

Suddenly, Voldemort pulled back and turned away.

"You may return," he said, stunning Harry to the core and filling him with unrealized hope, "On one condition."

"What? Please, I'll do anything."

The Dark Lord turned back to him, his mouth twisted into a cruel smirk.

"Hold still."

Below him the eye of the diagram finally shifted to directly beneath his feet, and magic welled up beneath him. He felt his magic twist inside him and the diagram pull at it sharply, as if to tear it away. His cry was more from surprise than pain, but pain quickly followed when he tried to jump away and he felt something tear. He screamed and fell, and the earth rose up to swallow him...

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Harry bolted upright in his bed, drenched in sweat and shivering. What had happened? Not a dream. He knew dreams, nightmares in particular, and that hadn't been either. Voldemort had been there and they talked and argued and he had, somehow, been bespelled.

He didn't need the blood and dirt covering his feet staining his blankets to tell him that.

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Voldemort withdrew from the dream scape and awoke in his body, sitting at his desk where his minions had left him hours before. Nagini still dozed in his lap, content to remain in his company as long as he allowed it. He opened his hand, in which he had held the diagram from his dream. Where the diagram had been now read an address.

He smiled grimly down at it.

“Gotcha.”

Book V:

Chapter 3: Legends

Harry took a bath in one of the guest rooms that morning, rather than his usual shower, hoping the hot water would ease the ache in his feet. There were cuts on him, in a spiraling arch that matched the diagram he had seen in his dream, and though they weren't deep they ached to the bone. His own magic felt drained, as if he had been casting powerful magic, and he was already tired from lack of sleep.

He laid in the footed bathtub, stared up and out the little window, watching clouds and birds amble by in the slowly brightening sky, and tried to think of what he should do as the water slowly began to cool. There was no telling what the spell in his dream did exactly, or if he wasn't even now suffering under the slow debilitating effects of a curse. The Dark Lord had said he could come home now... but at what price? And in what condition? He needed to be examined, but what if in doing so he ruined his only chance of returning?

And what if Voldemort lied and was really killing him? Or intended to torture and kill him when he got back? The man hadn't been happy with him in his dream, and some how he doubted the waking world made him any more amenable.

Reluctantly, he climbed out of the tub and got ready to face Dumbledore. He would have to tell the old man about what had happened, if for no other reason than he might be risking the life of a man who had shown him nothing but kindness. Mutual respect and trust, wasn't that what he had said? Even if it wasn't easy, Harry knew he had to make an effort too.

He had nothing to bind up his feet with, so he wore his thickest and softest pair of socks and carried his shoes in his hands. He kept Draco's knife in the back of his pants, but the rest of his belongings remained shrunk and carefully stored in the satchel Fleur had transfigured for him. Carrying all of his possessions in his pockets for the entire summer just wasn't that practical, but he still didn't entirely trust Dumbledore. He was actually planing on hiding the satchel somewhere he could get to quickly if he needed to make an abrupt

escape. If. So far there hadn't been any reason to be afraid, but then he had been there less than a day.

Gingerly, he made his way downstairs, hoping to find the wizard in his office. His feet ached, but there wasn't as much pain as he thought there should be. He was only to the second floor when the sounds of an argument reached him. At first, he thought it was just another fight between Dumbledore and one of his cohorts, but as he noiselessly inched further down to listen, he recognized the voice of Minister Seibligg. He froze, his eyes widening. What was he doing here?

“Auf gar keinen Fall! ” the Minister snarled, “Why would I ever authorize that?”

Dumbledore replied, his tone remaining congenial, but there was a touch of mocking in it, “I did not request your 'authorization', Minister. I was merely informing you of the situation so that you would not be alarmed.”

“Don't give me that! Potter is still under my jurisdiction-”

“But he is under my guardianship, and seeing as I will be leaving the country for a while it's only natural that he should accompany me. Really there is nothing for you to be kicking up such a fuss about. It will be safer for Mr. Potter abroad in any event.”

“Safer? That has absolutely nothing to do with this! I don't care about his safety, I care about what he knows! What you promised he would tell you!”

Harry recoiled. It had been a trick? The kindness, the liberties, and all that talk about respect and trust? He had thought it too good to be true, but he couldn't help but feel both surprised and betrayed to have his suspicions confirmed.

“I never promised you anything of the sort,” Dumbledore said, his tone darkening. “I said I would ask if he ever felt he could entrust it with me, and not a moment before.”

Now he felt uncertain. Yet again. He shoved his confusion away to listen further, deciding to withhold judgment for the moment.

“Don't play that game with me! The only reason I let you have custody of that brat was because I know what a manipulative old coot you can be. If you try to back out now, I can just as easily take him back.”

There was an amused chuckle, and Harry wondered yet again about the old wizard's sanity.

“Just as easily? Minister Seibligg, I do believe its Sunday, which means you'll have to wait till Monday to submit a complaint about my guardianship, which even with your political clout will take a week to investigate and take to court, by which time my own lawyers will submit a counter claim and delay it for another month. By then your deadline will be up, and you'll be far too busy trying to save your own skin to worry about where Mr. Potter and I are.”

There was a silence, tense and ugly. The kind Harry associated with anger.

“Do not underestimate me, Dumbledore. I'm a man on the edge, with more than power in my left pocket than all your allies across Europe put together. You can not win.”

“Good day, Minister.”

Heavy footsteps and the slamming of a door indicated that the wretched man had left and he felt relieved, but at the same time uneasy. Now what? He couldn't honestly tell what Seibligg would do, but Harry suspected it wouldn't involve any legal action by the ministry. Plus, he still had the old wizard to deal with.

“You may come down now, Mr. Potter.”

And how did that man do that? He slipped back on his shoes, gritting his teeth as he did so, and descended the rest of the way down the stairs. What he saw when he reached the bottom made him blink in disbelief. Dumbledore stood there, not in his usual gaudy robe and

hat, but in a respectable three-piece tweed suit with matching dark brown hat. He looked like a perfectly average muggle grandfather, even with the ridiculously long beard.

“Sir,” he said, trying not gawk, “Is everything alright?”

“Quite. It would seem that we may have to move on quicker than I had previously intended. However, there is an errand I hope you would like to accompany me on. Stretch our legs, do a bit of sightseeing and all that.”

Harry frowned. Was he really going to ignore the conversation they both knew he had overheard? “Yes, sir.”

“Good, good. I hope you are well rested. It's a bit of a jaunt I'm afraid.”

Frankly, Harry was exhausted, but he wanted to go out. He hadn't been in the warm sunshine in months. But he also had to tell him about his dream and the spell... which he didn't want to do at the moment. Seibligg's visit left him edgy and paranoid, and though Dumbledore hadn't betrayed him, he still felt leery about telling him. What would he do if he found out? They were leaving soon, so the chances of Voldemort finding him so quickly were slim, but what if he were ill? He didn't feel sick, at least not any sicker than would be expected, but hadn't that medi-witch in Durmstrang said curses could hurt you without inflicting pain? Of course, a curse without pain just didn't strike him as Voldemort's style.

Not yet, he decided. I'll tell him once we get where we're going, then I can still have a day outside.

“Yeah. That sounds great.”

“Excellent. Lets have breakfast and then we'll be off.”

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"Yes, I understand. I want payment upfront. After that, I don't care," Stephen Canis said sharply into the phone, his East London accent creeping into his voice. He pulled the phone from his ear as the man on the other end proceeded to shout into it. "And for heaven's sake stop shouting! I can hear you just fine if you talk like I'm in the room."

He looked over at his wife and three children at the kitchen table, and rolled his eyes and mouthed the word 'wizards'. Sylvia gave him a warning look, but the children giggled into their cereal bowls. The voice on the other end quieted a bit.

"Yes, I can do that. Two days probably, if I can get him today. Any more than that and you'll know something went wrong..." He listened to the reply, then smiled darkly. "With all due respect, sir, if I'm caught there's not going to be much left of me for you or anyone else to do any of that. What is the address?"

There was a pen and paper on the table, which he snatched up and began writing. He repeated the address back to the phone, then nodded to himself. "Good. I'll see you in a few days then."

He hung up the phone without waiting for a reply, and turned to his family. The children looked curious, but his wife only looked worried. She was always worried though.

"I don't like this, Stephen," she said bluntly. "This is an ugly business you're getting us mixed up in."

"This 'ugly business' is going to give us a future out of this slum, Sylvia. We deserve better than this," he gestured around their 'home', a three room hovel with rotting wallpaper and rotting furniture and rotting clothes strewn about. "Our children deserve better."

"And what if you're caught? What will happen to us then? And even if we do succeed, how do you know we can trust the British Court anymore than the German Ministry?"

Shaking his head, he moved into the living room, which in such a tiny apartment wasn't very far at all. He didn't even have to raise his voice.

“Just have the car and the kids ready within the hour. We're going to have to leave in a hurry.”

“Stephen-”

“No!” he snarled, and all four immediately flinched and looked down submissively. “I'm not throwing away the only opportunity we may ever have to get out of this place. Just do as I say.”

He waited, glaring at them, until each of them nodded their heads in compliance, even Sylvia who was looking increasingly distressed. He wanted to go over and hold her, to whisper reassurances to her and pet her long raven hair until at last she was convinced, but he couldn't afford dally here. His contact had said it needed to be done immediately, or the target might move again. There was no time for pacification.

Stalking out the front door, he gave a warning look to the nosy neighbor down the hall and the idiot pissing in the stairwell. God, couldn't he at least do that in the alley? There was drainage there at least. He hit the street and started loping towards the city train system. People moved out of his way and watched him cautiously as he passed. Everyone knew about him in the neighborhood. Something about him didn't sit right with the locals, and given the state of most of the residents that said something.

They thought he had killed people, and they would be correct, but no one who didn't have it coming. He had brought a sinister new meaning to 'family man' when he had moved his family there, and anyone who had so much as looked at either his wife or children the wrong way soon learned not to look again. They were all relatively safe, but 'relatively' didn't cut it for him. He wanted them somewhere they were completely safe. Somewhere with a view of trees, where neighbors were friendly, but far between, and where you could go years and never see a witch or wizard.

He wanted to move to Canada... or one of the Northern states in the U.S. at least.

They needed money though. A flight for five passengers over the Atlantic, even one way, was expensive and it still didn't solve the issue of where they would live or how. With the German ministry dogging their every move, refusing to let them work for muggles even when no respectable wizarding folk would hire them, money was hard to come by and he didn't dare risk the less than legal activities that would get them what they needed.

At least, he hadn't until today.

Kidnapping Harry Potter seemed a good way to get a lot of money quickly while simultaneously giving the German government the finger.

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"It might not look like much," the landlady admitted, showing McGunny around the one room apartment. It wasn't even very big for a studio. "But it's better than the dorms. Quiet neighbors. Walking distance to the University and the grocery store."

The new graduate took in the skylight, which effectively lit the entire room, showing off faded paint and creaky floor boards. It was clean though, and private. This was the tallest building for several blocks, and he had the highest floor.

"Any trouble with vermin?" he asked offhandedly.

"Absolutely not!" she said, genuinely indignant. "I run a respectable establishment, young man."

"I just had to ask... Would you mind giving me a moment to look around myself?"

She gave him an uncertain look, but finally shrugged. It wasn't like there was anything there for him to steal. "Alrighty, I'll be in my office when you're done."

She left, and once he was alone, he addressed his companion. "What do you think?"

"It's perfect. Just what we need," Tom said, pleased with their latest find. After six other places, McGunny was glad. Disembodied spirits might not get tired, but he certainly did.

"It's awfully small."

"There are ways around that."

"I doubt the landlady is going to want some kid right out of school doing any sort of magical renovation in her place."

"I doubt the landlady is going to want some kid right out of school growing a body in the middle of the room either."

"Point taken."

"Don't worry. I'll put everything back just the way I found it after I'm done. No one need ever know I was here."

"I don't suppose you could oblivate me before you go so we could say the same about me?" he suggested hopefully, because really it was the only conceivable way he thought the spirit might let him live.

"Why, Horace, I'm hurt. Do you really want to erase all the good times we've shared?"

He rolled his eyes. There was no way he'd indulge a statement that asinine. From the back of his mind, he could hear Tom chuckle grimly. For a murderous little fiend, Tom really was oddly jovial.

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The morning was cool, so Dumbledore sent him back to his room for something warmer. By the time he reached his room, found a jumper (not Mrs. Weasley's, bless her heart), and returned, someone else had arrived. No, wait. He blinked once, then twice. There were three,

shrouded in plain dark blue robes and listening as Dumbledore spoke to them softly. He hesitated on the stairs, and they all turned to him. It was rather creepy to discover he could not see their faces under their hoods.

"Ah, and here he is," Dumbledore said, smiling pleasantly as if he hadn't just pulled Dementor impersonators out of thin air. "Mr. Potter, these are some of my associates, who for reasons you overheard yesterday, shall remain anonymous."

"A pleasure not to meet you," Harry said blandly, cautiously coming down the rest of the stairs and into the lobby. His eyes automatically flitted to the mail slots behind the reception desk, easily spotting his wand. It was only a few feet away, but it may as well have been in Australia for all the good it did him. Turning back to the others, he could see the hooded figures still watching him tensely. He wondered what they thought he was going to do.

"While we're out and about, they will be here packing up and moving our things to another location. One that Minister Seibligg will have little more difficulty locating."

Two of the hooded figures moved, probably to do just as he said. The third one, however, lingered. Harry noted the third had smaller feet and nicer boots. A woman?

"Where to?"

"Greece."

Harry blinked. Greece? What the hell was in Greece? Yet as he thought about it, it didn't seem like a bad place to go. No one would think to look for him there, and it was probably an interesting country... except he didn't know even a smidgen of Greek. He thought about asking where in Greece, but Athens was the only city he had ever heard of and he didn't even now where exactly that was.

"Oh..."

"Shall we be going then?"

“Yeah.”

He followed Dumbledore to the door, and to his consternation the third hooded figure followed. He was so busy staring at the faceless entity that he missed exactly how the old wizard opened the door, and cursed himself for his carelessness. It probably didn't matter anyway. If the others were working on moving them out, they would probably be gone before he had opportunity to try the door himself.

The street was cast in early morning shadows, even as the sky was bright blue, the higher buildings facing East practically glowed where the sunlight touched them. The morning was deliciously cool, and there were people walking around them and the occasional car tottled by the one way street.

“Not to be a spoilsport,” Harry said, as they stepped out onto the sidewalk. “But your 'friend' is kind of conspicuous.”

A man and woman, each with a corgi leashed to them, smiled as they passed. Dumbledore tipped his hat and wished them a good morning in German. Harry turned to watch as they sidestepped the hooded figure without pausing, or even seeming to realize that there was anything there at all.

“No worries, Mr. Potter,” the old wizard assured him, “The cloaks are spelled for misdirection. Muggles will not notice them, and even a wizard would have some difficulty keeping track of them. In fact, I am rather impressed that you seemed to be able to spot our friend so consistently. It suggests a very deep, instinctual understanding of magic.”

So that was why he had trouble counting them when he had first seen them, Harry realized. Now however, he was able to spot her (he was increasingly convinced it was a woman once he had seen it start walking) without any difficulty. He turned back to Dumbledore.

“You can do it too, though, can't you? Like that night in the trophy room. You couldn't have seen me, but you knew exactly where I was.”

The old wizard smiled, but it was sad sort of smile, regretful perhaps. He turned around to address their follower.

“Would you mind giving us just a bit of privacy?”

She hesitated, but finally tilted her head in acknowledgment.

“Thank you.” They continued on a ways and when she was about thirty feet away, he continued. “I dare say our magical educations were not that different, Mr. Potter, although mine was likely far more self directed than yours. The Old Magics leave their mark on us, and even decades later, those reckless choices I made in my youth still effect me, as they will you.”

Harry stared at him, barely able to believe what he had just heard. Dumbledore, the Dark Lord's sworn enemy and leader of the Foreign Resistance, was a pagan? It was both absurd, and yet appropriate. He didn't know why he hadn't thought of it sooner. How else could he have stood up against Voldemort if he hadn't understood his power, and more importantly how to counter act it? Modern magics were strong, but they weren't as strong as the Old Magics, and certainly not as terrifying.

“How?” he found himself asking. “How did you come into it?”

“Likely the very same way Voldemort did. Through curiosity and ambition and the belief that there was something more than what my professors taught out of Ministry regulated school books. And of course, there was my incredible arrogance. I couldn't accept that my magic, my skill, should be remanded to the same level as everyone else's. I believed myself far too special to accept that.”

They walked on in silence to the end of the block, not speaking. Harry sensed that the old wizard wasn't done, but he needed time to collect himself.

“When I was still a student at Hogwarts, a young man came to my village to stay with his aunt, a close neighbor of mine. In him, I found another seemingly as gifted and dissatisfied as myself. His name was

Gellert Grindelwald, and he was first person I ever fell in love with. Together we searched for the true limits of magic and ourselves, and destroyed far more than we created in the process.”

If the first revelation hadn't stunned him speechless, this second one certainly did. Everyone knew about Grindelwald, and everyone knew that Dumbledore had defeated him. He could recall one of Toure's lectures, her voice softened by the odd euphoria that seemed to come over her when she talked of Dark Lords.

“Grindelwald turned the world on its head. No one had done the sort of magics he did, not for hundreds of years at least, and he was so very young! Officially, his reign of terror didn't start until he was twenty, but others believe it truly began with his expulsion from Durmstrang at the age of sixteen for cursing a teacher. He was exiled to England by his family, but while there he developed and solidified his ideology, returning two years later to gather followers. The irony here is that his eventual destroyer was in fact also his next door neighbor while in England. It has been a matter of some speculation as to whether Dumbledore and Grindelwald ever spoke to one another prior to their fateful battle. Considering their styles of magic, I myself wouldn't be surprised if they hadn't done more than just discussed the weather.”

So Toure had been right. They had been friends, fellow explorers, lovers? And then it had all come apart. They had tried to destroy each other, until at last one was imprisoned and the other carried around their history together as a shameful secret.

He felt suddenly lightheaded. Was that going to happen to him and Voldemort? Had it happened already? Had this been the inevitable outcome from the beginning? Why the hell was the old wizard telling him all this anyway?

“Those days were the most exciting and joyous days of my life, but ultimately they gave me my deepest regrets and sorrows, as well. I fear, my boy, that you are following the same path I did, and to add to that tragedy, it's not even your own arrogance or ambition that lead you there. Ah, here we are.”

They had stopped in front of a small shop, bouquets of exploding floral packed the window display, handsomely displayed in the dark green painted frame. A sign hung over the door, reading 'Fridas Blumenladen'. Still reeling, he followed Dumbledore blindly into the shop.

The woman at the counter greeted him by name, and he said something in return that made her giggle like a school girl. Harry couldn't concentrate on what was said, and was more than a little surprised when he was handed two bouquets. They were large, with dozens of different flowers, all in their own unique colors. He looked at the old wizard questioningly, but he just held open the door for him. Once out on the street Dumbledore continued.

"I told you before that I wish to save you, and I meant what I said. You are a remarkable young man, as I am sure you have been told before, but these gifts you have can lead you to many places, just as they did myself, and Gellert, and Tom Marvolo Riddle, whom you call Lord Voldemort."

"What? No wait, stop talking. You're talking too much. I mean saying too much. Why are you telling me all of this?"

Dumbledore turned to him, his blue eyes twinkly but it wasn't with mischief or amusement or whatever it normally twinkled with, it was grief and hope and perhaps a little bit of amazement.

"Because I made the mistake of holding back information before, and it has gotten people killed. I feel I must tell you now. Life has taught me that there may not always be a 'next time' or a 'later'. The world is moving ahead without asking us for directions first, and lately it's been going faster than I can make predictions for."

"Okay... then what's with the flowers?"

"Well, it's polite to bring something when visiting people you haven't met in a while."

"Who are we visiting?"

"You'll see. Now where were we?"

So much for not withholding information, Harry groused mentally.

"Tom Marvolo Riddle is Voldemort... is that really his name?" He couldn't help but ask. Tom Marvolo Riddle sounded kind of like a dork, or at the very least nothing like a Dark Lord. At the same time, he just realized he had never heard of Voldemort's first name. Did he even have one? It would have made school kind of weird if he didn't. It was sort of hard to picture someone like McGonagall calling on 'Mister' Voldemort in class or the Dark Lord casting Jelly-Legs on unwary first years. He tried to picture a 'young' Voldemort, or rather Tom Riddle, but he just ended up thinking of Thomas Rook instead oddly enough.

"It really is. I had the rather dubious honor of being one of his teacher."

Harry tried to picture that, but quickly stopped before his imagination slipped any further down the rabbit hole.

"... What was he like?"

"Charming, clever, motivated. The ideal Slytherin... and then some. He was a murderer before he ever graduated."

"Myrtle..." Harry breathed, because he had suspected it long ago, but didn't dare linger on the idea. Dumbledore gave him a grave look and nodded.

"Yes, she was his first. I still don't know if she was an accident or an experiment, but once he had killed her and successfully blamed another, he knew he had the ability to get away with it and tried it again when was sixteen. I didn't discover the second murder until years after he had graduated, and by then it was too late. He was already terrorizing the country."

Harry was having a hard time picturing Voldemort intentionally killing Myrtle. Cursing her, sure, but murdering her? It was easier to picture

him killing her accidentally... and then just not really caring that he had.

"Ah, but I've gotten a little ahead of myself. Lets sit here. The bus should be along shortly."

They took a seat inside the rain shelter, which was thankfully empty.

"Where was I before we were distracted?"

Harry shrugged, honestly unable to tell where one mind blowing revelation ended and another began.

"Hhmmm... oh, yes, wanting to save you-"

"Did you ever try to save him?" Harry butted in, because that was important. There had been something wrong with Voldemort from the beginning, and it seemed fairly obvious too. Someone should have done something long before Harry had to toss him a soul and get caught up in this international mess.

Dumbledore closed his eyes, as if pained, but answered, "Yes."

"How?"

There was a moment of silence as the old wizard gathered his memory, and tied back his grief.

"I tried twice. The first time... I knew from the moment I met him that something was wrong. He had such hate in him, and it had manifested in hurting other children and animals with accidental magic. He was being brought up in a muggle orphanage and had no idea that he was wizard, but he knew he was different and so did everyone else. He was completely alone in the world. I was sent to give him his Hogwarts letter, and while I was there I explained what he was and warned him of the consequences of hurting others with magic. I had hoped, naively, that by explaining things to him and offering him a place where he could be among his own kind, his frustration and resentment would dissipate. I was very wrong."

Harry was still having a hard time imagining Voldemort as anything other than his current self. Strong, confident, merciless but not cruel for cruelty's sake. An angry juvenile delinquent just wasn't clicking. A juvenile Voldemort of any kind was hard to imagine in general.

"The second time... I took him to someone else."

"Someone else?"

"Yes. By his third year I could sense that he was delving into the old pagan magics, but he refused to speak to me of it. He did not trust me and feared, rightly, that I would try and hold back his progress. I had abandoned the pagan arts myself, unable to trust myself not to be corrupted by them, so I had no right to direct the course of study he wished to pursue. So I thought I would take him to someone who had done it right. A druid priest named Cyril Carrigan."

A chill ran down his spine. He knew that name. He just couldn't remember where.

"I had actually met Carrigan with Gellert on a weekend romp through the highlands. We thought ourselves so clever and knowledgeable, we decided to try summoning a god. We made a mistake. Actually we made nothing but mistakes, which Carrigan pointed out in vivid detail after he came out of no where and saved our fool necks. He gave us quite a scare, swore if we ever stepped foot in Ireland again he'd tear out our souls and shove them in the nearest donkeys he could find. Said if we wanted to act like asses he would grant our wish. Naturally, being well educated young men of high society, we had a good laugh about it when we got back to England and wrote him off as a backwater yokel. Of course, Gellert never did go back. An endless well of power lies there, but he never dared return to tap into it."

"Was Carrigan really so powerful?"

"His magic wasn't incredible, nothing like Gellert's or Tom's, but his... 'influence with the higher ups' wasn't anything to sneeze at. He could ask for pears from apple trees or for rivers to run North, and they would do it. So they say."

"So you thought he could scare Vold- Tom back to the straight and narrow?"

Dumbledore smiled a bit at that. "In a sense. I was actually hoping Carrigan would be the sort of role model Tom needed. Someone strong and experienced, with the power to reel the boy in when he did wrong and the knowledge that even that stubborn child would feel compelled to acknowledge."

"But it didn't work?"

"Quite the contrary, it worked better than I ever could have imagined. They hit it off immediately. Carrigan took Tom in as a student for his fifth year summer and corresponded regularly with him during his sixth year at Hogwarts, and I never saw him more contented. I won't say he was any nicer or less arrogant, but his hatred seemed to have subsided. Carrigan had offered him the understanding that I couldn't, and held the keys to a world he desperately wanted to be a part of. I think he must have felt the same way for that man that I felt for Gellert. He was the first and last person Tom ever came close to loving."

The slow screech of brakes startled Harry. He had been so captivated by Dumbledore's story that he hadn't realized the bus was coming until it stopped right in front of them. A few people got off, and they climbed on. They went to the very back of the bus to continue their conversation.

"So what happened?"

"The Earth had other plans for him. Plans I could not change and Carrigan could not challenge. The summer before his seventh year, Tom discovered the name of the man who left him an orphan, and all the rage and anger he had forgotten, came back with a vengeance."

"And he was the second person Tom killed?"

"Yes, but not the last. Even after his revenge, he remained unsatisfied with his world. Carrigan could do nothing to reign in his anger, and ultimately had to settle for teaching him control. Control of his magic at least, which may have saved Tom himself but ultimately

damned many others. I foolishly thought the renewed aggravation was nothing more serious than a lover's quarrel or an argument between a father and son. I hadn't learned of the second murder, and still had no proof of the first. In any event, I was too busy with my battles against Grindelwald to worry about any future battles I might have with Tom. When graduation came, I let him go, having no idea what exactly I had unleashed onto the world."

"But Carrigan knew? Why didn't he tell you?"

"Why should he? I had shoved Tom off on to him, and washed my hands of responsibility. He did not trust me, and perhaps more importantly, he still cared for Tom. The same way you find yourself compelled to care for him, even when you've seen and experienced his cruelty first hand. I never understood it then, but I think I have an idea of it now."

Harry looked away, staring at his hands and then out the window. They remained quiet for a long time, and after a few minutes, Harry began to recognize some of the buildings outside his window.

"That's the Hohenzollernbrücke and the Cologne Cathedral and St. Martin Church! We're in Cologne?"

"Indeed we are, and a delightful city it is too. They make wonderful pickles here."

This was very true, but completely beside the point.

"Where are we going?"

He turned back to Dumbledore, who smiled a bit.

"I believe I read in a newspaper somewhere that you said if you ever came back to Germany, you would like to pay your respects to your parents and lay flowers on their graves. I myself am long overdue for a visit."

Harry was struck speechless. He had wanted to visit his parents' grave, but once he had arrived in Germany, it felt as if he were further

from that possibility than ever before. It also occurred to him that Dumbledore may have chosen this city as his newest hiding place specifically so he would have this opportunity.

"I... thank you."

"No thanks is necessary. It was the least I could do. I fought along side your parents during the war. Their bravery and selflessness was an inspiration to us all."

Harry opened his mouth to ask Dumbledore about them, but then remembered they were talking about something more important. He knew his parents far better than he knew Voldemort, and it was Voldemort he had to worry about.

"What happened to Carrigan?"

"Not a great deal. He still kept in touch with his wayward pupil, tried to convince him to calm down and not behave like such a bigoted loon. I would say his success was limited, but the fact that Voldemort never killed him suggests something of their bond still remained through the years. Somewhere in between his arguments with Voldemort, he finished his own training and became a druidic priest and took on other students. Professor Brennan was amongst them."

Harry nodded.

"When the eighties rolled around, things got really ugly. Carrigan went out to meet Voldemort one night, no doubt to try to talk some sense back into him again, but was killed by an overzealous young Death Eater. Carrigan's body was peacefully surrendered to his clan for proper rites, but they only ever found pieces of young Ms. Nominy.'

'It was a bad time for the Druids after that. Carrigan had been their unspoken leader and barrier between his people and the war, but with his death the Ministry proceeded to persecute them as dark wizards and Voldemort refused to help them without their sworn allegiance, which they wouldn't give. The Ministry in Ireland was the first to fall, not from Death Eaters, but from regular witches and

wizards enraged by yet another unwarranted attack on their people. In Ireland the druids are as much an important profession as they are a religious sect. They are the only effective defenders the people have against the fae, a far more insidious threat than any Dark Lord."

Harry remembered that from history class, and suddenly he thought he knew where he had heard of Carrigan. They called him Carrigan the Mediator before his death... or was it afterwards? His death had sparked a powder keg of violence in any event. Hundreds of druidic priests and priestesses had been arrested and dozens died in raids or in prison, and in their absence the faery folk had run amok amongst the commonwealth. People were disappearing left and right and no one knew if they should blame Death Eaters or Fae or the government itself. In the climate of fear and frustration, the people had snapped one late September night and burned the Ministry offices to the ground and attacked their own officials, hunting them and their families down in search of retribution for their own missing loved ones. It had only taken a few weeks after that for Voldemort and his soldiers to regain control of the country, and then use the resources he found there to continue his attacks on Britain. Yet another incident where the British Ministry had shot itself in the foot.

"... Is that why he took me in?" Harry said after a while. "I mean, he's been watching out for me since first year... sort of... after the whole torture in front of the entire student body thing... Does he want me to replace Carrigan?"

"That is hard to say. I doubt that's a conscious decision on his part. Carrigan was stronger than Voldemort in many ways, unacceptably weak in others, and only the Dark Lord's gratitude and respect kept him from ever raising a hand against his mentor. I don't see him intentionally duplicating that sort of relationship. However, the desire for a companion would not be unreasonable. The desire for a son is also possible, as I doubt he is capable of siring any children of his own anymore."

The first idea sat better with Harry than the second. He had never considered Voldemort as any sort of father, and certainly hadn't been treated like a son, at least he didn't think he had. How did Dark Lords treat their offspring?

"I don't think there's anything you can do," Harry said, looking back towards the front of the bus. Their body guard was sitting directly behind the bus driver, going completely unnoticed by the driver or the old woman sitting next to her, or the teenagers sharing ear pieces to their cd player directly across from them. "He messed me up already. My soul belongs to the Earth. I am a Child of the Moon and Madris is my patron goddess. It can't be undone, and I can't even bring myself to resent him for it."

Dumbledore nodded. "I thought as much. That is not what really worries me. You are not like Tom or Gellert or myself. You are more like Carrigan, and like your mother. If I can keep you from the Dark Lord, I believe you can grow up to be a perfectly self sufficient and morally upright individual, and given your impressive displays of magic, you could easily surpass Carrigan in say... fifty or so years."

".... swell."

"I think the next stop is the one we want."

The bus rolled to a stop and they climbed off. It was another six blocks taken in silence, as Harry tried to process everything that he had been told, and what it might mean for him and his future. He had learned more in the last half hour than he did in the last five years about the Dark Lord, but as things were going he may never be able to ask him all of this himself. Tightly packed rows of three story houses all painted different colors of the same shade, passed by unnoticed as he tried to puzzle it all out. Would he be on the run forever just like Dumbledore? Moving from safe house to safe house, city to city, country to country? And to what end?

He tried to picture himself doing what Dumbledore did, running charities for people he would likely never meet, endlessly fighting against the injustices of the world from behind a desk. He couldn't do that. He'd end up hanging himself or jumping off a bridge within a year from depression.

Perhaps he could set up a new identity for himself. It couldn't be that hard with all the spells and potions out there, disappear as one of the thousands British refugees wandering Europe.

Maybe he just needed to do what neither Carrigan or Dumbledore could accomplish, and just kill the murderous bastard. He shivered at the thought, feeling distinctly unclean for thinking it, and shoved it aside. It appeared he was too much like Voldemort's faceless mentor, picking up the torch where the other had dropped it, endlessly loyal until the day he died. How pathetic was that?

The row of houses curved upwards until they opened onto a T-section in the street. Beyond that was the cemetery. A high grated fence mounted on a low brick wall ran the length of the street, separating the living from the dead. Rows of tombstones and mausoleums were packed tightly together, not unlike the houses on the other side.

Without the buildings surrounding it, the cemetery already had full sunlight, and was oddly cheery in the summer light. The stones were clean, the flowers by some of the graves no more than a day or two old, and the occasional oak tree did a lot to give the place an open park-like feel.

Harry didn't need to follow Dumbledore to know where to go from there. He remembered it perfectly even seven years later. The gravestones were simple black marble, like dozens of others, but he remembered the angel statues on the graves nearby. He remembered having dreams about them after the funeral, showing up in strange places, haunting him like benevolent specters of death.

He stopped midway up a shallow hill, and found his parents laying side by side. He knelt down between them, placing the flowers on each of their graves, and listened. He wasn't sure what he expected to hear, but all he got was the sound of the wind and the occasional passing car on the street below. This was a place he thought he might be able to commune with his parents, to sense them or even hear them, but it felt like nothing more than a plot of grass. His mother's gentle eyes and his father's laughing mouth did not come to mind, no words they spoke to him, or gestures of comfort came. Of all

the travels and destinations in their lives together, this one was the emptiest.

His parents were not here, not in any way that had meaning to him. They hadn't been with him since the last morning they sent him off to school, and the last time he saw them was as the funeral director gently closed the coffin lids over their sleeping countenance. There would be no more memories of them after that.

There would be no more walks to the grocery store with his mum, no more football matches in front of the telly with his dad, plans made around the breakfast table, or weekend adventures out in the country. He would never hear them say 'wake up', 'goodnight', 'look there', 'come here', 'I'm proud of you', 'you know better', 'I missed you', or 'I love you' again. He would never get to ask him those questions that dogged him from the moment he learned that they too had been wizards but had kept it hidden. They were gone, and all that was left of them were his memories and two stone markers bearing their names.

His vision began to blur, but the tears didn't fall. He had wept for their loss when he had was eight, enough tears he thought he would drown in them, until he just didn't have enough left to spare. He had to keep the rest for later, for when others that he loved died and passed away, as he had come to accept while alone in the third bedroom at Privet Drive.

"They're not here," he said, not looking away from their names. "They're gone, and I won't ever get to see them again. Not even when I die."

"The world is not so black and white," Dumbledore said, coming up behind him to place a hand on his shoulder. "Not in life and most certainly not in death. You may yet see them again. You may have already seen them and just never realized it."

"You're just trying to make me feel better," Harry accused, glaring over his shoulder. The old wizard pretended to be affronted.

"Me? Comfort someone? Just what sort of wizard do you take me for?"

Harry's lip twitched a bit and he looked away, shaking his head. "It's okay. I knew what I was giving up when I gave myself to the Old Magics, and I don't regret it. It saved a life and gave me a family among the living."

"Really? And who are the lucky people?"

"Sirius Blackbone and Remus Slivermoon. I think they worked for you too. They're werewolves now."

There was a moment of silence then Dumbledore gave a little laugh. "I had nearly forgotten. It's been so many years, I wasn't sure if they had lived or died after their transformation. Yet another reason why one should never attempt to make predictions for the future. I do have to wonder what Sirius is like now. He always had a lovable mongrel air about him in his school days."

Harry felt a little of his grief subside, as it often did when he thought of his godfathers. He had loved his parents, and still did, probably more than he ever would anyone, but he loved his godfathers too and more than that he felt proud of them. They were strong and brave, and had been willing to die for him. More importantly, they had lived for him, and now they shared with him a fate in life and in death that comforted him more than any optimistic foretellings of the future or well meaning patronizations ever could.

"He's going to be head alpha one day," Harry said. "And Remus is his beta. They saved me from Moody. Didn't you know that?"

"No. I saw no pictures of your guardians in the papers and they were only ever listed as Blackbone and Slivermoon, names I had never heard used on them when I was still in their company."

"Oh," he said, and looked back towards the tombstones, the sadness ebbing away. "Dad would have approved of them looking out for me, I think, seeing as how they're my godfathers already. I don't know about mum though. I think Sirius would have driven her crazy."

“No doubt. Of course, both your father and Mr. Black drove your mother crazy, particularly back in their school days. In fact, Lily didn't liked James at all until their seventh year.”

“I didn't know that.”

“Indeed? And your father loved your mother at first sight. It made for some very interesting hallway drama.”

“So you were still Headmaster when my parents were in school?”

“Yes, as well as your godfathers and good many of your current teachers. For instance, your guardian, Professor Snape, was in the same year as your parents. I dare say he was at the crux of your parents differences.”

Harry had heard from this from his godfathers, but it was always to strange to hear. His mother and Snape as friends? Weird. Inconceivable even. Plus the man had never said anything or indicated Harry's parents mattered to him in anyway.

“... He never said anything.”

Dumbledore smiled a bit sadly. “Severus has always kept his feelings closely guarded. That was true as a child and still holds true-”

The old wizard's suddenly stopped, his mouth tightening into a grim line as his eyes focused on something beyond Harry's head. Confused, Harry turned to see what he was looking at. Some distance away, standing beside a mausoleum was a hooded figure. At first, Harry thought it was just their follower, but soon realized the truth. The figure was shrouded in black, not blue, and from within in the hood he could clearly make out the bone mask of a Death Eater.

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1. Before anyone starts shouting down hellfire on me for adding more gay couples, I feel I should clarify somethings. One, Carrigan and

Voldemort were never in a romantic relationship. It wasn't all that different from what Voldemort and Harry have, except for the political maneuvering and screwing around with each other's souls. Two, Gellert and Albus' relationship was described by Rowling herself in aforementioned fashion. Whether that love was of a romantic nature or just a deep brotherly affection, I'll leave for you to decide one way or another in both cannon and my story.

Book V:

Chapter 4: Recreant Knights

Voldemort stroked Nagini's head, pondering Harry and the chances of him ever seeing him alive again. After sending the address to Morgan to handle, he was left with nothing else to do but wait and think. Being a man of action, this was more difficult than it sounded. A lot could go wrong in extracting Harry. The agent could make a mistake and kill Harry, foolishly attempt to fight Dumbledore directly and fail, or Harry may have told the old coot about the dream and they may have left before the agent even arrived. Even if Harry was recovered, there was still the journey back to Britain to consider.

Germany's and Britain's border's were closed to magical transportation. They would have to rely on muggle transportation, and that was a treacherous route to take for entirely different reasons. The German ministry would send out its Aurors if they knew what happened, and again either the agent or Harry could be killed in their pursuit. If his protégé were unwilling, that presented new dangers all its own. The boy was resourceful, he could find a means of escape and disappear completely.

The more he thought about it, the more it seemed likely that something was going to go wrong.

Even if it went right, he still wasn't sure what he was going to do with Harry.

Their meeting in the dream had been disconcerting. Six months of silence and an assassination attempt had done nothing to lessen the magnetism he felt for him, and he was more than a little annoyed to find himself charmed and challenged by him all over again. He had liked talking with him. He had liked arguing with him. He liked tricking him, but that was hardly unusual. He liked tricking everyone. It was just a bit funner with Harry, since he always ended up surprising him later on.

And Harry had said it was accident... the nearly killing him at least. Hadn't Brennan said the same thing? And Diana? This didn't make it

forgivable. Messing around with someone else's soul was not something that could be easily overlooked.

Except that Harry had. The night of the moon ritual, he had let Voldemort change his soul forever. The boy had never held it against him, even knowing that he had done it for completely selfish reasons.

Of course, he had been giving Harry something he wanted. To save his godfather, and preserve what little family he had worth keeping. The Dark Lord most definitely didn't want a completed soul. He didn't want these weird new feelings that contradicted his reptilian logic or to be motivated by emotions he could not control. He didn't want to forgive someone who had, however unintentionally, betrayed him.

He had been thinking this for hours... no, for weeks... months? Still no conclusion could be reached about what he should do. He needed advice from a more 'divine' source. Carefully, he unwound Nagini from his body, and left her dozing in his chair. The display cases in his office, showcasing ancient and modern magical marvels alike, were ignored. Instead, he went to the liquor cabinet, but avoided actually indulging, no matter how tempting it was at the moment, and pulled from a drawer a pack of cards.

Tarot cards.

They were useless for divination as far as Voldemort was concerned, but they were a fairly effective way of asking the universe a question about the past or the present without a great deal of magical preparation. They didn't even require magical cards. In fact, the best decks had no spells on them at all.

This one was no different. It was a plain deck, worth no more than five knuts, with starkly plain pictures, not unlike a regular card set. He shuffled them for about five minutes, not looking at his hands, merely concentrating on the questions that had been plaguing him up until now.

Tarot was one of those rare crafts that any sentient being, magical or mundane, could master requiring only the ability to correctly interpret the cards and the self-discipline not to 'cheat'. Therefore, most

witches and wizards refused to acknowledge it as anything other than a hoax. Voldemort saw no reason to correct people. It was just another hidden weapon few others knew how to use.

He didn't ask a question, the 'universe' would know the right answer and the right question, without his help. He flipped over the first card.

The Hierophant. Upright.*

He stared at it for a long time, sorting through its various meanings, but it all came down to two. Two perfect answers, and he didn't know if he could accept them. Even though he wanted to.

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"I'm sorry," Harry blurted out, turning away from the Death Eater on the hill to Dumbledore, "I was going to tell you, but I thought we had time. I swear I thought we had more time."

The old wizard didn't look at him, instead scanning the entire graveyard. Harry followed his example, and sure enough they spotted two more Death Eaters. Their follower was nowhere in sight.

"I am afraid I have no idea what you are talking about," Dumbledore said, still keeping an eye on the threat. "But we will discuss it later, if we manage to escape the five Aurors. They certainly pulled out all the stops to bring us down."

"Aurors?" Harry did a double take, but all he saw were the bone masks.

"Yes. The Death Eaters were disbanded shortly after the war, given high ranking positions for their service, while the Sentinels took their place. Do you believe Voldemort called together five high ranking Court Officials and sent them into enemy territory for a highly risky snatch-and-grab? No, Mr. Potter, this is one of the Minister's plots. He knows I was going to take you out of his reach, and sent these men to retrieve you. Then he can blame your abduction on Voldemort. He may have come to the hotel with this very plan in mind, but hadn't

counted on the wards. They had to wait until we came out into the open and weren't surrounded by muggles to attack."

Harry felt his heart beginning to race, feeling more than his life was now in danger. He looked around yet again, but could only see the three, who made no attempt at concealing themselves. Instinct drew his eyes upward, where he spotted the other two Dumbledore referred to. They hovered directly above them like vultures. Without his wand, he was almost defenseless. There were few spells he could do wandlessly, and he would only be able to do two or three before he exhausted himself, which he couldn't allow if he were going to run away. It wouldn't be enough to get passed them all. It would all be up to Dumbledore now.

"Why aren't they attacking?" he asked.

"They want to see if we'll surrender first, most likely."

"What are we going to do?"

The old wizard scanned the cemetery grimly, assessed the situation, and after a moment, touched Harry's shoulder with his free hand. The young wizard let out a slight gasp, feeling magic spread into him, warm and tingling.

"This will repel two spells, three at the most," Dumbledore said. "I am sorry I can provide you with no better protection. It will be your speed and your cunning that saves you now. Do you think you could find your way back to the hotel?"

"What? I have no idea-"

"816 Westerly Street."

Harry began to protest again, unable to remember the route they had taken, but... what other choice did he have? He'd find a way.

"But they could be waiting..."

"It's enchanted against forced entry, just like your wand in the mailbox. You'll be safe, as long as you can get inside. Once you reach the street, they won't dare use their magic in front of muggles, but you mustn't let your guard down."

"What about you?"

The old wizard's grim countenance melted away, and his twinkling eyes found his. "I assure you, Mr. Potter, I am more than adequately armed to face this threat on my own. Now, when I cast my first spell, that will trigger the others to attack. I need you to run, as fast as you can, to the gate and then keep running. Don't look back. Don't hesitate. Understand?"

Frankly, Harry didn't really understand what was happening. Too much had been revealed today, and now he was going to have to run for his life from duplicitous Ministry Aurors back to the place he had been trying to escape only yesterday? What the hell?

"Sure. Why not? It's a nice day for a run," he laughed, his voice a touch on the hysterical side.

"That's the spirit! Alright, we best take care of our friends up there first. Tacicimos!"

One of the robed figures above them suddenly jerked, smashing into his (her?) partner and knocked him from his broom. Flailing, the unseated flyer fell from his brooms to the ground below. The still mounted Auror cast some sort of spell, and regained control of his broom, only to have another spell from somewhere else knock him off. It seemed Dumbledore's blue robed follower had finally decided to show up.

Harry didn't stay to sort out where everyone was or what they were doing, he was already bolting for the gate. Two Aurors ran to head him off, and it was with more than a little concern that Harry noticed at least one of them was closer to the gate than him. Behind him he heard the sound of stones shattering, and knew Dumbledore was now fully engaged in a battle of his own.

The Death Eater reached the gate first, blocking the exit. They had not bothered to stun Harry, so they had to have known he was unarmed, and assumed him defenseless. It wasn't until the 'Death Eater' saw the boy wasn't slowing down, that he realized something was off, but it was already too late.

"Stupefy!" the Auror shouted, and Harry was too close to avoid it. It smashed into his chest, momentarily knocking the breath out of him, but ultimately bounced off him harmlessly. Harry threw out his hand, shouting one of his wandless spells.

"Expelliarmus!"

The Auror was thrown back, his wand torn from his grip, and he landed in the street. Harry dived behind a tombstone, as he heard yet another stunner being cast at him. It barely missed him. He had barely taken cover when another spell flew at him, this time a Blasting Spell.

The tombstone he was hiding behind exploded, sending him flying into the side of a plinth of a statue. Pain stabbed at him everywhere, in his head, in his back, arms, legs. For a moment, he could only lay there, too shocked to move. He couldn't believe they had actually done that. That could have killed him... it may already have.

Blood was running down his face, getting into his eyes and mouth. His glasses were gone, knocked off in the mayhem, but he didn't need to see to know there was blood on his hands or that they were shaking badly. Was anything broken? How deeply had he been cut? Was anything lodged in him? He was too afraid to move, to find something that was broken or that he had been cut deeply or that there was something still inside him.

He was still just laying there, when the Auror caught up to him. The wizard just gave him a quick once over, then grabbed hold of his arm and hauled him to his feet. New pain flared, making him cry out, but at least he now knew nothing was broken.

"Wo ist dein Zauberstab?" the man shouted, shaking him harshly, his cover instantly blown. "Where are you hiding it?"

“What?”

“Your wand, damn you?! Tell me or I'll break your arm!”

The hand on his arm tightened, revealing a strength capable of carrying out that threat. Harry hissed and grit his teeth. They thought he still had his wand? Of course they did. They had no idea about his wandless ability.

“I dropped it!” he cried.

“I just bet,” the man snarled, and threw him back onto the ground. “Stupefy!”

Again the Stunner hit him directly and again it bounced off, but Harry let himself sag and fall, partially to trick the man but mostly because he was really hurting. The Auror walked up to him, and Harry thought he would pick him up or drag him, but he moved passed him and towards the gate.

“Meier! Get out of the street before you're run over, we still have the old man to deal with! Idiot!”

Harry opened his eyes and watched the vague, blurry figure of the Auror stepping through the other side of the gate to help his comrade. As soon as he was out of sight, Harry got to his hands and knees and began searching the grass for his glasses. It was not his glasses that he found, however, but something much better.

It was Meier's wand.

He could feel the magic inside tingle as he touched it, not like his own wand, but it would work.

“Accio glasses.”

His glasses flew to his hand, and he put them on. One of the lenses was cracked, but he could now see much better than before. Turning back to Dumbledore, he could now see why the old wizard hadn't

tried to help him. He had his hands full fighting off three wizards at once, while his helper was hiding somewhere, and casting spells from some hidden spot but only enough to cover his back. The two on broomsticks had apparently recovered from their fall, and were going all out. It was mesmerizing to watch. The Aurors were well trained, their attacks perfectly in sync and always varying, but Dumbledore just wouldn't fall, throwing out shields and hexes and illusions, and the follower threw the Auror's strategy into chaos. He had to tear his gaze away. He had his own battles to worry about.

Struggling to his feet, he limped towards the hedge and squeezed inside. He could already hear the two Aurors arguing, and while they were distracted he cast a spell on the iron gate closest to him. Through the iron gate, he watched for the right opportunity.

"Leave off, Shauffer," the disarmed Auror snapped, shoving the other man off as he climbed to his feet. "How was I suppose to know he was a little freak? I hit him spot on, and he barely moved. I didn't even see a wand. I mean what the hell?"

"Enough of your bullshit. Get your wand and come on. I mean if you think you can handle an unconscious teenager. I know it's challenge, but-," Shauer cooed at him mockingly.

"Shut up!"

They stepped back into the cemetery, and Harry made him move, pushing aside the now rubbery iron gate and climbing out onto the side walk. As soon as he was on the other side, he hobbled across the street, barely taking the time to check for traffic and moved as quickly as he could. The houses along the street were all connected, leaving no alleyways to hide in, and with every step he became increasingly anxious that the Aurors would come back out and see him.

What he hadn't counted on, was the kindness of strangers. No sooner than he was half way up the street, than a passing car suddenly slowed beside him. Harry turned in alarm, expecting an attack, but what he saw was a young woman, barely into her twenties staring at him with some alarm.

“Are you alright?”

“I...” he quickly looked down the street, so see if anyone was coming. The street sloped upward, meaning he should have been able to look over the fence and into the cemetery, and indeed he saw graves and trees, but no Dumbledore and no fake Death Eaters or exploded tombstones. They had spelled it so no one would notice what was happening inside... but that didn't mean they couldn't see him outside.

“Uh... no,” he choked out, looking at her desperately hoping for some help. “Can you get me out of here? I don't really care where, just... not here?”

She looked surprised, and then looked back at where he had been looking. Of course, she didn't see anything.

“Did someone hurt you, honey?” she asked, then realizing he seemed to think the danger hadn't passed, opened her door. “Get in. I'll take you to the police station.”

A police station wasn't where he wanted to go, but it would be better than here. He climbed into the front seat, and she pulled away from the curve. He kept checking the mirrors and looking over his shoulder, but as the cemetery faded from view and pulled into busier streets he felt himself start to relax.

Annie was the name of his rescuer, and her first order of business was to ask him what happened. He told her he was mugged and beaten up, which she seemed to think odd for the neighborhood, but didn't question. The second was to call his parents. He told her they were staying at a hotel, vacationing from Britain and all, and that he had an address but not the number or even knew where it was precisely. It took a little bit more haggling, but he managed to convince her he would rather go find his parents than a police officer, and after a brief stop at a kiosk to figure out exactly where 816 Westerly Street actually was, made their way across town.

When they finally reached the hotel, the day had warmed up and the streets were crowded. Harry felt both relieved and paranoid. Like

Dumbledore said, no witch or wizard would attempt magic on him here, but that didn't mean one wasn't hidden in the crowd, invisible amongst the multitude.

"Thanks for everything," he said to Annie, who smiled and gave him a pitying look.

"You sure you don't want me to take you up?"

"No, it's okay. You've done too much already."

"Well, I hope it was enough to make up for what happened to you. I am sorry that you had to go through that on your vacation. We are all usually much more welcoming."

He smiled shakily at her. "I know. Thanks, again."

Climbing out of the car, he made a quick look around and moved as quickly as he could to the door. His primary fear was that it would be locked with magic, but the door opened and closed behind him without incident. It wasn't until he was inside, that he remembered he had never figured out exactly how to get back out. The door handle was still missing.

Likewise, he didn't see anyone around. He checked Dumbledore's office, but found it empty. So was the kitchen and the bar.

Now what?

To find an empty room, curl up and hide seemed like a wonderful idea. Wonderful, but stupid. He needed to be able to defend himself... which technically he could now. He had a wand, and it worked, but... it wasn't his wand.

So wand first.

Retrieving his wand, now that he had another wand, turned out to be absurdly easy. A few flicks and the password, Cockroach Clusters (seriously?), and he pulled his wand out of its slot without issue. Now he had two wands. How awesome was that? He stuck the spare

wand in the back of his pocket with his knife, and headed for the stairs.

It felt like an eternity before he reached his room, every part of him aching, including his previously injured feet. As he made his ascent, the conversations he had just had with Dumbledore flooded his mind, the sheer volume and impact of information leaving him numb to it. As he sifted through it, he realized he had said some things he hadn't intended to tell, not even if tortured. Nothing about Madris or the Moon, and he had very nearly told the old man about the first Winter Solstice, when he had shared something beyond description with the Dark Lord, something the old man could never have experienced with Grindlewald.

Why had he said that? Why had he said anything at all?

He suddenly felt tricked, manipulated... and hated himself for it. He had sworn to himself he wouldn't fall for any of the old coot's tricks, but he had just been falling into them one after the other. Dumbledore had told him to give up his wand, yet the very next day he had been attacked and left to fend for himself. He had told Harry things, causing him to drop his guard. Who knew what he would have told him if the Auror's hadn't interrupted them.

Dumbledore had already tricked the Minister in order to gain custody of him. And for what? For Harry? Impossible. The old wizard was a politician, even his charities suggested he had strong ties with powerful witches and wizards and the people in general, and wouldn't risk making an enemy of the German Minister unless the gain outweighed the risk. What did he think he could gain from making Harry his ally? Was he really gambling on his information on Voldemort to be so valuable or was he banking on something else?

When he reached his room, he stripped out of his ruined clothes and took a shower, a torture all its own as the soap stung his wounds. The water turned pink as it flowed down the drain. He checked his wounds, and found too many for his liking, particularly on his back and shoulders which also started to turn purple, but nothing that looked too serious. He couldn't leave them bare like he had his feet though (which had re-opened as well and ruined his socks), and used

his knife to cut up strips of bedsheets and used them for bandages. He redressed in slacks and a button up shirt, nothing unusual for a muggle, but exchanged his shoes for his charmed boots and slipped his arm guards underneath his shirt. He raided his satchel for anything that might prove useful in a fight (or flight), and found the golden ring for his watch, the UnSilencing Bell, but nothing else inconspicuous enough to wear around muggles.

One of the Weasley twin's wigs, however, found a use and after charming his glasses invisible, he found himself looking... not like Harry Potter. The wig was magical, turning not only the hair on his head blond (and long), but also his eyebrows and eye lashes, and the absence of his glasses made him look older. He thought he looked rather like a college art student... which turned out to look pouncier than he would have liked.

"You ready to go then?" he asked his reflection, who regarded him unenthusiastically. "Well, tough luck. We aren't sticking around here."

He put on his satchel, ignored his trunk, and opened the window. He looked up and down the street, up at the sky above, the windows of the adjacent buildings, but saw nothing but muggles. Muggles who were going to make his escape less than conspicuous, but also ensure no one was going to swoop down out of nowhere and grab him.

He wasn't entirely sure what he was going to do after that.

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"He's not in the cemetery. You sure there wasn't anyone else?" Tonks asked Dumbledore, striding towards him. The five Aurors were now unconscious, and latched together with ropes and devoid of wands. Dumbledore was quite happy to leave them there until the police showed up and arrested them for defacing the surrounding graves, and put them through an embarrassing and much deserved processing down at the muggle police station until the Ministry tracked them down and sorted things out. Depending on how vindictive he was feeling once he reached the hotel, he may or may

not give a call to the local wizarding paper and tip them off to the Auror's less than righteous activities.

He had to find Harry first.

"I am quite sure I saw Harry collapsed over there, but he seems to have disappeared. Given that one of these Auror was missing their wand, I think it might not be unreasonable to assume he took the wand and ran away under his own power."

Tonks shook her head and ran a hand through her, currently black and red streaked, hair. "Great. How far do you think he got before someone else picked him up? A block? Two?"

They began to make their way out of the cemetery, and she pulled off her blue robe to reveal a light peach colored dress and white sandals. Together they looked like daughter accompanying her grandfather somewhere or other, and while she was not invisible anymore they did look inconspicuous together.

"Let us hope our young friend was resourceful and lucky enough to make it back to the hotel."

"Or that he even bothered to go back to the hotel. He may have just run off into the city and disappeared," she pointed out, extremely disgruntled over this turn of events. She hadn't wanted to take the boy out in the open to begin with, too many risk factors even without the Minister's men after them, and now they had lost him.

"A possibility," he admitted, "but I think he trusts me enough now to consider my hospitality preferable to the Ministry's or the great unknown. We should hurry though. Once Seibligg discovers his failure, he will no doubt try again before we can get out of the country."

She let out an irritated huff. "Easy for you to say, you don't have to walk the entire way in these shoes."

"Alas, my dear, the anti-apparition wards around the country are rather tedious, but you may be comforted to know your shoes are

very flattering. I am quite certain any gentlemen we pass will be quite envious of me for having your company.”

She slapped him on the shoulder and rolled her eyes, but she couldn't fight off a smile completely. Their plans were falling apart like a tissue in the rain and they had gained yet another enemy, and he was flirting with her!

Only Dumbledore could be that charmingly weird.

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Climbing five stories down a rope ladder (transfigured from his Durmstrang uniforms) was a lot more awkward than Harry had thought it would be. It didn't help that a small crowd had gathered outside the inn to watch him do it. Nevertheless, he managed to successfully descend to the side walk, and the crowd gave him a little applause for his troubles.

“What were you doing up there, kid?” someone inevitably asked.

“Er... fire drill.”

“Told you so,” another observer said to her friend.

The spectacle over, the people started to wander off, and Harry was one of them. Looking around for anyone suspicious, he hurried off down the street. His first thought was to get out of the city. This was easy enough to accomplish with the many rail systems and tourist buses. All he had to do was cast a Notice-Me-Not Charm, sneak aboard and ride the rest of the way to... anywhere. After that, he would have to figure out what he was going to do.

He walked quickly, but kept himself from running. Running was suspicious, and if wizarding spies hadn't just seen him escape out a window, he didn't want to draw their attention now. And also, he was in a significant amount of pain and exhausted already. So with a great deal of paranoia, he walked several more blocks until he was completely out of the neighborhood and in some sort of shopping

center and found what he was looking for. There was a kiosk in the center of the square, and there was of course a map of the city printed on one side of it with symbols of important landmarks, including the train and subway stations and the airport and bus routes. Concentrating on his next destination (he was starting to entertain the idea of hopping on a plane to New York), he forgot to keep looking around.

He was only mildly surprised when he felt a hand on his shoulder and something sharp pointing into his back.

“Very clever, kid. I applaud you on your ingenuity. Now if you would be so kind as to hand over your wand?” the voice said in perfect English. Shakily, Harry handed over the spare wand, which the still unseen man behind him confiscated.

“Who are you?”

“Just a bloke trying to earn a living. The Dark Lord says 'hi', by the way.”

Harry grimaced. Out of the pan and into the pot and then straight into the fire. Only your luck could this twisted, he lamented. The man grabbed his arm, causing Harry to grimace as pressure was placed on one of his cuts, and pulled him away from the square. Now, Harry could see the man clearly. He was medium height, in his thirties, brunette with a week's worth of stubble and hard eyes. His clothes were ragged, but he held himself with a sort of confidence that belied his social standing. Something about him reminded him of Sirius.

They only made it a few feet before Harry started to resist, digging in his heels. The man turned back to glare at him, and tightened his arm threateningly.

“Let go or I'll scream,” Harry warned him.

His abductor snorted. “I knew you'd be a handful. There's nothing omega about you, is there?”

It suddenly clicked for him why the man seemed familiar.

"You're a werewolf."

"Clever, clever. Which is why you should know better than to threaten me. You scream and the first person who comes to help you gets to spend the rest of their life with odd cravings for raw meat and a sudden fondness for the moon. Have I made myself understood?"

Harry glowered at him, but nodded. He couldn't risk innocent people getting caught up in his fight. He would just have to figure a way out of this himself. It shouldn't be too hard. He had been escaping all day. He was on a roll.

And he still had his own wand tucked up his sleeve and knife tucked into his boot.

Letting himself be dragged along, he waited for his opportunity.

"So what are you going to do to me?" he asked. Though assassination seemed likely, it just didn't seem to fit with what Voldemort had told him last night in his dream. Merlin, had that only be last night?

"My job is to take you back to the UK, but if you keep dragging your feet I'll take a detour to beat the shit out of you. Hurry it up."

"I just had the shit beaten out of me, asshole. It doesn't improve my pace any in case you haven't noticed."

They were out of the square now and half way down a street of apartments, and only a couple was walking their dog far ahead of them. The werewolf jerked him forward, the blade he was carrying now finding it to Harry's throat. The boy froze, the first real sense of fear of the man coming over him.

"Don't push me, you little prick. You ever sass me again and I'll cut out your damn tongue."

Oh yeah, werewolf, Harry remembered, you don't go picking fights with the dominants. Not unless you knew you could win. He wisely

kept his mouth shut, and the man put his knife away and started moving again.

“And stop looking around for escapes. If I have to chase you, you'll be sorry.”

And Harry believed him, which was why he couldn't let him chase after him. His wand was still up his sleeve, but he couldn't use it with the werewolf gripping his arm. Likewise, his wandless magic could backfire on him while they were this close. That left the knife in his boot. The knife he couldn't get to if they kept up their current pace.

“Please... can't we just stop... for a second? I really did get beat up.”

The werewolf glared at him, but stopped. “What the hell happened to you any way? How did you ditch the old man?”

Harry blinked. “You didn't follow us?”

“I didn't go any further than the bus stop. I just waited around for you to come back. Your coming alone made things a lot simpler than I expected.”

“I got on the wrong side of a Blasting Hex. The stone I was hiding behind sort of exploded on me.”

The man gave him a weird look. “What the hell did you say to piss off that old goat?”

“He's not the one who tried to blow me up! Those were Aurors!.”

The man tensed, and looked around. “Break time is over. Come on.”

His moment of distraction was all Harry needed to grab the knife out of his boot, which he promptly brought to the man's throat. The werewolf tensed.

“Let me go and step away.”

"You don't want to do that. Just put the knife away. No one has to get hurt."

"Mister, I've been nothing but hurt all freaking day. I'm tired, sore, and and frankly sick of being kidnapped. So back off," he said, prodding him with gentle poke of the knife. To his surprise, it cut into the skin easier than he had thought, and he flinched as he saw the blood. It was a mistake.

The man let go and moved away quickly, but only far enough to move his neck out of harm's way. In stead of retreating, he grabbed Harry's wrist and jerked him forward, meeting him with a savage head butt.

The world exploded into pain and lights and stars, and then just as quickly went dark.

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"How precisely did you talk me into doing research the day after we get back from school?" Draco whined, following Hermione through the isles of books. The Treacle Tatterly Public Library was quiet, and almost empty, much as any library should be during summer break in the young Malfoy's opinion.

"I didn't," she said, not bothering to tear her eyes away from the titles listed in front of her, "I said I was going to the library and you insisted on following in case I were kidnapped by rogue Bulgarian Quidditch players."

"You know that's not as funny when we actually know someone it's happened to. What are you hoping to find here that wasn't at the school library?"

"I'm hoping to find some of the book I couldn't get to because they were in the restricted section. They don't have a restricted section here."

"That's because their selection is lame."

"Hush. I think I found one."

She pulled out a large book, the cover green faded almost to brown and the edges tattered.

"What is it?" Draco asked, not really interested. After months of trying to help Hermione figure out exactly what she had forgotten the day Viktor had run off with Harry (and he still had urges to throttle her after she told him about her reckless confrontation), and finding nothing he was more than willing to just forget the entire incident. What did it even matter? Knowing what happened wouldn't get Harry back, alleviate Krum of his treachery, or help Uncle Severus (according to mother, he had already weaseled his way out trouble on his own).

"It's a book for diagnosing and treating memory loss."

"Why would that be in the Restricted Section at Hogwarts?"

"I don't know. Lets find out."

With a sigh, he followed her out into the study area and resigned himself to wait. It took less time than he thought. It took half an hour in one decrepit book to find an answer that had been evading her for six months.

"I think I was obliviated," she said, frowning down at her book. Draco blinked at her.

"Pardon?"

"Obliviated. It's really bad. I'll never be able to recover the memory on my own."

"Wait, wait, wait. What is 'obliviated'? How do you know you weren't hit with a regular forgetting hex."

"Draco, please. I tried the counter spells for nearly a dozen memory spells, and none of them worked. An obliviation is different though. It

doesn't just hide a memory, it fragments it and then buries it. It's considered a Dark Arts spell."

"Do you think it was Oblitz then? He is a former Auror and Dark Arts Teacher. I bet he knows a ton of spells like that."

She frowned, flipping through the pages. "Maybe. I don't know why he would bother though. Why not just stun me?"

Draco shrugged. "Why do you think it was even an obliviation?"

"It's... it just fits the symptoms... or the lack of symptoms. Most memory spells have after affects, they fade and you start to remember or you dream about the incident or have a strong case of deja vu. With an obliviation you don't have any of those things. It's like nothing ever happened."

"Sounds kind of feeble, if you ask me... and there isn't a cure? If that's even what's wrong with you."

She closed the book and looked him in the eye, and he instantly knew she was going to propose something he wasn't going to like.

"I can't get to the memory myself. Maybe if I were some sort of meditation guru I could, but that takes years of training and mental preparation. However... I know someone who could."

"... if you say Ron, I'm going to pop you one just out of principle."

"What? No, of course not! I meant Uncle Severus. He's a skilled Legilimens. He could probably do it... but..."

"And the other shoe drops... but what?"

"... Remember how I said the memory is fragmented and buried?"

"Yeah."

"Well... in order to put it back together, I would have to let him sift through my other memories."

He blinked at her. Then looked horrified. "No way!"

Someone shushed them from the other end of the library.

"Are you serious? I like Uncle Severus and all, but do really want him poking through your head. In case you've forgotten, we weren't... aren't exactly saints. We've broken priceless artifacts and blamed it on House Elves-"

"- technically only you did that-"

"Snuck out after curfew at home and school-"

"Yes, well-"

"And stolen books out of his library!"

"Borrowed, Draco. I always put them back."

"Not to mention all the embarrassing stuff, like the first time you kissed someone or that time you wet yourself in public."

"I was five and I told Narcissa I really had to go."

"Anyway, do you really want him to see all of that? Do you really want to make him see all of that? Is it even worth it?"

Hermione shook her head. "It's not just about the memory. I woke unconscious on the floor, Draco, and I have no idea how I got there or how long I had been out. I was helpless, completely vulnerable. What if someone... did something to me?"

Her brother suddenly paled. It had never occurred to him that something other than being knocked unconscious could have happened to her. There had been no marks on her, her clothes were intact, and she had only seemed scared of being found out, not of being... that.

"I don't just mean rape, Draco. I'm pretty sure no one had the time to do it and to get rid of the evidence that thoroughly. But what if it were something else? What if I were forced to tell an important secret or have another spell on me that I'm unaware of? What if I betrayed someone and don't even know it?"

"... but what if it's nothing and you end up betraying those secrets to Snape instead?"

"I've got to know. Not knowing is driving me insane. Besides, I trust him."

"He's Slytherin, Hermione. As a four year veteran of that particular House, I can safely say he'll only keep secrets as long as it's advantageous for him to do so."

"That's an awful thing to say."

"Awful? I'd be disappointed in him if he didn't!"

Her only response to that was to roll her eyes. She had already made up her mind, and Draco knew it was impossible to dissuade her. His only hope was to dissuade his godfather from going along with her foolhardy scheme.

They checked out the book and took the floo to a little pub, and from there made their way up the winding road towards Snape's house. It wasn't until they were actually at his door that the awkwardness of the situation began to dawn Hermione. Their godfather wasn't exactly the sort of man who cared for unexpected visits.

However, as a Gryffindor, stubbornness accounted as much for her bravery as anything else.

"Uncle Severus!" she called, knocking on the door. "It's Hermione and Draco. I have to talk to you. It's important."

It took a few more minutes of persistent pounding, but eventually the door cracked open to reveal a very unhappy potions master.

"Someone better be dead."

"Uncle Severus, you would really feel awful if you had said that and it turned out to be the case."

"I imagine it couldn't be much worse than now. Do you know what time it is?"

Draco checked his watch. "11:26."

The potions master let out a tired sigh and stepped away from the door, letting godchildren inside. "What do you want?"

Hermione told him. Snape stared at her blandly through the entire explanation, sighed again, rubbed his forehead, and turned to Draco.

"What time did you say it was again?"

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Harry was jostled awake when the car came to an abrupt stop, and his seatbelt caught him and threw him back into his seat, knocking him upside the head.

"Ah, fuck, fuck, fuck..." he cursed, holding his pounding head in his hands. It felt as if someone had tapping on his skull with hammer for the last hour.

"Hey, no cussing in front of my kids," he heard snapped at him from somewhere ahead of him. He groaned, pulling his hands away from his head so that he could see exactly where he was now and in what state.

The first thing he noticed was that he was in a rather small car. The second, was that it was a very crowded small car. The man from before was at the driver's wheel, and in the passenger's seat was a woman. Sitting beside him in the back were two children, a boy and girl, neither more than nine years old. He blinked at them blearily, and they blinked back with wide brown eyes. Who were they?

"Here, drink this. You're probably dehydrated," the woman upfront said in a barely discernible Scottish accent. She held out a water bottle, and only after a moment's hesitation did he reach out to accept it... then realized his hands were tied together. He looked at the ropes binding his bare wrists, then realized his button-up shirt was missing. In fact, as he looked himself over, he realized he was missing just about everything. His boots, his arm guard (and his wand), his boots, his wig (no real loss there since it itched something awful), and his socks. The only thing left to him was his undershirt, his pants, and the make-shift bandages he had made for himself..

"Come on, drink up," the woman urged. Slowly, he accepted the bottle and took a drink. It was cold, and soothing, and not nearly enough. He felt confused, sick, and sore. Outside his window he could see other cars whipping by them and farmland stretching out behind those. Where were they?

"Where are we?"

"About twenty miles south of Cologne," the woman said. "How do you feel?"

"Probably about as good as I look. Do you have a headache potion, perchance?"

The man snorted.

"Or a Tylenol? I'm not picky."

"Nothing. I'm sorry," she said.

"It's fine."

"Oh, now you decide to be polite?" the man scoffed. Harry glared at him.

"You're hardly in a position to criticize. You said hello with a knife at my back."

“Point taken. Now that you're our guest, I am going to set up some ground rules. If you follow these rules, maybe you'll get to where you're going in better shape than you are now,” the man said, watching the road and Harry in his rear view mirror simultaneously. Harry scanned his prison on wheels for routes of escape and the scenery outside for potential sanctuary. “Rule 1, you call me 'Sir', you call my wife 'Ma'am', and you don't talk to John, Jane, or Noah period.”

Harry looked at the two children beside him. “Where's number three?”

From behind his seat there came a rustle, and third child made an appearance. He was about five and was missing half his teeth when he grinned at Harry.

“I'm Noah!”

“Noah, you're not suppose to talk to him, remember?” John scolded, glowering as menacingly as a nine-year old can.

“Oops!” he ducked back behind the seat and disappeared.

“Rule 2, you will respect me and every order I give you. Rule 3, you will respect my wife and every order she gives you. Rule 4, you will not try to escape.”

“That it?”

“I doubt we'll be together long enough for any other rules to come into play.”

Small blessings.

What was he going to do now?

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1. If you want to know what the Upright Hierophant stands for, you'll have to go look it up. Otherwise, I'm going to keep you guessing until Harry and Voldemort meet again.

Book V:

Chapter 5: The Quest for the Prince

“Damn it! Damn it all to hell, don’t people understand what’s riding on this? How can everyone be so stupid?!” Minister Seibligg snarled, throwing something across the room, and forcing one of his interns to jump out of the way. “I’ve got three and a half weeks! Just three and a half weeks, when I could have had six months... It’s that damn Dumbledore’s fault. He said he’d handle it. Well, he handled it alright. Handled it right over to Voldemort more than likely!”

The minister continued to rant for several more minutes along these lines, while the half dozen interns waited in quiet tension for him to either wind down or throw something at them. You could never be certain which would happen first with a man as volatile as him.

It didn’t help that the political climate lately was... intense.

The papers had been criticizing him relentlessly for the failed attempt at spying, and more importantly for risking the lives of mere school children in the process. His political opponents were out for blood, suggesting he be surrendered to the Dark Lord as a display of peaceful reconciliation with Britain. Their blood thirst wouldn’t let them wait until September when the national election would be held, and defeat him legitimately.

If it weren’t for the common consensus of the public that Britain was ruled by the Devil, and public outrage at the Dark Lord’s Ultimatum, he might have been impeached months ago. As things stood, his chances for reelection were slim to nil.

He had needed Potter’s support, and what ever intelligence he might have on the Dark Lord, not only for military reasons but for public ones. The witch and wizarding community were still patting their own backs for ‘rescuing’ the little ingrate, and he needed to take advantage of that while he still could. The boy was his single gain in the entire Triwizard Tournament debacle, but if anyone found out the child had disappeared or even worse, that he had defected back to Britain, he would be ruined.

They would say he had lied to the public, and the boy really had been kidnapped just like the Dark Lord had been claiming all along. They'd throw him to Voldemort just out of principle.

During coffee breaks, the interns silently admitted to one another that they hoped Potter showed up at the execution and gave the bastard the finger.

"I want Potter found! I want Dumbledore found! Heads are going to roll for this, and mine sure as hell won't be one of them. Autman! I want you to contact every major paper and tell them the old bastard was attacked by Death Eaters, and we don't know what happened to him or Potter. Tell them the Ministry is posting a 1500 Schulich* reward for any information leading the safe recovery of Potter or Dumbledore or both. I want it out by the morning post or it's your balls, Autman!"

Autman hurried to do as commanded, more than happy to be safely out of the room than worried about his manhood.

"Spencer, you're going to contact the Auror Corps. I'm issuing a national alert. The borders are closed. No one in or out until that boy is in our custody. Blame it on the Death Eaters, but make it known Potter might be resistant to capture... Imperius curse or some other nonsense. Eisenhoff, find someone convenient to blame for the breach in security. Oreff, find those imbeciles to botched the mission and then 'lose' them again. I don't want their screw up messing with the official report, got that? And Dieski..."

"Yes, sir?" she said, timidly, hopeful that she'd finally get to do something important.

"Get me a beer."

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The newest headquarters for the Order of the Phoenix was a bit more cramped than their usual selection, but Harry's disappearance had

ruined much of their plans and forced them to compromise. Something no one was happy about.

"You seriously couldn't find anything better?" Phoebe groused, timidly stepping over a desiccated pile of rodent crap. "I wouldn't even sleep here."

The basement of the abandoned paper factory provided them with plenty of privacy, but that was about it. It was dank, smelly, and infested with rodents. It was also only a few blocks from the Astora Hotel, and roving gangs of Aurors trying to track Dumbledore down.

"It is only for a short time," Dumbledore assured them, "Until we have a better idea of where Mr. Potter has gone."

"He ran away," Johan stated bluntly. "Didn't I say he would at the first chance he got?"

"Some how I don't think this specific circumstance was what you were referring to," Viktor said. Of everyone, he was the most concerned about what had happened. Harry and he had not parted on good terms, but of everyone there Viktor thought he understood the boy the most. Harry was probably the most conflicted person he had ever met, which meant all his actions only made sense to himself. It frustrated Viktor beyond words that Harry couldn't just decide whose side he wanted to be on, but perhaps that very indecisiveness was the final remnant of innocence still left to him. He was still only fourteen, and that boggled Viktor's mind more than anything else. He was only fourteen and running around with Aurors and Dark Wizards chasing after him. There was nothing good that could come out of this situation.

There was a knock at the basement door, followed by Fredric, still in his Auror's uniform. They all turned to him expectantly. He gave them a grin.

"The Minister doesn't have him. He's shutting down the borders and put up an award for the both of you. I think he still believes you have him, Albus."

There was a vague air of relief at the news, except for Johan who just snorted in disgust.

“What did you think happened? They spelled him to get his stuff and then climb out the window? How the hell did he even get his wand?”

Dumbledore smiled a bit at this. “I believe he disarmed one of the Aurors and ran off with his wand, and used that to retrieve his own wand.”

Now Fredric was confused. “How did he disarm an Auror without a wand?”

“I am not entirely certain myself. I was unfortunately distracted.”

“I have heard a rumor,” Viktor offered, “that he can do some wandless magic. I don’t know if it’s true. I’ve never seen him do it myself.”

“Marvelous,” Johan muttered.

“So now what?” Tonks said impatiently. “We can’t stick around here.”

“Not all of us,” Dumbledore admitted. “Viktor, I’d like you to stay in the area and conduct a search of your own. No one will question you searching for a lost friend. Fredric, just keep monitoring the situation as best you can. I will talk to the police, and put myself up somewhere for the next couple of days.”

The Order looked a bit confused by his last statement.

“Who are the ‘Police’?” Timmons asked.

“Muggle Aurors,” Tonks said, grimacing. She’d had a few run in with those. A few unauthorized entries while working for Dumbledore had gotten her in more than few hot spots with the police.

“What could they possibly do?”

“Mr. Potter escaped into Muggle Cologne, not Wizing Cologne. He has no idea how to get to the magical part of the city, and even if he

did, he would probably avoid it. I feel it is likely he will try to flee the city by railway or bus. The police can send out a notice to be on the look out for 'my runaway grandson', if you catch my drift."

It seemed like a sound idea, except to Johan who saw the obvious flaw. If Potter didn't want to be noticed by muggles, he certainly had to know some spells to ensure that he wasn't. He didn't say anything though. No one listened to him anyway.

"We will meet here in twenty-four hours. If we have made no progress, we will relocate and make new plans."

With that, they made their exit. Fredric first to make sure no one was there to spot them, and then the others, each wandering to different sides of the abandoned factory to carry out their various duties.

Viktor hung back a little to talk to Dumbledore, who seemed to be expecting him.

"You are worried about our misplaced friend," the old wizard surmised.

Viktor nodded.

"What, specifically, are you worried will happen?"

"A lot of things. I'm worried he'll get caught by Aurors. I'm worried he'll get caught by Voldemort's men. I'm worried he'll go back to Voldemort of his own free will. I'm worried he'll just disappear and we'll never know what happened to him."

"Worrisome things indeed."

Much to Viktor's dismay, he realized Dumbledore didn't have any words of comfort for him. All of these fears were legitimate, and the old wizard wasn't going to downplay the seriousness of the situation. The only solution was to find Harry first.

He might as well try and find Atlantis while he was at it.

It took less than an hour for Harry to become completely and utterly carsick. At least, he hoped it was just carsickness. If any of his wounds got seriously infected he would be in serious trouble. In any event, he was not in a good state.

Harry had his own bottle, nearly empty. Lycanthrosis, he thought vaguely, gradually coming to the conclusion that all of the family were werewolves and not just the man if they didn't seemed worried about contracting it. He didn't think too much into it. He was too nauseous and headachy to devote much energy to any thoughts aside from 'where are we going' and 'how do I get out of here'.

“Why are we going by sea?” he asked, the first words he had spoken since he’d woken up. The mother’s eyes widened and she turned to her husband. So he had guessed right.

“Why do you think we’re going to the sea?” the man demanded, as if accusing him of something.

“Because we passed by all the train and bus stations, and a couple of airports... and several post offices if you wanted to get clever about it.”

No one said anything for a long moment. The car suddenly lurched to the side to let another car pass, and Harry closed his eyes and clenched his teeth, his insides threatening to revolt.

“Oh God, pull over. I’m going to be sick.”

“As if-“

The mother interjected. “Dear, he’s serious. Pull over.”

There was another abrupt swerve and fierce stop. Harry struggled with the door, but it wouldn’t open, and as his stomach wasn’t waiting for him to complete his evacuation, he gave up and climbed half way out the window and vomited over the side. There wasn’t much to expel, but it seemed to take forever, and when it was finally over he could only hang over the door, exhausted to the point of pain.

Had he ever felt this awful? After Infelix malis? When Snape slipped him that Blue Pox potion? At this point, he couldn’t even bring himself to care that he was being driven to his probable torture and death. This was insidiously slow and torturous death all its own.

“Here,” the woman said from behind him, nudging his hand with his water bottle. “Wash out your mouth and get back inside.”

“Is he okay?” Jonah queried sleepily from the back.

“He’s fine. Go back to sleep.”

“Does he need medicine?”

“Go to sleep,” his father reiterated, and the boy fell quiet. Stephen looked to Harry, who had climbed back into the car, and sat slumped

in his seat. They stared at each other for a long time. "You should sleep as well."

Harry glared back at him. "You should just leave me at the nearest hospital."

"I swear to god kid, I'm going to pop you one if you don't drop the sass."

"Next upchuck I'm aiming at the back of your head."

"One more word, just one, and I'm gagging you."

Harry believed him, and relented, turning to stare out the window as they headed back out onto the road. How far was it to the sea? Several hours. When would they stop? Would they stop at all? If they did, he might be able to stun both of the adults. The children were too young to stop him. He could find his things and runaway again. Find a place to sleep off the sickness.

If the fucking drive didn't kill him first.

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Hermione fidgeted nervously in the kitchen chair, staring across the table at her godfather, his eyes skimming the article she had found. He looked awful, like he hadn't slept at all, even though he obviously needed to. He was still wearing a brewing apron, dragon hide, and his hair was tied back. Had he been brewing all night? What ever for?

He had listened to her though, from start to finish, and even double checked her interpretation from the book. At last, he shut it and looked back at her.

"Do you have any idea what you are asking?"

She nodded. "I know I'll have to let you into my memories... even those I'd rather you not see..."

“There’s a lot more to it than that,” he said, closing his eyes. She hadn’t a clue what she was requesting. Sure he might find what she was looking for, and perhaps she was willing to sacrifice a bit of privacy to do that, but there was more at stake. She had buried memories that he had buried himself and that WYRA had lawfully buried. Memories of the basilisk incident and memories of her family before the Malfoys had adopted her. Shaking any of those memories loose into her conscious or subconscious mind could have serious ramifications.

It would be a tricky enough operation if her other memories weren’t a factor and he had a full night’s rest, but as it was he didn’t even want to attempt a glance into her mind. His own was too exhausted.

He had been up all night, tweaking loyalty potions, altering them enough so that they could be reversible or broke down on their own in time. The Dark Lord might THINK he wanted a completely loyal Harry, but Snape knew such a thing would soon result in disappointment. A servant who did not question would simply become another meaningless sycophant.

There would likely be several ‘experiments’, before Voldemort found a solution that satisfied him.

Snape knew something had to be done, but he suspected it would all come down to the Dark Mark or something similar. Physical and mental freedom, but with a magical bond. One that could easily destroy you if you ever attempted to break it. The idea didn’t sit well with him, but then nothing about the situation did.

Which was what made Hermione’s unexpected appearance almost welcome. He needed a distraction that even the Dark Lord would excuse.

“Fine. We’ll try, but if it becomes too much of a hassle, I’m pulling out,” he said, leaning back in his chair. Draco, who had been uncharacteristically quiet standing by the counter immediately protested.

"You can't be serious! When was the last time you slept? If you go stumbling through her brain like you are, she's going to end up thinking she's poodle by the time you're done!"

"Draco!"

"A legitimate concern," Snape said mildly, turning to the boy. "Which is why you're going to make some tea. Some very, very strong tea. Second cabinet on your left."

"You're all loons," he muttered under his breath, but did as he was ordered.

An hour later found them in the living room, the curtains all shut tight. Draco guarded the windows, peaking out to make sure no one came to disturb them. Hermione and Snape sat on the couch, a pensieve on the coffee table. Snape took her face in his calloused hands, and stared deeply into her eyes.

"I want you to think of that day in the castle, just before your memories disappear, in as much detail as you can manage."

Her cheeks instantly pinked at the thought of Viktor's proposal to her in the abandoned classroom. The potions master scowled at her.

"You can't afford to be embarrassed. Your mind retreats from memories that make it uncomfortable, and that makes my job that much more difficult."

"I'm sorry..."

"Just concentrate."

Gradually, the memory came to the forefront of her mind, and Snape found himself the third party to an adolescent soap opera. All tears and pleas, and the only thing keeping him from retching was Hermione's staunch adherence to logic even in the midst of teen heartbreak. The memory suddenly stuttered, and he found himself looking down at Hermione on the floor, waking up in confusion.

Having found the time frame of the lost memory, he left her conscious thought to find exactly where it went. Technically, he had no physical body with which to move, and both time and space was ephemeral concepts in the mind to begin with, but with mental discipline and self awareness, he found it easy enough to create a landscape that he could work with.

Concentrating, he dismissed Hermione's image of her last meeting with Viktor, and found himself staring out in a smoky black void. He hovered in the nothingness for a moment, deciding on the mindscape that would best suite his needs, and willed it into being. The darkness suddenly brightened, and where once there was endless space there was now white walls, a floor, and a ceiling. A corridor stretched on into forever, and the walls were each lined with a door, and all of the doors were different. Wood doors, painted doors, glass doors, barn doors, tiny doors, car doors, draw bridges, attic doors, beaded doors, elevator doors, round doors, pink doors, doors with knockers, doors with mail slots, doors with signs on them, just endless doors of all varieties. Their only linking factor was the set of gold numbers printed neatly above each.

Curiously, he opened what appeared to be a closet door. Inside, he found Hermione, no more than six, watching Narcissa intently as she dressed for a night at the opera. Long, elegant fingers weaved through her golden hair, her swan neck tilted just a bit as she looked into the mirror. The image of a beautiful princess made real to a little girl, and the heart racing thrill of knowing she was her mother now.

He closed the door, more than a little embarrassed. If Lucius ever found out he had seen his wife in her under clothes, he'd never see the light of day. He looked at the door number. 2836621. He tried another door.

This one had Harry in it. It had to have been first year, he looked so tiny. They were outside the castle with their fellow first years, Professor Grimms barking at them not to mount their brooms. Snape had heard about this incident, but couldn't help but linger as it played out before his eyes. He watched as Grimms was called away, as everyone became aware of Weasley riffling through Harry's bag, the insults, and the fight on the broomsticks. It wasn't until the end of the

little drama, when Grimms smacked Harry upside the head with the journal, that Snape realized exactly what it was.

What the bloody hell is that doing here?

He didn't find out what happened to the journal, as Harry was pulled away and the memory ended, but he made a mental note to find out where and how exactly the boy had come across it. There was no way it could have come into his possession by accident, or that he could have had it for long if he was still alive and (relatively) sane.

It was an important discovery, but not the one he was there looking for. He made a note of the door number, 4594532, and continued on his way. The walking continued on for what seemed like hours, but time was ultimately meaningless since to Hermione and Draco it wouldn't even be half a second, and his mental body did not fatigue. It was merely an attribute to Hermione's rather remarkable memory. Aside from the first two memories, most of what was stored behind the doors were facts and foresights she had acquired over the years. Even Snape learned a thing or two when he bothered to pay attention.

Most of them he left untouched. The fractured memories were hidden behind some of these doors somewhere in the corridor, and there would be some sort of sign to let him know when something wasn't where it was suppose to be.

And it came in the form of door 6002 41, a simple blue house door with a conspicuously absent 5th number. He opened it and instantly recognized the memory as one he had altered himself. Hermione and Harry and the Weasley girl conspired in the library over what had happened to the unfortunate Ms. Sweetey. On the other side of the Library, Hermione and Viktor talked softly about fairy folk and house elves. A memory overlapping a memory.

Knowing what to look for now, he watched the numbers of the doors as he passed, looking for any with missing numbers. He found two others, ones of Hermione when she still living with her muggle parents, but it was the fourth door the yielded the first meaningful results.

Door 6666 66, a black door with silver fixtures. Snape recognized it as one leading to Lucius' study. He opened it.

Larousse's funeral procession marched passed him, himself at the forefront, marching up the hill with his fiancée's body resting on the palate he held on his shoulders. He could see Morgan on the other side of the palate, but the other men helping him take her to her pyre, he didn't know and had never bothered to meet. Behind him trailed Harry, looking absurdly young and pale in his grief, Hermione and Draco standing on either side of him.

He forced himself to look away and not follow them to the top of the hill, and watch as that wretched morning played itself out. He would indulge in masochism after he found the memory that was hiding within this memory.

Looking around for anything out of place, he spotted a strange outcropping of trees, still green and deeply shadowed even in the depth of winter. He headed for it. The moment he entered the darkness of the forest, it shifted into the dimness of Hogwarts' history classroom. At the center, he could see Hermione and Viktor arguing with each other.

He had found the right place. All he had to do was wait.

The wait wasn't long at all. Within seconds of his arrival, the door to the classroom burst open, and a figure stepped through the door, flinging out a stunning hex. Hermione was down in an instant, sent into unconsciousness by the hex. The image dissolved around him but Snape had seen what he needed to.

He had seen Horace McGunny.

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"He has a fever now and he's soaking wet. We have to stop for the night."

"Sylvia-

"I'm not killing this boy in front of our children for you, Stephen."

"He's not dying-"

"Says you..." Harry muttered, not bothering to open his eyes. He wasn't getting any better. In fact, the more time that passed the more he was convinced he was dying. He could barely open his eyes, let alone move his body, and breathing the hot, humid air was becoming increasingly difficult.

"... Fine, fine, whatever," Stephen snarled. This was followed by several sharp turns that rolled Harry's already sensitive stomach and insured that he would despise 'Stephen' for the rest of his probably very short life. They came to a stop somewhere and Harry dozed off, until the door was opened and he fell out of the car. Stephen caught him, and pulled him the rest of the way out.

It was more than a little alarming to find his legs wouldn't support his own weight. He was half carried, half dragged into the hotel room and straight to the bathroom, where he was set in the tub. It was blessedly cool and unmoving, and he sighed in relief. He had to have drifted off again, because he was woken by Sylvia, turning on the tub faucet. Cold water splashed his feet, jolting him back into awareness.

"Easy now. I'm just going to cool you off and then put to you to bed," she said.

"What's wrong with me?" he said, because he hadn't been this bad off that morning. Not even after being blown up and climbing out a window.

"I think you have a concussion. The heat and physical exhaustion only worsened things. Don't worry, you just need some rest to regain your strength."

The water was a touch too cold as it rose up around his legs, making him shiver even as it eased the pain. She left him in his pants, but pulled off his shirt, which he could see was now stained with sweat

and blood. His makeshift bandages were likewise discolored and filthy, and he did nothing to protest as she started to unwind them.

“What happened to you?” she said, clearly surprised by the damage he had been hiding. He gave her a wane smile. The water around him was starting to turn pink.

“Aurors.”

“Aurors did this to you?”

“Most of it. The cuts on my feet are all Voldemort though.”

She looked perplexed by this, but didn't question. Taking a wash cloth, she began to wipe him clean, and despite his embarrassment at being bathed like a toddler, it felt too good for him to ask her to stop. Besides, his hands were still tied and didn't think he could do much for himself at this point.

“Where's...Stephen...Sir... whatever?”

She glanced at him briefly, and then at his hands, then back at him.

“He's getting some supplies. Food. Maybe something to make you feel better. There won't be any stops tomorrow. How do you feel?”

“Better. Why are you all doing this? What did Voldemort say he'd pay you?”

“Is that what Stephen told you? That it was for money?” she said, looking disgusted. “He can be such an ass. He doesn't care about the money. The money is just a means to an end. A way to get somewhere better than here.”

“What's wrong with here? Isn't it your home?” he asked. He was starting to shiver, but he didn't want to get out yet. After hours of feeling like he'd melt in that damned oven of a car, this was pure heaven.

She shook her head. “Not any more. Not for many years now.”

“Why, what happened?”

“I got bit by a werewolf,” she said simply. She expected him to flinch, or to somehow withdraw, but he didn’t react at all. He seemed to have figured it out already.

“Are people cruel to you, because you’re a werewolf?”

It was the most absurd question she had ever heard. Where people cruel to her? Of course they were cruel. They spit at her in the street, refused to serve her at the grocers, didn’t give back her change, accused her of stealing, wouldn’t acknowledge her mere existence, took their children to the other side of the street, threw rotten food- She could tolerate it if it had just been directed at her, but her heart shattered when her children were given the same treatment. They were her angels, her babies... they deserved far better than their stupid mother. They deserved what their father wanted to give them.

“They are.”

“I’m sorry.”

She looked at him squarely. This had to be the first time a wizard had ever apologized to her, and ironically enough it was from someone who had a legitimate reason to hate them.

“You say weird things.”

He smiled weakly, but it slipped away, leaving him looking drawn and very fragile. She wasn’t what she had been expecting, all fierce eyes and assertive confidence like he was in the papers. Fourteen, she remembered, he was still only fourteen.

A bang at the door alerted to them to her husbands return. He walked in on them, looked at her and then at him, his expression contemplative. He set a plastic bag on the counter and addressed his wife.

"I'll take over from here. Go look after the kids." She looked at him curiously, but did as he said. When she was gone, he turned to Harry. "You better not be trying to sweet talk her."

Harry gave him a baffled look, then snorted. "You caught me. My plans to run off with your wife to Paris have been foiled."

"You are so lucky they were out of duct tape at the store."

There was Tylenol in the bag, which Harry was grateful enough for that he bit back any witty remarks as Stephen dried him off, cleaned his wounds with peroxide, and wrapped him up in real, clean bandages. The werewolf wasn't gentle about it, but he wasn't intentionally rough either. As long as he sat on the edge of the tub limply and didn't make direct eye contact, the alpha didn't seem inclined to smack him around.

"Do you want anything to eat?" the man said at last, tying off the last of the bandages.

"...Maybe later."

"Can you walk on your own now?"

Embarrassed, he made an attempt to stand. This time he was able to get to his feet, although the position made his head pound. Carefully, he made a few wobbly steps. Stephen watched him closely for signs of falling, but once he was fairly certain he wouldn't, he handed him a towel.

"Take off your shorts and dry off. Then come out and lay down. You have five minutes."

Harry did as he was told, and came out into the sleeping area with the towel wrapped around his waist. Sylvia and the children were gathered around a table, eating, while Stephen stood staring at the TV. There were two queen sized beds, and Harry climbed into the nearest one. Finally feeling as if he weren't going to die, he began to think of what he should do to escape. Stunning and running, was

about the only thing he could come up with, except for the fact that running wasn't really possible at the moment.

"Shit."

Harry opened his eyes, not even realizing he had closed them, and turned to Stephen.

"What is it?" Sylvia asked, coming over to look at the TV.

"Storms up north. Bad ones. They're suspending all water and air traffic."

"For how long?"

"They're not saying. The storm supposedly 'came out of nowhere'. I can think of a few likely sources."

Harry could too. He wondered if the storms would hit land, and he'd find himself walking out into one in the middle of the night. Did the Ministry know where they were going? Or was it just another way to block off one of his escape routes? Perhaps even Voldemort had sent it as a means to cover their escape. Stephen didn't think so, but he seemed to be flying by the seat of his pants anyway.

At some point, he drifted off again without realizing it, and when he opened his eyes the room was dark and he could hear rain outside, arguing with the droning air conditioner. He felt no compulsion to go outside, but he couldn't think of what had just woken him.

"Go back to sleep," the Stephen growled from the other side of the bed.

I could stun him now, he thought sleepily. I could stun him and his wife and just walk away. I feel stronger now.

Deciding he had put it off too long already, he rolled over to do just that. Stephen was just a vague shape in the darkness of the room, highlighted in the faint glow from behind the hotel curtains. He sat up and extended his hands out to him.

“Stup-”

There was a crash of thunder and wood exploding, a blinding light and shouts of surprise. Harry’s first peculiar thought was that the door had been struck by lightening. The second was that they were under attack. The children and Sylvia screamed in surprise and fright, their bodies clearly visible now on the second bed, huddled together, but then there were other shouts, not of surprise but of command.

“Put your hands in the air and stay where you are!”

Wizards poured into the little hotel room, soaking wet and wands drawn. Some of them had cast Lumos, which now lit the room in a harsh blue-white glow, blinding its inhabitants. Harry felt the bed shift, then heard a snarl of rage.

“Stupefy.”

There was a thud, followed by Sylvia screaming again.

“Don’t anybody move! Put your hands in the air and stay exactly where you are!” another wizard shouted. They all did so, even Harry, whose bound hands were now clearly visible.

“What the hell?” a spiky –haired wizard exclaimed, looking at Harry in complete bewilderment. Now that everyone was still and not screaming, Harry could see there were three wizards total, and they were dressed as Aurors. They looked awfully young. “Who the hell are you?”

Harry blinked. They weren’t here for him?

“Er... Heinrich Makowski?”

“Oh shit, that’s Potter,” another Auror with crooked nose said. The other two looked at him and then at Harry, their eyes widening in surprise as they finally recognized his face. Harry’s estimation of them went down considerably. They were all clearly rookies, but what were they doing here if it wasn’t to find him?

'Spiky's' expression hardened, and he walked over to Stephen, now sprawled dazed on the floor, and kicked him in the chest. Hard. He grunted in pain and the children let out shocked cries. Harry could only stare, stunned at the pointless cruelty of it.

"What the hell, Canis? When did you graduate from mongrel to Death Eater lap dog?" Another vicious kick to the kidneys.

"Stop! Please, stop!" Sylvia begged.

"Shut up, you stupid bitch!" the third Auror, the bulkiest of the lot, snapped, seizing her by the hair and pulling her off the bed and away from her terrified children, who cried and reached helpless for her. He tossed her into a dresser, where she hit her head and slumped to the floor, blood running down her face.

What are you doing? Arrest them or stun them, what's the point of this bullying? Harry marveled, horrified as he had been with Voldemort that day in the Forbidden Forest and his brutal interrogation of the centaur herd

Spiky approached him, and he instinctively flinched away, but the man made a calming gesture and gently took his bound hands.

"It's alright, no one is going to hurt you. You poor kid, you're a mess. They really worked you over, didn't they? Excarcerous!" The ropes fell away from his wrists, freeing them. Harry stared at them, shocked, then at the Auror. He thought the werewolves had hurt him, and not his buddies at the Ministry?

"You are one lucky guy, you know that?" he said, looking him over for any other wounds. He eyed the crescent moon tattoo suspiciously, but didn't examine it too closely. "Got a call from a concerned neighbor that these guys had run off without notifying anyone, and we were dispatched to track them down. The tracking spell on their car led us here. I thought they were just trying to run off to the mountains, not run off with you. You okay? Where are your clothes?"

Harry couldn't say anything. They had broken into the hotel just because Stephen's family hadn't been at home? What were they going to do if they hadn't found him there? Arrest them for being on vacation?

"Hey, kid, you alright?"

He blinked at the man, and finally managed, "What are you going to do to them?"

"Don't worry, they're not ever going to be able to hurt you again."

"What do you mean?"

"Kidnapping, assault, conspiring with a hostile foreign government. As soon as we get back to headquarters, they'll be scheduled for execution. You'll be safe."

His heart sank into his stomach. He looked over towards the children still huddled together on the bed, their tiny faces morphed into terror and grief, choking back sobs. Oh god...

"The children..."

Now, the Auror seemed to sense something was wrong. Harry's expression wasn't one of relief. If anything, he was looking increasingly distressed. He looked to his comrades, who seemed to have sensed it too, but they were occupied with guarding the werewolves.

"No."

"Harry? What is it?"

"Let them go..."

There was stirring on the floor, and 'Crooked Nose' lashed out with a sharp kick to Slyvia's back, knocking her to the floor, on top of her husband. She let out a cry of pain, and Noah scrambled for her.

“Mama, mama!”

“I said don’t move!”

‘Bulky’ grabbed him by his neck, and shook him like a rag doll, ringing out screams of pain. Harry was on his feet so fast, the Auror who was attending him fell to the floor. He was so fast in fact, the Auror who had grabbed Noah didn’t even realize he had moved until Harry’s foot smashed into his face.

“Expelliarmus!” The wand of Crooked Nose flew into his hand, and knocked the man into the wall. With his newly acquired wand, he swept it towards Stephen. “Rennervate.”

The man was on his feet just as quickly as Harry had been, and he went immediately for the first Auror who had been tending Harry, just beginning to climb to his feet. Stephen’s fist knocked him back into the ground, and he didn’t get back up.

The threat neutralized, the werewolf immediately searched out his pack. John and Jane rushed into his arms, latching onto him as fiercely as they could, sobbing against him. Noah was already with Sylvia, who had managed to sit up again and was hugging him to her breast.

Harry watched them all and felt like crying himself. But he couldn’t. He had to get away. Again. On shaky legs, he climbed off the bed, just barely able to find a path with everyone crowded around and unconscious bodies littering the floor, and made his way to the bathroom. He could feel their eyes on him, but he didn’t look back. His clothes were hanging over the tub, and when he put them on they were still a bit damp, but tolerable. He took two more Tylenol, stared at his pale, hallow face in the mirror for a minute, and then wobbled back out to the sleeping area.

Sylvia and the children were now back on the bed huddled together in a comforting pile, while Stephen searched the Auror’s for anything useful. He noted that Sylvia had a wand, but Stephen didn’t. Everyone turned to him as he re-entered.

“You’ll have to abandon your car when you leave,” Harry said softly. “I left the Tylenol by the sink, if you want any. Oh... and I want my stuff back.”

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A Schulich is a German form of wizarding money. The equivalent is about \$50, so the reward is about \$75,000.

For those who don’t know the ‘Chunnel’ (Channel Tunnel) is a subterranean rail system under the English Channel between France and England.

Book V:

Chapter 6: The Fae

Harry swayed, dizzy, but kept to his feet and kept walking. His satchel hung weightless at his side, his small collection of wands tucked into either boot. Stephen had given them back to him without a word as he proceeded to move his family's belongings from the trunk of his car to the car he was in the process of stealing. Harry felt bad about that, but thought he might feel worse if the family was caught because they were stuck in their current rust bucket.

He had left them still loading the car, simply wandering away while they were distracted with their work. There was no point in saying goodbye, and frankly he didn't want to risk a confrontation with Stephen, who may still be reluctant to let him go. Probably the only thing stopping the man so far was Harry's newest wand and the evidence that he was both proficient and quick with using it.

The rain hadn't stopped, merely slowed to a drizzle, and off in the distance he could make out the lightening traveling south with the storm. It was a good time to travel. The air was cool with the rain, and his black cloak provided both warmth and concealment in the night. He just had to be wary of cars traveling a little too close to the side of the road, and he would be fine.

Well, perhaps he had to be wary of Aurors wandering a little too close as well.

He was practically buzzing with energy after the confrontation with the men in the hotel, senses on edge, even as his body fought its own physical fatigue. How far could he get like this? It was too late... early in the morning for buses to be running, and he had no idea where the nearest stop one was located. He might get a ride from a passerby if he were lucky, but with his luck he'd probably end up hitching a ride with a vampire.

He couldn't have made it half a mile when headlights coming up behind him drew his attention. He tensed, and tensed further as the vehicle began to slow down. Weird luck, he groaned mentally, when

he realized it was Stephen and family in their newly acquired vehicle. The man rolled up beside him, but Harry kept walking, forcing him to follow along at a crawl.

“Hey, get in,” Stephen said, sticking his head out the window. Harry just glowered at him, and kept walking. “Come on, we’re in the same boat, you might as well come with us.”

Harry snorted.

“Harry, please,” Sylvia said, rolling down her own window to speak directly. “It won’t take long for those men to wake up and report to their superiors. Aurors are going to swarm this area, and you don’t want to be anywhere near here when it happens. Please, get in the car.”

He glared at the both of them. “I’m not an idiot! I know all of that. But I also know hitching a ride with people who are going to trying to sell me to the highest bidder is an equally stupid idea!”

“Ha-“

“And stop using my name like we’re friends!” he snapped. “I didn’t save you because we’re friends!”

There was a moment of tense silence. Sylvia hung her head, shame faced, while Stephen proceeded to simply stare at him in his usual unreadable stare. In the back seat of the car, the children stared at him with wide, frightened eyes. Harry just kept walking, eyes on the road, and his wand clenched in his fist. Finally, the alpha broke the silence.

“Then why did you save us?”

“I did it just for your kids, got it? I hate people who hurt kids!”

This was perfectly true, but not the entire truth of the situation. He did hate people who hurt kids, but the situation was a bit more complicated. The fact was, he understood why Stephen and Sylvia had kidnapped him. They wanted something better for their children.

A life Harry was beginning to understand they couldn't get in Germany. So he had saved them, and given them a second chance. But he wasn't going to pay for their chance at happiness with his blood. They'd just have to get creative.

Stephen heaved an irritated sigh. "You really are a fucking prince."

"You're fucking welcome!"

"What do you want? An apology?"

"I want you to go away! Go find someone else to kidnap."

"Will you just get in the car? What do you think we could do against you when you've got...that anyway?" And by that, Harry assumed he meant his wand. He had a good point there. "The law is going to be here in a few minutes, and none of us can afford to stick around here. So get your sassy ass in the car before we all get blown to bits!"

Well, shit, he was right. He couldn't afford to be picky with his rides, and right now they were the lesser of two evils. Escaping them would be a lot easier than escaping Aurors, if it came down to that.

"Fine, but I'm sitting up front."

"No w-"

"Honey," Sylvia interject, her own patience finding its limit. "Don't make a mountain out of a mole hill."

Harry stopped walking, allowing them to stop the car so she could climb in back, and he could climb in front. He had barely closed the door, when Stephen put his foot to the gas and sped away with a screech of tires. Harry quickly fastened his seat belt.

For half an hour, no one said anything. Luckily, their new car was nicer than their old, with roomier seats and working appliances. The digital clock glowed 2:35 am. In the rearview mirror, he could see the children snuggling up to their mother as best they could in their seat belts, except for Noah who was curled up on the floor around her feet.

"Where are you going exactly?" Harry finally, quietly.

"If you're not going to accompany us all the way, it's better I not tell you," Stephen said bluntly, not looking away from the road. The boy fought back his annoyance. The situation called for civility, even if it had to be faked.

"We're not going north."

"There's nothing north. The ports are all closed due to the storms. Besides, the Aurors will know that's the direction we were headed. We'll head back south along the less busy highways until we can find a place to lay low for a while."

"... Why did you even come to get me?"

"It wasn't gratitude," Stephen sneered.

"I didn't say it was," Harry sneered right back.

"Hn. It's safer to travel with a wizard on our side. Sylvia knows a little magic, but not much. Nothing like you. So you get a ride and we get a little more protection. Everyone wins."

Everyone wins, Harry thought glumly, if by some miracle I can keep you from betraying me.

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Snape had wanted a distraction, but he wasn't entirely sure if he wanted one this badly. As much as he disliked fiddling around with other people's free will (with a few exceptions), he didn't like wandering around London in the middle of the night much better. It was actually a newer city by wizarding standards, having been developed after muggles had settled there rather than at the same time, and as a result the city was... dirty. Not as bad as the muggle part of the city, but still dirty and cramped and decidedly slipshod in several districts. Oh sure, the Court Offices were all magnificent,

along with the art and theatre districts, and a few high end residential areas, but for the most part it was kind of grimy.

It wasn't as noticeable in the day time, when all the wizarding folk were about in their colorful attire and the stalls for produce and flower sales were open, but at night the garbage littered the streets and rats ran freely trying to snatch it up before morning cleaners came through and magicked away as much of it as they could. The buildings were blacked and crumbling from acid rain, byproducts of living so close to muggles. Their own cultural assertion that old was somehow better than new, and their subsequent refusal to tear down or replace anything didn't help matters.

At least he didn't have to worry about muggers. It was a bit early in the morning for any to still be out and about, and none would dare attack a man as well dressed as him. After Voldemort's regime, any sort of crime you were convicted of with high recidivism earned you a one way trip to Azkaban or the werewolf colonies. Arson, rape, thievery, and the selling of contraband were the most common of these crimes. It was still around, but the perpetrators kept to their slums, where they could act out their brutality and self destruction on one another and no one gave a damn.

The neighborhood he currently found himself in wasn't particularly nice, but it was well out of the slums. Mostly tiny apartments and shops that catered to the nearby university students and faculty. Here he could see a few windows still glowing as some desperate student crammed for their next exam or abused the vitality of their youth with some other arbitrary excuse to dismiss sleep.

Not that Snape was in any position to criticize them. He should have been asleep hours ago. Hunting down an address when the Court offices were closed (it was still Sunday when Hermione arrived on his door step) was not easy. Hunting down an address when the Court offices were closed and not calling Lucius in for a favor was damn near impossible.

He had made the effort though. Horace McGunny had some role in the Durmstrang students escape, and he suspected the boy also played a role in Harry's abduct... escape as well. By all accounts, he

could have just taken what he learned directly to Morgan or even Lucius and had the boy arrested and interrogated, but he wanted to hear the truth himself and judge whether the boy's crime was worth destroying his life and possibly harming his goddaughter over. For all he knew, McGunny had been helping Harry per his request, and Snape didn't see any reason to ruin the Ravenclaw because of his former ward's selfishness.

The more he thought about it the more it seemed likely McGunny had helped Viktor in some sort of attempt to help Harry, not Germany. McGunny had a fondness for Harry, which was hardly uncommon in the last few years, and was very astute. He may have realized something was wrong when Snape himself had not, and gone out of his way to remedy it. The risk seemed awfully high for someone as conservative as McGunny, but then Snape didn't know him all that well. He would find out soon enough.

The Newt Hill Tavern stood in the middle of the block, made completely inconspicuous by the four other apartment 'taverns' that surrounded it. The entrance was not locked. There was a registry in the entryway next to the mail slots, and he ran his finger down the list until he found Horace McGunny's neatly scrawled name at the very bottom. Mentally, he groaned. Of course, he would be on the top floor. The building had no elevator.

Maybe McGunny did deserve to be thrown to the Sentinels after all.

Nevertheless, he found the stairs and followed it all the way to the top floor. There was only one room, and Snape was a bit curious to see light was still shining out from the bottom of the door. From inside he could hear a soft, rhythmic tapping.

He knocked sharply on the door.

The tapping sound stopped. There was a moment of silence.

"Just a second," came a muffled voice, and a moment later the door opened cautiously.

Horace McGunny stared out at him, tired and suspicious. He looked older than Snape remembered, paler too, but that could have just been fatigue. His clothes were rumpled and his eyes were darkly circled.

“Professor? What are you doing here? Especially at... whatever time it is right now.”

“Can I come in for a moment?”

“Listen, I’m really busy. I’ve got a transcript due tomorrow, and this is a new job, so I really-”

“It’s about Mr. Potter.”

McGunny’s tired eyes suddenly became more alert.

“Is he alright?”

“As far as I know... maybe. Can I come in?”

This time McGunny moved away from the door. The apartment was small, only one room it seemed, and despite only having a bed, desk, chest, and small shelf it felt cramped. On the desk sat a type writer, the likely source of the tapping noise. There was no where he would deign to sit.

“Not to be rude, but why are you here, sir?”

“Like I said, it’s regarding Mr. Potter. I needed to ask you something.”

McGunny sat on his bed, across the room from him, and waited.

“Did you obliviate Hermione Granger the day the Durmstrang students escaped with Mr. Potter?”

The boy tensed, his entire continence frozen into an expression of surprise.

“I... what? No. What are you talking about?”

“Actually, that wasn’t really the question. I already know you did that. What I want to know is why. Did Mr. Potter ask you to do it or did you do it of your own volition?”

“I don’t even know what you’re talking about. How would I have... obliterated... obliterated... whatever Granger? She wasn’t even there that day. What does this even have to do with Harry’s abduction?”

Snape’s expression didn’t change.

“Did you do it yourself did someone help you? Perhaps you got Oblitz. He probably knows about Obliviation.”

McGunny scowled at him. “I don’t care for what you are insinuating, Professor. I think you better go.”

“Yes, you’re probably right,” Snape conceded. “But not without my answers. Legilimens!”

He caught McGunny off guard, as was his intention. The subject they had been talking about was now at the fore front of the Ravenclaw’s mind, and he sifted through it quickly. His interruption of Krum and Hermione’s argument, the sleep spell he cast on her, the run to the tower, and his return to obliviate his goddaughter.

And then things got very, very weird.

McGunny started to talk to himself... and someone who didn’t sound like McGunny was talking back. Schizophrenia?

Snape didn’t have long to theorize on it, because he was very quickly and very violently thrown out of the Ravenclaw’s head.

“Oprimmo!” McGunny snarled, slashing his wand out at him. Reeling from the mental expulsion, Snape didn’t dodge quite fast enough. His left hand caught the Crushing Hex, and pain seared through him as he felt the bones in his fingers and hand fracture.

“Sectumsemptra!”

McGunny rolled off the bed, which exploded into a flurry of feathers. The Ravenclaw landed on the floor, and found himself staring directly at the potions master. The man's black eyes burned with the agony of his broken hand and rage was quickly rising to the surface.

On his end, Snape noted clinically that one of McGunny's eyes had turned red. He didn't analyze it, merely flung out his wand again.

"Incendio."

"Obsideo," McGunny said, blocking the Fire Curse, then grinned nastily at him. "Don't you think you're getting a little carried away? Codicarius!"

Snape only partially avoided the curse as he leapt to his feet. The wood of the floor boards had already started sprouting roots, ensnaring part of his robe, so that when he pulled away, it tore away his sleeve with it. He considered himself lucky. That particular curse could have resulted in roots growing straight into his body and torn him to pieces. It was a very obscure curse. Where had McGunny discovered it?

"Celoxis!" the young wizard shouted, before he could get off another curse of his own. Snape didn't recognize it, which made his attempt to block it as futile as any attempt he may have made to dodge it in the tiny room. It cut through his shield as if though it were nothing, and caught him in the gut.

There was a moment of stunned silence. Snape slowly looked down to see the front part of his robe fall to the floor, cleanly cut. The pale skin of his stomach shown completely untouched, but slowly he started to feel something happening inside his body... something that was quickly turning to agony.

He fell backwards, landing heavily on his back, and further jarring his damaged insides. He screamed, unable to hold it back. Oh fuck, oh fuck... what is that?

“Do you like it? It’s one of my own creations. It leaves the skin intact, but inside... inside it rips you to pieces.”

McGunny was the one who said it, but it wasn’t McGunny’s voice. Struggling against the pain, he looked up at him and could now see both of his eyes were brilliant red, and his smile was monstrous. Casually, the monster walked towards him, sticking his thumb in his pockets, confident in his victory.

“What...” Snape let out a grunt of pain, “... are you?”

The grin grew larger and nastier.

“I’m Lord-”

“Sectumsemptra!”

As close as they were, the curse couldn’t be blocked effectively, but McGunny instinctively throwing up his arms saved him from being killed instantly, and it knocked him clear across the room in a spray of blood.

Snape didn’t wait to see how effective his attack had been. He was dying quickly, and needed to save himself before he could worry about destroying his enemy. Closing his eyes tightly, trying to gather his concentration around the pain, he thought of exactly where he needed to go and all of the parts of himself he definitely wanted taken with him.

There was a loud ‘pop’ as he apparated away.

At the other end of the room, lying halfway in the bathroom, McGunny lay stunned as his blood began to pool around him.

“Oh God,” he gasped, “Oh God, oh God, oh God...”

Shut up! Tom snapped. Get a hold of yourself.

“I’m bleeding... I’m bleeding to death,” he gasped.

You will if you just lay there. Get up and get to a hospital. It's easy enough to fix.

"I can't... I can't move... I can't..."

He was quickly slipping into shock. Snape's spell had cut deep into both his arms, severing veins and arteries alike, and perhaps taking some of his bone as well. He couldn't feel the pain, but he knew he should be in agony and the amount of blood that was pouring over his clothes and onto the floor told a story of eminent death.

"This is all your fault," he said, his voice shaky with fear and anger. "If I die... I'm dragging you to hell with me..."

I won't let you die. I still have plans for you.

There was a loud banging at the door, startling them both. "Mr. McGunny! Mr. McGunny, are you alright? Mr. McGunny?"

Relief washed over him. He may yet live.

"Help..."

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St. Mungo's saw its fair share of emergencies at four o'clock in the morning. Admittedly, it was usually during weekends and holidays and involved the over indulgence of alcohol and most of them came through the front door with the assistance of Paramedi-wizards and witches.

Tonight, however, Professor Severus Snape apparated himself straight into the lobby, and from the floor, proceeded to instruct the medi-witches and wizards that came to his aid in exactly what potions he required and in what dosage and order... then proceeded to wail in agony out as they moved him into the nearest vacant room to do just as he said.

Dumbledore's wake up call was unfortunately early. The news Fredric brought him about Harry's most recent sighting was even more unfortunate. Listening to Fredric's account of his debriefing and the latest assumption that Harry Potter was now infected with Lycanthrosis and running north with werewolves, Dumbledore was beginning to think he may have gotten in over his head with his latest project.

Breakfast was a sausage roll and a large coffee from the gas station they next filled up at. The morning was gray and gloomy, and according to the radio storms across the country had caused transportation delays, although in the south it seemed business as usual. Harry fought to stay alert as the hours passed with nothing but the soft tones of the radio, and an endless road stretching out before them.

“Hey...” he said, “What kind of life do you want?”

"I'm curious. What kind of life did you think you could get for selling me?"

“Shit, could you make that sound a little less perverted? Why the hell do you want to know?”

“Just curious.”

“Mmm... nothing fancy. Just... a normal life. A house, a job, school for the kids, some place I can let them run around and not worry about perverts or fanatics. A life where no one tells us where we can live or how, or watches us like some sort of criminals every moment of every day, where we don't have to worry about some bastard deciding on a whim we don't deserve to live and sending Aurors after us. Some place where everyone speaks English would be kind of nice too.”

Harry thought that very reasonable, but not really applicable to him.

“How did you become werewolves?” he found himself asking instead. “For that matter, how did you end up in Germany? You're obviously British.”

Stephen just glowered at the road, but from behind them Sylvia picked up the tale.

“It's kind of a long story. I suppose it's really my fault. We both lived in London, same neighborhood, same primary school, same muggle upbringing. When I turned eight, a neighborhood kid started harassing me. Lifting my skirt and making lewd jokes, and wouldn't leave me alone. I got scared and... sent him away. They found him two days later curled up in a drainage pipe. He couldn't remember how he had gotten there, but I knew I had done it. That day a man came to me from the Ministry of Magic and told me I was witch...”

“Were you really a jerk, even back then?” Harry said, looking at Stephen, who sent him a dirty look.

“That wasn't me, you jackass... that was my brother. My older, creep of a brother.”

“Anyway,” she interrupted before they really went at it, “I was really happy. I thought my life had become a fairy tale and I was going to have adventures and magic and live happily ever after... but it wasn't like that. It wasn't like that at all. By the time I was old enough to go to school, I discovered the wizarding world could be as nasty a place as the

muggle one. I suppose it wasn't that different in most ways. I had friends, classes I love and hated, people who teased me because I was poor, and I worried about my future. By the time I graduated, I decided I didn't want to be a witch anymore. My family was all muggles, all my neighborhood friends too. Besides, Voldemort and his Death Eaters were roaming the country, and I decided I'd rather pretend to be a muggle than risk my life as a muggleborn. I lived with my parents for a while after graduation, and met Stephen."

"My brother used to insist Sylvia was a witch, but no one believed him," Stephen said, smirking a bit as he brought up the memory. "I didn't like my brother at all, so I ended up asking her on a date just to freak him out. Which it did."

"How romantic."

"It was really a lot of fun," Sylvia said. "Although, Stephen didn't think so when I told him the truth. He wouldn't talk to me for a month."

"Hn... then you wouldn't talk to me for two months after I came to my senses and apologized."

"So you got married?" Harry prodded.

"Yeah," Stephen said. "We got married. We got jobs, and our own place. We were broke all the time, but we got by. And then we got the Scare."

"The Scare?"

Sylvia sighed. "That's what they call it now. Just after the Dark Lord finally destroyed the Ministry, there was a period of time called the Scare, when everyone thought the Dark Lord would start to slaughter muggleborns and half-breeds and anyone who sided with the Ministry. Thousands fled believing their lives were in danger. When one of my friends from school warned me that the Death Eaters would use Ministry records to hunt down me and my family, we decided to flee. We spent all the money we had saved up just getting to Germany. We didn't speak any German, so getting a job was tough. We ended up living in the ghettos for British refugees, and I worked at a local

tavern, while Stephen found work at a muggle office as a janitor. We thought we could make it work, just like in London, but...”

“You got bitten by a werewolf?”

“The ghettos were pretty seedy. The local werewolves started to infiltrate them, hoping to find better living conditions because their own parts of the city were even nastier. They’d set up cages in basements and sewers during the transformation, and then just go about their normal lives the rest of the time. It probably would have been fine, but sometimes someone got careless. We were taking a walk together, the closest thing to a date we could afford back then, and we got attacked. It went straight for me. Broke by collarbone and dislocated by arm. I’m not too clear about what happened after that, but...”

“I killed her.”

Stephen said it bluntly, his expression completely blank. The silence that followed convinced Harry not to ask specifics.

“And that’s how you got bit?”

“No. After Sylvia was treated for her wounds, we found out she was pregnant. Our land lord kicked us out, and we ended up living on the streets. We tried living with other werewolves, but they... we couldn’t stand them. They were just a nasty lot, and we knew eventually they’d kill us or worse, so we tried it on our own. John was born, and I made my first mistake. I didn’t take into consideration that he would need to be kept with Sylvia during the transformation. Eight months old, and he took a bite out of me. It was actually a relief. I knew I’d end up dead or turned eventually, and frankly I don’t mind the werewolf stuff so much. Some of it is actually kind of fun. It’s the damn wizards that are such a pain in the ass.”

Harry wondered how they had the other two children. It didn’t seem likely that they would intentionally have more kids into the situation they were in. Unless they ended up doing...it... while they were werewolves. He supposed that was the most logical reason. It wasn’t like a werewolf would ever use a condom in the middle of a

transformation, and why the hell was he thinking about werewolf sex lives exactly?

“So you want to live somewhere without any wizards bugging you?”

Stephen shrugged. "It would definitely be an improvement."

“Mm...” Harry thought on that, but couldn’t imagine pretending to be an average muggle for the rest of his life. It seemed sad and lonely to him, but perhaps it was different when you had a family. It must have been for his parents to have chosen just such a life. A quiet, feminine voice spoke up.

“What about you?” Jane asked. “What kind of life do you want?”

Harry tensed. Stephen glanced at him briefly from the corner of his eye, then back at the road. They all seemed to want to know the answer.

“... I wonder... I guess I want pretty much the same thing, a family, friends, and not having to worry about people trying to hurt us, but... I still want to be a wizard. I understand why you would want to avoid magic. It’s brought you a lot of pain, but for me... I could never leave it behind forever.”

“What’s it like for you? To do magic?” Jane prodded.

“I don’t know... it depends on the magic. Sometimes it makes me feel warm, other times really strong or weightless, and on very rare occasions... like I can feel the universe stretching out around me and its waiting to do exactly as I say. It feels like...”

“God.”

It was Stephen who said it, barely above a whisper. Harry turned to him, but he was still staring out at the road. He didn't say anything further and the car fell into silence once again.

[illegible]

Snape woke up in a tiny room, surrounded by the smell of antiseptic potions and his godchildren's concerned faces. He was bleary from the sleeping potion (which he had not asked for and would be throttling someone over later), but he still managed to hold onto a vague idea of what had happened that night... morning.

Gingerly, he prodded his side with his uninjured hand. It ached, but was hardly the mind numbing agony of before. He lifted his injured hand to examine it, and found it wrapped in a mitten of bandages. Someone had scribbled on top of it, 'Do not use until 10:30 am, Tuesday.'

Well, bother.

"Uncle Severus?"

"Yes, Draco?" he said softly, his voice husky from screaming.

"Are you alright... I mean, aside from the obvious."

"Aside from the obvious, I should be fine. What day and time is it?"

"Monday," Hermione offered, "About three in the afternoon."

"How did you find me?"

"The hospital identified you through BIN*, and found Lucius listed as your emergency contact number. They called the house, and we all came down. Lucius had to go back to work after signing all the paperwork and Narcissa went home to prepare a room for you. The medi-wizard said they could discharge you tomorrow, but you'll have to take it easy for a week. What happened to you?"

Snape closed his eyes, trying to think through the haze. It took him a minute to think how exactly he wanted to handle this.

"Did you tell anyone about our meeting?"

"We only said we went to visit you," Draco said, "And that you had to leave on an errand and sent us home... and really it was very rude of you to just run off without telling us what you learned. Hermione was freaking out."

"I was not freaking out!"

"You kept rambling about-"

"Children, if you would please shut up, your Uncle Severus would greatly appreciate it."

"Sorry," they apologized in unison.

"Good. If anyone asks, I am going to tell them I went out to Knockturn Alley to pick up some potion ingredients for a special project. I was attacked by an unseen assailant, who I managed to fend off but not before sustaining serious injuries. I aparated here for treatment. That's it."

They both nodded, and Hermione asked, "But what really happened? You didn't say anything before you ran off. Did you see who knocked me unconscious? Is that who did this to you? Oh, Severus, you're such a mess. They said you would have died within minutes if..."

She was starting to tear up, guilt and relief rising to the surface, but tried to fight it back. She knew it wouldn't be appreciated. Severus despised emotional displays, sincere or otherwise. Wiping away a few stray tears, she mumbled out a 'sorry'.

Whether it was leniency on his part or he was too tired to care, her godfather didn't bother chastising her.

"McGunny," he said, "That Ravenclaw boy. I confront him, but... there's something wrong with him. I don't know if he's entirely in control of himself."

Draco and Hermione shared a look of surprise. Horace McGunny? They never would have thought of him. The idea of him attacking Hermione was absurd enough on its own, but attacking and nearly

killing their godfather, Dueling Champion and former Death Eater, was just plain inconceivable.

"Do you think it was the Imperius Curse?" she asked.

"No. Whatever it was, it was something more... insidious. If he is still alive, he will need to be thoroughly examined."

Hermione's insides suddenly twisted.

"If he's.... what did you do? He isn't..."

"Dead?" he said plainly, not an ounce of remorse present in his voice. "I don't know. The blow I gave him before I escaped was potentially lethal, but... if I have survived, I suspect he will have managed to as well."

"What are you going to do?"

"Find him. I under estimated him last time, but that will not happen again."

He was tired, but not oblivious, so when his godchildren shared concerned looks he caught them easily enough. It wasn't hard to figure out their thoughts on the matter. In their selfish, loving way they didn't want him pursue this matter further and risk his life yet again. Snape honestly didn't want to either, but he had made a dangerous enemy last night and he couldn't afford to let him run free. If McGunny survived, there was a chance he would come after him on his own to determine what Snape had told others, putting both himself and his godchildren at risk. There was also the simple fact that McGunny had aided the Germans in Harry's abduction, and it was possible he was aiding them still or would cause additional mischief in the future.

At this rate, he might have to tell the Dark Lord, and the consequences for that would be dire. He had hidden some very significant facts for over six months, and even now may have allowed a suspected traitor escape. He needed to find the boy, find the truth, and then find a way out of this mess.

The 'old fashion' solution was the most obvious, but depending on what was making McGunny a psychotic encyclopedia of Dark Spells that might not be the best solution.

And frankly, it would be a pity to have to kill him. He was bright, sensible, and competent. The world needed more people like him, and he didn't like the idea of him increasing the ratio of stupid people to smart ones. It was high enough without his interference.

"Get me a medi-wizard. I need him to write some prescriptions for me, and then check out of here."

Both children opened their mouths to object, but he cut them off.

"That wasn't a suggestion. Either do it or I'll do it myself."

Draco let out an annoyed huff, but stalked out to do as he was told. Hermione just stood there, a horrified look on her face.

"What are you going to do?"

"My dear, the answer to that isn't going to make you any happier."

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"These tidings bode ill..." Voldemort murmured to himself, looking over the latest report Lucius had sent him. Severus had nearly been killed the night before. A bit of bad luck at any other time, but right now Germany was starting to behave strangely. He would consider these events unrelated, if it weren't for the fact that his protégé had made a brief but impressionable appearance around the same time in Germany. According to Morgan's spies, the boy had been found, but escaped not only his captures but the Aurors as well. The search that followed had yet to yield results, and more importantly, the Canis family hadn't reported in. Were they dead or merely attempting to flee after their failure? Either way Harry was in the wind and there was no telling when or if he would reappear.

It felt as if forces were at work protecting Harry, and that wouldn't be surprising in the least. He had made a powerful ally in the goddess Madris, and even now might have moved out of his sphere of influence. If the Hierophant card was anything to go by, he would have to accept that he didn't have as much control over Harry's destiny as he originally thought.

Ugh.

He needed to stop thinking about it. There were other things he did have control over that he should be utilizing right now. Germany was frantically searching for Harry, and in doing so had closed their borders, and more than likely irritated more than a few of its neighbors. It was a prime opportunity to write Queen Ophelia of what he had learned. She likely knew just as much if not more than he did, but the exchange of information was as symbolic as it was practical.

They were 'friends' now, and friends share gossip.

While he was slowly strengthening his alliance with France's queen, he could begin his work weakening Germany's alliances with its allies. The Netherlands, Belgium, Denmark, and Luxemburg, proud but small countries that had been held in a financial stalemate with Germany for decades, unable to afford to break away, yet unable to grow with the German Ministry's ever growing list of trade restrictions and tariffs. Suggesting an open trade market with them might be exactly what they needed to break that stalemate. He already had his people working on several trade proposals which would be sent out by the end of the week.

If everything went according to plan, Sweden, Finland, and Norway would open their borders if only to remain competitive with their southern neighbors. Spain and Portugal could go either way, but sharing a border with France made it more likely they would follow their example. Italy was a hopeless case. They had hated the British long before he had come to power and nothing had improved the situation since then. Eastern Europe was if-y, but they were also in an economic slump, meaning they had a lot of unemployed young men, which more often than not spelled a revolution. A revolution the Dark Lord wasn't opposed to stirring up for his own benefit.

But that was all years down the road. Right now, he needed to focus on France and Germany, and Britain itself. He had already scheduled a press release for Seibligg's latest blunder, informing them that Harry had runaway from them, and that the Minister was trying to blame 'Death Eaters'. He would ask them all to 'pray' for Harry's safe return. It would be the perfect opportunity to gauge his protégé's current popularity, as well as the public's outrage at Germany.

Everything was falling into place, except for Harry himself, and perhaps that was just how it was meant to be.

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Harry woke when the car stopped. There was a moment of terror, an instant of knowing he was in danger and had left himself vulnerable. He started violently, nearly dropping his wand.

The world snapped into focus. He was still in the car with the werewolves. Stephen was still at the wheel, and Sylvia was still in back with the children, who had switched seats at some point so that Jane was now napping on the floor of the car.

Stupid! He snarled to himself. He had fallen asleep. Stephen could have snatched his wand out of his hand at any time. Why hadn't he? Had he not realized Harry was sleeping? Unlikely. The man saw everything.

"Where are we?"

The car had stopped at the side of the road. On either side of them stood trees, old trees, thick and tall, reaching high into the air. Flowers crowded along the roadside, whites and purples and yellows, gradually slipping into the forest. The place gave him an odd feeling.

"About two miles from the next town," Stephen said. "You need to decide now if you're going to stay with us for the full moon or get out there. I can't guarantee your safety either way."

"Tonight is the full moon?"

"Yes."

"What would you have done if we made it to the port?"

"Not that it's any of your business... but our contact there was supposed to have Wolfsbane potion."

Harry's first thought was that Stephen was too damn trusting. The 'potion' could just as easily been poison. His second thought was that he was too damn jaded. His third was that he didn't know what would happen if were left around muggles during the full moon. He would be completely uninhibited. Magic would be inevitable, and if he did it in front of anyone, things could get very bad very quickly in many different ways. Spending the night with werewolves, however, presented more obvious pitfalls.

Pitfalls he already had experience dealing with.

"I'll go with you."

Stephen gave him a weird look. "You're a lunatic."

"The word 'lunatic' has its root in the Latin word for 'moon', you know, so you're absolutely correct."

"Whatever, don't come crying to me if we eat you."

They stopped at the town anyway to get some food, gas, and a map, and Harry found out exactly where they were. The Black Forest. Arguably, the most magical forest in the world. Nearly 4,600 sq mi of mountains and forests and rivers that the muggles knew about, and another eight or nine thousand sq mi that only wizarding kind did. Well, wizarding kind and the fae.

They were at the north end of the forest range, and drove for an hour on the mountain highway, before turning off onto a dirt road. After forty-five minutes of squeezing between the encroaching trees and being tossed about by the rocky, uneven road, they couldn't go any

further, and got out to walk for another forty minutes. Only Harry brought supplies. The werewolves would have no need of shelter or food once the transformation was upon them. The forest would provide.

They had wanted to bring chains to secure themselves from running off and tearing apart any hapless hikers or from getting separated once the sun rose, but Harry had convinced them he could create a ward much more effective and a lot less damaging to them. While the werewolves waited anxiously, the sky slowly beginning to dim as it sun settled in the west, Harry walked a large circle around their 'camp', writing runes in the air with a fiery 'Flagrante' spell.

He had the very distinct impression that he was being watched. By what exactly, he didn't know, but he didn't think it was anything... human. Fairies, he thought, but couldn't be certain. If they didn't want to be seen, he wouldn't see them. If they did want to be seen... he might be in a bit of trouble.

He was a bit old to be spirited away, but that didn't mean they wouldn't take advantage of him being right in the middle of their territory. The Black Forest was notoriously dangerous due to their abundance. Handfuls of people, wizard and muggle alike, disappeared in there without a trace every year. The werewolves would be fine. As far as fairies were concerned, they were already apart of their realm, and didn't bother with them.* So ten minutes before sunset, he magicked himself a platform up in the trees, and climbed up, then placed additional protective wards around himself.

Then it was only a matter of waiting.

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"Mom, will you relax? I'm fine," McGunny assured his mother, who had been bursting into tears randomly since she had arrived at his hospital room. He understood it was her love for him that made her so upset, but it was starting to get tiresome.

St. Hababa's was a teaching hospital not far from the university, and therefore the first place his landlady, Mrs. Anselfeldt, had thought to take him after finding him a bloody mess on the floor of his room. One of the tenants was a medical student and had managed to stop the bleeding long enough to get him there, and after that things had gone fairly smoothly as far as a rather shaken McGunny could tell. It was his first time being critically injured by a curse, so he had no other incident to compare it to.

They had made him swallow a lot of potions and dipped his lacerated arms into vats of warm ooze, all of which left him numb and disoriented, but blessedly free of pain and with more blood inside of him than out.

A Sentinel had come to question him about what appeared to be a rather nasty assault. McGunny had told him he didn't recognize the assailant. The man had been crazed, ranting about him owing him money, and then started tossing out spells before finally apparating away. He said he thought it was some sort of addict high or drunk on some sort of potion. The Sentinel hadn't believed him, but since McGunny was the obvious victim he wasn't in a position to accuse him of anything.

"I know, I know, it's just..." she sniffled. "When I went to your apartment to get your clothes and wand, I saw all of that blood... It's just too horrible. You could have died and I just can't... I just can't..."

"It's fine, mom. I'm fine. Why don't you go fire call dad and the kids, and let them know I'm okay? They're probably worried."

"Ah, you're right. I'm being selfish making them wait. I'll be back in a few minutes, alright?"

"No worries, I'm not going anywhere," he assured her, managing a little smile as she walked out the door. When she was out of sight, he let his smile drop, and climbed out of bed. He grabbed the bag she had brought with his change of clothes, and after checking the hallway, walked away.

He didn't know if Professor Snape was dead or alive or how he had found out about his involvement with Harry's abduction, but he couldn't risk sticking around for another confrontation. The chances were high that someone like Snape would have informed someone else of where he was going last night and why.

He stepped into an empty patient room and changed into his street clothes, then walked straight out into the lobby, passed the check-in desk, and out into London. After that he apparated into the muggle part of the city, inside the attic of pub he had never been in. Tom was guiding him now. This was all Tom's fault, but that didn't change the fact he was the only one who could save him, even if it was only to save his own incorporeal ass.

You'll like Germany, the evil spirit purred, There's a lot of history there, and good food.

"Fuck you. I may have killed my potions teacher because of you."

Believe me when I say, he had it coming.

"You've ruined my life."

I'll make you a better life. It'll be fun. Harry will be there.

"You leave him alone, you freaky pervert."

Now you're just being childish. You always knew it could come to this. You should be thankful that you are even alive.

As annoying as Tom was, he was right about that. He was thankful to be alive. He would be more thankful if he knew he was going to stay that way.

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Harry watched in child-like fascination as the Canis family began to transform beneath him. He was too high up for a really good view, even with his improved vision, but it was still mesmerizing to watch as

smooth naked flesh turned black with coarse hair, and bones rearranged themselves in painful snapping sounds. It all took less than a minute, but it left an excited thrill in Harry.

This was the first time he had been with werewolves during a transformation since the summer ritual. He rocked himself anxiously as he watched them gather together below him, sniffing and licking at each other in greeting.

He wanted to go down and say hello too.

As if he had heard the boy's thought, the alpha male suddenly looked up at him and gave short, querying bark. Harry made a little whine, but didn't go down. He wasn't afraid of the wolves, but the little creatures that were starting to close in on his perch.

"Komm doch herunter," a wood sprite said, hanging above him from a higher branch like bat, his stick-like fingers curled under his pointed chin. Black, pupil-less eyes smiled down at him, and Harry fought the urge to smile back.

"You'll kidnap me," he pointed out.

The sprite shrugged. "Probably."

"I'm always getting kidnapped. It's no fun at all."

"Then they obviously ain't do'n it right."

Laughter broke out in the surrounding trees, but in the darkness of the branches Harry was having difficulty finding the sources. Maybe it was the trees themselves.

"Won't work, won't work," someone chirped, and a moment later another fae appeared, a body of pheasant and the human-ish head hopped up and down at the far end of the branch, causing his platform to pitch to the side a bit. "Too much like the serpent king, hiss hiss, slither slither. No time for wine, food, or women. Sounds the war drums, drums, drum, drums. All blood and no battle makes Tom a dull boy."

More laughter through out the trees, and Harry found himself getting annoyed. He enjoyed a good laugh or too, but these fools had the humor of drunks and babies.

"If you're going to laugh at nothing, do it somewhere else."

More laughter this time, and it didn't stop. It dragged on for several minutes, grating at his nerves, until at last he flung out his wand and sent out a wind hex, shaking the trees violently. The fae hiding there let out terrified shrieks, and a few of them even fell, although not very far. Most of the tree dwelling fae had wings or gliders of some kind.

"Serves them right. Obnoxious little runts," a voice said in English.

Harry looked down at his side, and found a raven standing next to him. Inside the ward.

"How did you get in here?" Harry asked curiously, not in the least afraid. In fact, the higher the moon got the less concerned about the fae he was becoming.

"I'm not a fairy. Those wards don't work on me," the raven said, his voice deep and smooth, strange for bird known for its high and coarse calls.

"What are you then?"

The raven fluffed up its feathers and then hopped up to a higher branch so they could stare more directly at each other.

"I'm a familiar. My name is Bobby."

That made Harry grin. "Bobby?"

"Well, technically it's Bobitimus Tarotte IV, but that comes off as a bit pretentious, don't you think?"

"Quite. I'm Harold James Potter, but everyone calls me-"

“Harry. Yes, yes, I know about you. Everyone knows about you.”

Harry tilted his head, curiously. “Who’s everyone and how do they know?”

“The faery folk. The Seele Court, and the UnSeelie too. Madris’ people have been gloating about you for months. It’s very annoying.”

“Are you a part of the Fairy Courts?”

“No, no, didn’t I already tell you? I’m a familiar, not a fairy. Very big difference. They’d just wish they could get their hands on me.”

Harry was about to ask his newest guest a few more questions, but he was interrupted by the sound of a fiddle. As he listened, a flute of some kind joined in, and then a drum. Dancing music. Harry’s foot began to tap in rhythm.

“What is that?”

“Wedding party,” Bobby explained, “Mountain elves. You should go. A wizard would make the party complete. They won’t try and kidnap you there. It would be rude.”

“I haven’t been invited,” Harry said, although he was already thinking about it. He wanted to see the other fairy folk. He had never read or heard of a satisfying description of them. Already he could tell they had good music.

“Of course you have. Anyone who can hear the music is invited. That’s why they play it.”

“Well, if that’s the case.” He tucked his wand into his sleeve, and proceeded to climb down the tree. The horde of little creatures started to climb down after him, blocking any possible attempt to return to his perch, but he wasn’t interested in it any longer. He wanted to have fun tonight.

The werewolves were waiting for him when he reached the ground. He smiled at them. They moved forward as one, and he greeted them

with his open hands, rubbing their large furry heads behind the ears and down their backs. The fur was coarse, just as he remembered Remus' being, yet soft in the undercoat. The werewolf pups jumped up on their hind legs, begging for his attention. It was a pity he didn't have more hands.

He moved forward and they followed after him or, in Stephen's case, wandered ahead in search of potential threats. Surrounded by them, Harry could feel their magic and their sheer physical presence, rippling against his senses, smelling of earthy things. Moss and flowers and musk and old blood. It was a homey, comforting smell.

They moved to the edge of the ward, and with a flick of his wrist the fiery rune floating in the air vanished. He had no intention of leaving his friends behind for this night. They followed the music deeper into the woods and higher up the mountain and Harry started to sway and move his feet to the music. Meanwhile, other fae began to gather. Not just the foolish tree dwellers either. White fairies, wood elves, High anytas, nymphes, satyrs, centaurs, harpies, horn gnomes, and peoples who appeared completely human, but whom Harry could sense were not. They all moved through the trees, on feet, wings, paws, and hooves, some dancing, some gliding, some cart wheeling, dressed in the finest silks and gold, in furs, in leaves, in absolutely nothing at all.

The music led them to a clearing, fairy lights floated everywhere, shining all around them like white Christmas lights. Harry stopped for a moment to admire it, and Bobby landed on his shoulder.

"Have fun," the raven said, "Just don't accept anything anyone offers you. It'll make for a very long morning after."

With that, Bobby flew from his shoulder, scattering a small flock of pixies, who chattered at him angrily. The wedding itself must have occurred earlier, for there was nothing ritualized in the party to suggest a ceremony. The bride and groom, mountain elves who appeared nearly human but for their glittering white limestone skin, danced at the center, their union marked in the extravagant brilliance of their Mithril adorned wedding attire and by the tender joy in their eyes as they stared at one another.

Very few of the people there spoke English or even German, but somehow Harry was able to convey everything he wanted to say in gestures and no one seemed confused. In many ways it wasn't that different from a werewolf celebration. Everyone danced and played, entertainers who were guests or guests who entertained moved about the clearing, charming and surprising them with their talents. Harry nearly busted a gut laughing as one elderly looking gnome folded up pieces of paper, like origami, and his creations proceeded to argue you with one another about who was best until their argument became so heated they all burst into flames. Another creature that Harry couldn't identify, struck up a conversation, and every time he looked away and then looked back something about him had change. The first time, only his eyes changed color, and Harry was certain he only imagined the difference. The next time he suddenly had a mustache. The third his eye brows were missing. By the sixth time, he had become a she, and Harry ran off before things got really weird. Harry ended up playing a few tricks of his own. Setting off fireworks from his wand and changing people clothes different colors were simple tricks, but it amused the simpler fairies plenty.

There was food and drink, which Harry reluctantly declined, and dancing that Harry did not. The elves seemed to find him particularly amusing, and since many of them were blessedly shorter than him, he found plenty of partners.

The werewolves lingered around the fringes of the party, playing with other werewolves and fairy canids and sneaking off with pieces of the food when no one was there to stop them.

The night passed in the simple celebration of life, and for a few hours Harry forgot about his past, his present, and his uncertain future and lived in the moment. The beautiful, beautiful moment.

The moon settled behind the mountains before the sun rose, and as it did, Harry felt his energy wane. He rested against a tree on the edge of the clearing, and quietly watched the rest of the party from there. The Canis family had found a grassy hill to curl up against, and were fast asleep by the time their bodies reverted back to their human form,

oblivious to the revelry surrounding them. Harry too must have dozed off, because when Bobby alighted on his shoulder yet again, the wedding party was gone and only an old crone was left sitting across from him.

He stared at her for a long time, wondering if he were dreaming or if she were real and the fairy party had been a dream. She was rough and brittle being, like an old dead tree, her eyes and nose and mouth little more than knobs and gnarls in her bark-like skin. Indeed, if he were not looking right at her he would have mistaken her for deceased shrubbery.

"Her name is Cucuchoin Anan," Bobby told him, his voice soft and dreamlike, adding to the uncertainty of his wakefulness. "She has a message from Madris."

Harry suddenly sat up straighter, his attention caught. When the old crone spoke it was wheezy and barely discernable.

"Hywaa nabucuri nas ni d'hal."

He waited for her to continue, but she said nothing more, merely stood and moved off into the trees, slower than seemed conceivable. It took her nearly three minutes to move two feet. Harry turned a confused look to the raven, who looked extremely amused.

"I don't suppose that made any sense to you?"

"Certainly. It's very basic crone."

Harry looked at him expectantly. Bobby just preened his feathers.

"Aren't you going to tell me what she said?"

"Aren't you going to ask?"

"I wonder if ravens taste as bad as crow," Harry muttered to himself. Bobby just laughed, and told him.

“It’s time to go home.”

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BIN stands for Blood Identification Network. Works like a muggle DNA database. No machines involved, but a person does have to register with the Network to be quickly identified, and then additional information can be gathered such as medical records and emergency contact information. All Court officials and many public service jobs require this registration and Snape is no exception. There are other spells and potions that will identify a person using their blood or hair, but they’re less reliable or take longer.

In my universe, werewolves are technically a sort of fae. They are humans who are physically altered by a fairy curse, and as a result become ‘pagan’ not by choice but by the corruption of their spirit. Sirius told Harry that he and Remus will never go to heaven and so became pagans in a previous chapter, and this why.

And yes, Harry and Voldemort reunite in the next chapter.

Book V

Chapter 7: Kings & Princes

It occurred to Snape after leaving the hospital that perhaps his physician wasn't a complete idiot when he said it would be unwise to move for another day, and then as little as possible for a week. Whatever internal damage he had acquired due to McGunny's spell had been repaired, but it certainly didn't feel that way as he walked through the city streets. His insides felt bruised, and with every step he could feel each individual organ and muscle throb.

He had pocketed the Pain Relief potion prescribed to him without taking any, knowing once he did his investigative ability would evaporate and he may as well just lay around like a log, just as the medi-wizard had suggested. If the pain proved just as mentally debilitating as the potion he might consider taking some later.

"What's happened?" he asked a young man, a student most likely, crowded outside McGunny's room in the hall. There were nearly half a dozen other tenants there as well, looking curiously at the open door, but kept at bay by the glowing green line just outside of it. Inside, he could see a pair of Sentinels wandering around the room, taking pictures and collecting evidence.

"Someone got attacked this morning. Really early this morning. Woke up half the building."

"Really?" Snape said, feigning surprise. "Was anybody hurt?"

Another person, possibly the young man's girlfriend, eagerly butted in.

"Yeah, the guy who lived here was really messed up. The landlady had to take him to the hospital, but he should be okay. It's a crazy world though. I've been here for two years and nothings like this has happened before, and here this poor guy wasn't even here a week and it happened to him. Isn't it a crying shame?"

"Quite," Snape agreed solemnly. "Perhaps some of us should send him some flowers. Do you know what hospital he was sent to?"

“That’s good idea. I think he was taken to the university hospital. It’s the closest. You could always ask the landlady to be sure. She should be in her office.”

“Thank you, I’ll go do that.”

He did not go to question the landlady, who unlike the young gawkers would know he wasn’t another tenant and likely have been suspicious, but went straight to the university hospital. The nurse at the reception desk told him quite plainly that Mr. McGunny was not there, but something about her nervous, almost embarrassed expression told him that at one point he had been. Checking the sign-in roster proved that Mrs. Trudy McGunny had arrived to visit her son earlier that morning. She had not signed out yet.

When the nurse was once again distracted, he continued his search in the halls. It didn’t take long to find what he was looking for. The patient observation floor was nearly full, medi-wizards, nurses, interns, patients, and visitors roamed the crowded hallways, making it simple for him go unnoticed as he read the names of the medical files sitting in the slots beside every door. Within minutes, he found a file with McGunny’s name printed on it. The door was already ajar and he could hear voices coming from inside.

“He is not lost. For heaven’s sake, he’s not an idiot,” a woman said, frustrated and impatient. “He could have easily asked someone to help him find his way back. It’s been over two hours.”

“Er, yes, well... he was pretty heavily medicated. He probably stepped outside for something and got confused. I’m sure we’ll find him napping in one of the other patient rooms or something similarly harmless. Don’t worry-“

“You keep telling me not to worry, but what else am I suppose to do? My son was attacked last night and now he’s missing, and you expect me to not worry?”

“Madam, please-“

Snape walked away, cursing. He had missed his chance, by two hours apparently. His next stop would have been the boy's family home, but obviously that lead was already bust. Just as well, it saved him a trip to Salisbury.

He took a short break for lunch, ate some very bland soup (the only thing he didn't think would cause him agony to digest), took a few sips of pain potion, and tried to think of what to do next. He ended up returning to McGunny's apartment, by now devoid of investigators and gawkers, broke the ward to get inside (he had been to enough crime scenes to know how), and looked for any clues of where the young man may have gone or what might have been wrong with him.

He searched the most obvious places, the desk, chest, drawers, and closet, but came up with nothing. The only even slightly questionable thing was the closet, which had been expanded into a little sun room with a large skylight. There was only one feeble little plant in it, but if McGunny had only been there a few days he probably hadn't had the time to get any more. He was just starting to search the floorboards and the wall panels for hiding places, when it struck him.

Why would McGunny bother making a sun room for a plant he could just as easily have placed on his desk?

He went back to investigate the plant.

It was just a tiny thing, barely a sprig with two tri-lobed leaves, not that dissimilar from a maple. It was not a maple though. In fact, Snape couldn't identify it at all, and being a potions master with a rather vast mental encyclopedia of plants, that was a bit suspicious. He gave it a cursory sniff to see if he could identify it by smell. He cringed away. It reeked of spoiled blood.

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Harry waited till late that morning to wake up Stephen and his family, tossing them their clothes and kicking them lightly on the feet. The

look Stephen gave him when he finally opened his eyes promised death. Harry just smiled down at him, cheekily.

“Wake up, Sunshine. It’s time to get dressed.”

It suddenly occurred to Stephen that he was very naked... and so was his wife.

“Turn around, you little perv!”

Harry snorted.

“Like I haven’t seen naked people before. I’ve spent the night at werewolf colonies during the full moon. Hundreds of naked people all over the place.”

Stephen chuckled a rock at him, which Harry avoided easily. “Alright, alright. Just get dressed. I need to talk to you about something.”

Harry moved a ways down the clearing to a nest of boulders, and sat himself on top of one. Bobby appeared from out of the tree line and settled himself beside him. The raven had been hovering all morning, and Harry wasn’t so sure what to make of it. Surely his master would be expecting him back once Harry had received his message from Madris. Speaking of which...

“Who is your master, Bobby? Were they at the party last night?”

The raven tilted his head curiously at him. “My master is dead. Dead for a long time.”

“I’m sorry,” Harry said sincerely. “But why are you helping me?”

“Because I choose to.”

“Yes, but why?”

He tilted his head in the other direction, and Harry got the impression he was supremely amused. “You’ll make a fine new master. If you don’t get blown up.”

The young Gryffindor blinked at him. Oh no, most definitely not...

"Listen, Bobby, you're really interesting and all, but I've already got an owl... and a snake...and a godfather who can turn into dog. I don't think I can handle another familiar."

Bobby seemed to consider this for a moment then gave a little birdy nod.

"Okay. Then you can be my familiar. Ha ha."

Before Harry could protest, the raven had already flown off, laughing to himself as he went. The boy shook his head and wondered if the bird wasn't channeling Fred or George. A minute or so later, Stephen made an appearance, not looking any more happy to be awake than before.

"Where the fuck are we? What happened to the ward you put up? Don't tell me that was just a bunch of BS."

Something about irritating Stephen amused Harry or perhaps he was just feeling really good at the moment, but he couldn't keep the smile off his face.

"It's a bit complicated, but you don't have to get upset. You all weren't in any danger. I think you actually had a pretty good time. I know I did."

"Would you just spit it out already? This mysterious crap is just making you come off as a pervert. What did you want to talk about?"

Harry decided to have mercy on him... well, that and he didn't want to piss off the guy who was going to be taking him home.

"I think I'd like to go back to Britain after all."

Stephen just stared at him for a minute then glared suspiciously.

"Seriously?"

“Seriously.”

“What made you change your mind? Isn’t the Dark Lord trying to kill you or something?”

“I don’t know, but I know it’s safe enough for me to return now.”

“How do you know that?”

Harry really couldn’t help himself. It was just too perfect.

“A little birdie told me so.”

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McGunny was scared of muggles. Strange as that was, with all his power and pragmaticism, it was now an undeniable truth. For all of his life, a muggle had always been nothing more than an accepted idea, like great white sharks and Polynesians. Something you knew existed, but would never meet. Standing in the middle of a muggle department store, in the middle of an enormous building called a ‘mall’, surrounded by hundreds of these ‘accepted ideas’, McGunny was very close to having a panic attack.

At any moment he expected the notice-me-not charm on himself to fail and for dozens of people to suddenly turn to him and shout ‘DEMON!’ Exactly what would happen after than, McGunny wasn’t entirely sure. Logically, he could just apparate away and that would be the end of it, but for the life of him he couldn’t bring himself to calm down. Tom was getting very irritated with him.

Honestly, the spirit grumbled, you’re being ridiculous. Being scared of muggles is like being scared of boggarts. They’re only scary if you imagine they are.

“Yes, well I wouldn’t feel very comfortable walking through store full of boggarts either. Just tell me what we need so I can get out of here.”

You tell me. We're looking for your clothes.

Very true. They had already picked up a traveler's trunk from another store, and were now wandering around the largest clothing store McGunny had ever seen in order to fill it. The wizarding world have very few large corporations, and those few corporations were centered around specific products not the stores that sold them. McGunny hadn't been in a store not owned by a single family his entire life. Walking around the monstrosity known as 'Macy's' was dizzying.

It didn't help that he only recognized about half the items being sold, and that only twenty-five percent of the clothing being sold there would be anything a wizard would be caught dead wearing (although the women's section proved considerably more aesthetic if not for the complete lack of modesty in the juniors department). It drew out an already nerve-wracking experience.

Guilt, however, never factored in. He couldn't find it in himself to feel bad about the actual items he was stealing, because as much junk as this place had, he didn't think anyone would notice a couple of missing socks.

If it weren't for all the muggles, the Ravenclaw thought he might actually have enjoyed himself. He walked all over the place, sometimes picking up something he would wear and sometimes to just stare and wonder at myriad of strange items scattered around the store. What the hell was a camcorder anyway?

Another feeble attempt by muggles to be more like wizards, Tom sneered. McGunny didn't even bother to point out that since muggles supposedly didn't believe in wizards anymore, his comment didn't make much sense.

"How long should I pack for?" he asked instead.

A very long time.

What else had he been expecting?

Chief Sentinel Andreas Morgan never really left the office. It followed him where ever he went, and home was no exception. Or rather it followed him to Erica's house. As far as he was concerned, the office was his home, and the only room in the London flat he shared with his wife he truly felt comfortable in was the study he set up solely for that purpose.

“Lydia and I have absolutely nothing in common,” Ira said, joining them in the dining room. “Good afternoon, mother. Good afternoon, Andreas.”

“Oh really, what do you have against Lydia? Certainly, she’s better company than your bugs.”

“Honestly! No man, no friends, and only creepy crawlies for company. You’re turning into a-”

Riiiiinnnggg.

Everyone in the room gave a startled jolt, and Erica dropped her cup, spilling coffee into her egg salad. The matron of the house let out an irritated huff.

"I hate that thing! It scares me every time."

Riiiiinnnggg.

Morgan, however, felt a jolt of excitement. There were only a handful of witches and wizards who even knew how to work the muggle telephone, and only three of them knew his telephone number. He stood from the table and went to his study.

Riiiiinnnggg.

The phone was in the old style, black and elegantly carved. He picked up the receiver and placed it to his ear, mentally reminding himself not to shout into it.

"Hello?"

"Good afternoon."

Morgan stiffened, instantly recognizing the voice on the other line.

"Mr. Potter."

"... Chief Sentinel Morgan, isn't it? I would have thought someone else would be manning the Court phones."

"How did you get this number?"

"A mutual friend. He's here with me now if you want to speak to him, but I'm afraid we don't have much time to spare. I only had enough change for a five minute call."

"Where are you?"

"Some place I won't be in about five minutes. I only called to tell you I'm on my way. I'll leave it to you to inform all relevant parties."

Morgan couldn't help but be surprised. The boy intended to return on his own? He wanted to ask why, but then thought better of it.

"Do you require any assistance?"

"Just tell me how to get back into the country. I'll take care of the rest myself."

If only his own men were so efficient.

"Are you familiar with the 'Chunnel'?"

"Yes."

"That's your best bet. It's the only way you can get directly into Britain from the mainland. Otherwise, you'll have to take a boat to Ireland, and take the floo network from there. Any above ground travel into Britain is likely to kill you."

"Good to know."

"There's something else. If you take the Chunnel, you'll have to get to France. Assuming you can do that, things get tricky. France doesn't allow the use of unregistered wands, and they have means of finding people who use them. If you use your wand, an alarm will go out and you'll find yourself in the custody of the French Wizarding Guard. I have no way of knowing if they'll return you to Britain or send you back to Germany, and I would rather not find out, so once you cross the border you can't use your wand for anything, not to hide yourself or shrink your luggage or fend off muggles. Nothing."

"...Shit. We'll need to buy tickets... no we're not robbing a bank in Germany...because my guardian believes in corporal punishment... no, you would not like him. He'd blame you for corrupting me and turn you into a rug...I don't know Noah, he'd probably turn you into a hat or something... Shut up, Bobby..." Who else was there? Their replies were too far away to make out. When Potter spoke again it was directed at Morgan. "That may be a bit problematic. We're essentially broke here. Don't suppose I could borrow a couple hundred Euros?"

No, never mind. We'll figure something out. I'll contact you again later."

"Potter-"

The line went dead. The cheeky little bugger. Morgan almost smiled, but movement out of the corner of his eyes stole the opportunity. Erica and Ira were standing at the study door, both wide-eyed and perfectly silent. He had forgotten how quiet women could be when they wanted to snoop. He glowered at both of them.

"What exactly did you hear?"

For once, Erica couldn't seem to find anything to say and just sort of floundered for a bit. Ira, however, was more curious than cautious.

"That was Harry Potter, wasn't it? And he's trying to get back home... on his own... without magic... and probably a lot of people after him."

So they heard everything. He seriously hoped that wouldn't prove problematic later. He didn't like messing with people's memories, particularly in his own house. It tended to make people flakey or paranoid.

"Essentially," he said darkly, pleased when she flinched. "Since you seem so interested in matters of national security, you can assist me. I need to go to talk to the Dark Lord. I want you to find Professor Snape and inform him there has been a development in the Potter case. He'll know where he needs to go."

She looked ready to protest, but then thought better of it. In all honesty, she had nothing better to do. And she was interested. Very, very interested. Perhaps if she helped now, he would tell her more later... or maybe Snape would tell her something. Impossible wretch though he was.

"Very well. Where can I find him?"

"He should still be at St. Mungo's. He was attacked last night in London. If he's already checked out, he should be at Malfoy Manor.

Erica, you stay here and wait by the phone. If it rings, take a message. And whatever you do, don't give them your real name."

Ira frowned at the mention of an attack on the professor, but Morgan was already heading towards the living room where the floo was located, ignoring Erica's protests and unlikely to answer her questions. She decided Snape had probably said something obnoxious to the wrong person and got into a tussle. It couldn't have been too bad if he was supposed to check out today.

"Well, that's that," she sighed. "I best do as he says. I'll see you later, mother."

She kissed her still flustered mother on the cheek, and headed for the door. She hated the floo and the hospital wasn't far, so she decided to walk. Half an hour later she walked into St Mungo's main lobby and learned Snape had already checked himself out. She apparated to Nottingham, and from there hired a carriage to take her to the Malfoy Estate, inaccessible by apparation or floo.

A house elf greeted her at the gates, and once she told him her business, it disappeared with a loud 'pop'. A few minutes later, the gates opened, and the carriage brought her to the manor house. Narcissa Malfoy met her on the marble steps personally, and this made Ira more than a little nervous. It was no secret that Lady Malfoy could be down right dangerous if you got on her bad side.

"Ms. Beadle," she greeted stiffly with a slight inclination of her head. Ira made a subtle curtsy.

"Lady Malfoy, thank you for seeing me."

The older woman dismissed her greeting with a wave of the hand. "I am afraid your errand is in vain. Professor Snape is not here."

Now Ira was getting frustrated. She had spent nearly an hour trying to find him, and he just didn't seem to want to be found. Not by her at least. She did her best to keep the frustration from her voice when addressing her host.

"I see. Do you know where he might be?"

Now here Lady Malfoy looked annoyed, and Ira wondered if she weren't in trouble.

"On some stupid, manly mission of revenge, no doubt. Couldn't even wait for his hand to heal, the fool."

Ira didn't know what to say to that, so she kept quiet. The older woman let out an annoyed sighed. "He'll stumble back here at some point. Would you like me to leave him a message?"

"Ah...yes. Would you tell him Chief Sentinel Morgan needs to speak with him as soon as possible?"

"Can I ask what about?" There was a definite glint of curiosity, but Ira wasn't sure if Morgan would care if she knew or not.

"He didn't tell me," she said, and Lady Malfoy seemed to accept that. It wasn't like Ira had any business know anything about what her stepfather did. "I'm sorry to have taken up your time. Thank you again."

She walked back to the carriage, unaware of Lady Malfoy's speculative look as she climbed inside and out of view. As the carriage left the Malfoy Estate, Ira was stuck with the question of what to do now. Andreas had intended for her to find Snape, but he couldn't have known the man would prove so difficult. Unfortunately, she had no way of contacting her stepfather about her difficulties, and this matter was definitely an important one.

Harry Potter was trying to come home. The thought of the child attempting it all on his own, was both frightening and captivating. What kind of a person must he be to do that? She, like so many of her fellow countrymen, had read the papers and heard of his many fantastical exploits, and she often felt like a school girl reading a favorite book. One where the hero triumphs against impossible odds and gets the girl at the end. Her brief visit with the boy's guardian had shaken her image of the boy, however. The guardian had laughed. Not a cruel laugh really, but a very tired one, tinged with irony. What

did Snape know that she didn't? Afterwards, she had started to think about it, really think about it, and realized something.

Harry Potter was surrounded by people who terrified Ira. Lord Voldemort wasn't even the worst of them, and he was formidable all his own. There was also Bellatrix Lestrange, Lucius Malfoy, various people who tried to kill him, and werewolves and others whose vicious reputations preceded them. The more she thought about it, the more impressed she was with him. If she had been in his position, she would have curled up on the floor at St. Mungo's by now.

And he was coming back to that. He was willingly and intentionally coming back to that.

If he was willing to that, Ira decided, the least she could do was make sure his guardian knew about it. She needed to try something clever and unexpected. Something Harry Potter might do.

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"Not far now, my darling familiar," Bobby sang as he soared beside Harry's window. Inky black feathers glistened in the afternoon sun, guiding them through the plains to a place not listed on any map.

"Bobby, for the last time, I'm not your familiar. And are you sure it's still there?"

"Yes, yes. I know these things. The fae only wish they could get their hands on me for all these things I know."

Harry hoped that was true, because as far as he could tell Bobby was leading them absolutely nowhere. The road had turn to gravel miles back, and he was starting feel the beginnings of car sickness again. At least they were out of the mountains, the land spreading out around in vast fields, broken by the occasional wooded glen and shallow river that flowed down from the mountains. The air here had the cleanliness of the mountains, but not the eerie feeling the fae of the forest left on their lands.

"I cannot believe we're following a bird," Stephen muttered, for probably the hundredth time. The werewolf's dislike of magical beings, his wife notwithstanding, left him leery of Bobby. The raven's insistence that it knew a secret route to get passed the wards surrounding Germany made him downright reticent. However, they were following Harry, the only one who genuinely seemed to want to help them and actually had the capability of doing so.

And Harry was following Bobby.

"Don't worry about it. Even if this falls through, it's not like we're not heading in the right direction. There has to be a dozen different places to cross the Rhine around here."

"The Bridges will all be monitored," Stephen pointed out.

"Then we'll find someone to take us across by boat. They can't monitor every muggle tugboat and dingy out there," Sylvia pointed out.

By now, the children were all starting to come out of their post-transformation lethargy, and were actually starting to get excited. Harry's tale of the night before and Bobby's confirmation of it had them giddy. They had also never seen so much open space in their young, disadvantaged lives, and were eager to explore this strange new world.

"Are we going to live in France?" John asked, uncertain of the idea.

"No, baby, we're not going to live in France. We're going somewhere even better."

"Like England?"

There was an uncertain silence, and Stephen spoke first. "I don't know. I don't know how the English handle werewolves."

There was a pointed look at Harry, which made him feel rather silly for not having told them all about it sooner. Of course, earlier they hadn't been allies, and once they were they were usually too busy with other things.

"It's a lot different than here," Harry said. "Probably as different as you can get. Werewolves don't live with other wizards or muggles. They live in... colonies... or clans I guess. Packs. There are territories all over the UK, mostly woodlands, where only werewolves live. And all the werewolves live in these territories, and they can't leave but no one else can enter either, and it's... kind of a feudal era setup. They build their own houses and hunt their own food, but they also had trading posts where they can exchange goods with wizards without crossing into each other's spaces. They're actually pretty rich. They have a monopoly on the fur and potion ingredient's market, and Voldemort is a friend of the Head Alpha."

"Head Alpha?"

"He's sort of... the werewolf king, I guess. All the packs have an alpha, a chieftain, they follow, but all the alphas still have to follow the Head Alpha. He's kind of a jerk actually, but he does a good job. No one ever goes cold or hungry, as far as I can tell. He throws really great parties during the summer solstice."

Stephen gave him an odd look out of the corner of his eye. "You've met him? This werewolf king?"

Harry gave him sardonic grin. "Oh yes. He tried to turn me into a werewolf once. Oh, and he almost killed my godfather, who also happens to be the next in line for Head Alpha, and part of the reason why we can all be such good friends during the full moon."

"...That explains a whole lot, and is at the same time extremely confusing."

Bobby flew in through the car window and landed in Harry's lap, distracting them once again.

"Turn off the road here. There's an abandoned manor house a little ways up. Beyond that is the entrance to the tunnel. Humans don't know about it anymore. Not muggles or wizards."

Harry stroked Bobby's back gently, conveying his appreciation, which the raven definitely seemed to enjoy it.

"Then how do you know about it?"

"The dwarves know about it. They use it every couple of years to move their goods. They'd trust a tunnel under a river rather than a bridge over a river any day."

"And wizards don't know about it?"

"Humans make nasty thieves. Wizards are the nastiest. Too smart and too dumb at the same time. Except for you, of course. You're a doll."

Harry rolled his eyes. Sure enough though, after a minute or so they came upon an abandoned manor house, easily four hundred years old, the windows all empty of glass and the stone infested with ivy. It would have been a great place to explore, but they didn't want to linger anywhere for long. The tunnel entrance was behind the house, disguised as a tomb. All around lay the graves of the land's previous owners, the names worn away by time and the elements. The rusted iron gate blocking the entrance practically disintegrated in his hand as he and Stephen pulled it open.

"What do you think?" Stephen asked, looking down into the darkness, "Do you think the car will fit?"

"For right now, yeah, but it'll be tight. We won't be able to open the doors once inside, and if it gets narrower or turns too sharply? We'd be in trouble. Bobby, how familiar are you with this tunnel?"

Bobby was perched on the iron gate, looking inside rather curiously himself.

"I've never been inside," he said, "It shouldn't get any narrower. The dwarves have very large carts for being such short people."

They thought about it for a minute or so, and Stephen made the decision.

“It’s can’t be that far. Two or three miles at the most. You and I will walk in front, Sylvia will drive the car behind us with the head lights on. If we hit any obstacles, we can move them out of the way or break the windows and help them crawl out, and we’ll all walk the rest of the way.”

And that’s what they did. With the car’s headlights shining behind them, Stephen and Harry lead the way into the darkness. The tunnel itself was in good repair, probably by the dwarves who were very finicky about their tunnels, but also cold and wet and very, very dark. To stave off claustrophobia, they talked about Harry’s experience with werewolves in his home country.

Harry told them about the Summer Solstice celebration, about the Moon Goddess they worshiped, the Head Alpha Fenrir Greyback, his godfathers Sirius Blackbone and Remus Slivermoon, about the goddess possessed Luna and now Diana, about the trades, the foods, the fights, the arts, and everything Harry could think of. He wasn’t exactly trying to convince Stephen that he might be happy amongst one of Greyback’s packs, but he held such a fondness for the people it more than likely reflected in his descriptions. Stephen said very little; accept to ask for examples or for him to elaborate every so often. For the most part, he remained deep in thought. Bobby, who rode on Harry’s shoulder the entire way, remained nearly as attentive and even quieter.

What felt like hours later, though it couldn’t have been more than one, they saw the faint glow of sunlight in the distance, which grew brighter and brighter with every step. At its end, they were bathed in the heat of the summer air, the chill of the underground and their own soaking wet feet, began to warm in the light.

Turning to one another, they couldn’t help but grin and laugh. They had made it. They were free. Now they just had to get home.

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“Professor Snape!”

The potions master stiffened and turned, mentally cursing himself for not realizing he was being followed before hand. He was exhausted and in more than a little pain, but that was no excuse. It could have been McGunny coming up behind him to finish what he started the night before. Fortunately, it was not the elusive little hellion, but a woman he thought vaguely familiar.

“Madam?” he said cautiously, as she hurried towards him as fast she could without knocking into anyone on the busy walk way. It was a little after five, and most everyone was heading home for the evening or out to eat, crowding shoulder to shoulder with their fellow Londoners. Snape very much wanted to go home himself, but thought he might have to settle for a hotel. With no further leads for finding McGunny, he had visited the local flower shops in hopes of identifying the plant, and its significance if any. No one had known what to make of it, and he was thinking he would have to try Knockturn Alley for answers, but he knew better than to attempt it in his current condition. He would have to try again in the morning, unless the woman before him had a reason for stopping him. He seriously hoped not. He was tired.

“Professor Snape, thank goodness I found you. I’ve been looking everywhere for you,” she said, breathing heavily from her pursuit. She looked him up and down, and frowned critically. “You’re a mess, sir. You should be in bed.”

“Very true,” he said blandly, and turned to leave, “I was just about to do just that.”

“Wait! You probably don’t remember me, but we met at the court a few days ago. You laughed at me.”

Oh, yes, now he remembered. Myra or Ira or something Beadle, the bug woman. He turned back to her, and waited expectantly.

“I have a message from my stepfather.” She looked around at the crowd of people, and then at Snape, her brows furrowed in uncertainty. “I think you should come home with me, Professor.

You're in no shape to be about, and this is sensitive information. Would you please come with me?"

He thought to protest, remind her that taking home men she barely knew would do her reputation no good, but he was tired and she was already signaling for a coach. Plus she had already taken his plant from him, and he wasn't about ready to wrestle her for it in the middle of the sidewalk with only one good hand. When the coach pulled up for them, he climbed into the cabin and leaned back into the seat, fighting off the urge to sleep. If he wasn't careful he'd collapse for certain.

"How did you find me?" he asked, genuinely curious, if a bit tired.

"It wasn't easy. None of the tracking spells I tried seemed to work, and neither the hospital or Lady Malfoy seemed to know where you had gone. It's a good thing I have a few tricks up my sleeve."

From her sleeve, she pulled out what looked like a silver toothpick, but when she brought it to her mouth it wasn't to clean her teeth. A little chirp, not unlike a cricket emanated from the tiny instrument, and a moment later a large black moth fluttered towards her and landed on her outstretched pinky. Snape was a bit alarmed to realize that it had come from somewhere in the folds of his robes.

"This is Marty," she told him. "He's a breed of moth in the Saturniidae family. A very interesting species. A male can find a single female within six miles using only molecules it catches in its antennae. That's a hundred times more sensitive than a dog's nose. I've been training them at the university to find people for law enforcement purposes. Congratulations. You're the first successful trial."

"Honored, to be sure," he said flatly. "Now, perhaps, you can tell me why you went through the bother?"

She blinked and suddenly became more flustered. Apparently, she had been more prepared in finding him, than actually speaking with him.

"Of course. My stepfather received a call... I mean he was contacted by Mr. Potter today."

Snape grimaced. That was all he needed. Potter come to make things more complicated and uncomfortable again.

"But of course. Is he still in one piece?"

"I didn't get to speak with him myself, but I don't believe he was injured. He informed Andreas that he was coming home. I don't know if he said when or where exactly. Andreas told me to find you and said you would know what needed to be done. Though, I don't think he knew you were wandering around London, hunting muggers and shopping for house plants at the time."

"It's for a potion," Snape said quickly. "I meant to pick it up yesterday, but I didn't factor in the random malice of the universe."

She nodded. "You should stay at the house tonight. Andreas should be back eventually, and you can talk more with him then."

"You live with your stepfather?"

Ira blushed, embarrassed. At twenty nine, she knew very well she should have a husband and children, or at the very least her own apartment, but life hadn't been considerate of society's expectations.

"For now," was all she answered, and quickly changed the subject. "What is Harry Potter like?"

"Trouble some," Snape said, and by his tone he meant it. "Everything he touches gets complicated."

She gave him a long, hard (or as hard as she seem capable of) look, frowning thoughtfully. "Do you not like him?"

The potions master laughed softly, a quieter version of the laugh he'd had at the Court. "Like I said. Complicated. Now please be quiet. I need to think."

They rode the rest of the way in silence.

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Fleur expected to come home to an empty house. Her parents and sister were off in Sète, sailing their yacht and soaking up the sun. She had to stay behind, her apprenticeship at the Royal Military Academy of Paris keeping her close to home. In another week, she would be assigned to a Master, and would be living under his or her roof while attending the Academy. For now, she just had to mentally prepare herself for the separation, this one more final than any she had had while attending Beauxbatons or even Hogwarts. When she left home, it would be as an adult, and she ached with both pride and homesickness at the thought of it.

Pride and homesickness were the furthest thing from her mind, however, when she came home not to an empty house, but Harry Potter sitting on her doorstep. His hair was Weasley Orange, and his glasses were no where in sight, but even so she knew instantly it was him when he grinned at her.

She blinked at him dumbly for a moment, and then grinned back. She threw her arms around him and laughed.

“You scallywag,” she said in English. “Ow did you get ‘ere? You are zupost to be running wild in Germany. Zey say you were abducted by Death Eaters, and zen zey say you are a werewolf. Pah! No one believes it.”

“That’s good, cause it’s utter bollocks.”

“Urry, now, come inside before anyone sees you.”

They stepped in her house, and he let out an appreciative whistle at the granite floors and high arching ceilings. The entire place was a mix of Arte Nouveau and Baroque, an elegant combination of curves and extreme detail. It was beautiful and contemporary by wizarding standards, and Harry thought it suited Fleur every well. There were no house elves, but a maid was there to accept their cloaks and offer

refreshment. Harry watched her nervously, but Fleur assured him that Nadia was well trained in the art of discretion. If she knew who Harry was, she would never admit it.

To anyone.

They went into the study, however, and closed the doors. Harry highlighted what had happened, firstly about the Auror attack in the cemetery, then about Stephen picking him up and telling him that it was safe to return to Britain (a little fib, but he didn't have time to get into the entire complicated mess) and that they were werewolves, and then of the second Auror attack and their inability to escape to the North Sea, about his acquiring Bobby in the Black Forest and him leading them into France, and finally that the Canis family were hanging out in a park around the corner and waiting for him. They intended to spend the night in Paris and head into Britain the next morning. Which brought him to the real reason why he was there.

"I know this is really rude of me, and I wouldn't ask if I could think of another way, but... do you think I could borrow some muggle money? I mean, if you have any or know how to get any or... something. Or know how I could get some really quick... without using my wand, cause that's really not an option..."

His ears burned at having to ask. He had never had to beg for money. Not at the Dursley's, not at Hogwarts, and not at Snapes (unless it was to buy groceries which didn't count). To do it from Fleur, a friend who risked a great deal by helping him, was even more humiliating. She just smiled at him though, and kissed him on the cheek.

"If zat is all you need, I am 'appy to 'elp. Ah, zis is zo romantic. Just like in my book. Kidnapped princes escaping across borders with ze 'elp of strange of allies. I'll be in 'istory books for zis one day. Just wait."

He smiled a bit at that. "You're already in history books, remember? The Triwizard Tournament? All the champions saving each others lives, before Durmstrang got all weird on us."

She laughed and led him out of the study and up a flight of stairs to the bedrooms.

“Just wait. Ze two of us, we are just getting started. We will ‘ave eternal glory and fame. You in ze service of your King, and I in ze service of my Queen.”

“Don’t forget Viktor. He has a master of his own that he serves,” Harry said, trying to bite back his disappointment there. He didn’t blame Viktor for his choice. Of the two of them, Viktor’s choice was probably the more morally sound. It just happened to make them enemies, as well.

“Ah, poor Viktor,” she sighed, “e does not understand true rulers cannot pick and choose ‘zer battles based on morality like Dumbledore. Zey must face all dilemmas with all the resources available to zem, even zose zat bring zuffering. A nation is built with sweat and blood, ‘Arry, with love and with pain. It is maintained ze same way.”

Harry considered her words. He was starting to see, or perhaps he had always seen and was only now starting to understand what she meant. Voldemort was a Dark Lord, a ruler steeped in murder and manipulation. But so was Seibligg. Harry might not have seen it like he had with his mentor, but he sensed it when he met him and with the barbarism his Aurors had displayed towards the Canis family and himself. He knew the Old Ministry had its own list of crimes it had to answer for. Fenrir Greyback ruled his people with a more honest brutality, but it was no less violent, and he knew intuitively that Sirius would not be any kinder when it was his turn to take over. He couldn’t afford to be soft.

The more he thought about it, the more it seemed like no ruler could afford that.

They reached Fleur’s room, sensually decorated in rich blue velvets and gleaming hardwoods. She had a small writing desk, which she opened and pulled out a silver jewelry box. Inside was a large wad of muggle money. She handed the entire thing to Harry.

"My Aunt Suki zent it to me as a graduation present. She always zays zat muggles always 'ave ze best shoes. Zis is very true, but I won't be wearing anyzing but my uniform boots for at least a year. Zo zere you are. You 'ave one year to pay me back."

Looking through the wad of money, several hundred Euros worth, Harry wondered how many shoes her aunt intended for her to buy. She walked him back to the door, hugged him again, wished him luck, and opened the door for him...

And then slammed it closed again in Viktor's startled face.

She turned to Harry. "Was zat who I zot it was?"

The Gryffindor could only stand there and wonder the exact same thing for a moment. There was a knock on the door. Neither of them moved to open it.

"Fleur, open da door. I know he's dere already."

"Go away, Viktor. You are not in Germany anymore."

"Harry, please just open da door. I only vant to talk to you."

They gave each other an uncertain look, but eventually Harry just sighed and nodded. Fleur opened the door again. Viktor scowled at the both of them.

"What are you doing here, Viktor?" Harry asked, exasperated.

"Ven Dumbledore found out you left Cologne already, he sent me to France on da very slime chance dat you might head here after the ports closed in the north. How did you even get out of Germany?"

"How did you?" Harry challenged.

"Dumbledore... he has his ways," the Bulgarian said.

"And I have mine. You should know by now I'm a sneaky little bastard."

Viktor's mouth twitched into the beginnings of a smile, but he quickly smothered it. "Dat I do. Vat are you intending to do, Harry?"

Harry considered lying, telling Viktor that he was going into hiding and never be seen from again. It seemed a possible way of avoiding another fight with him, one that he couldn't use a wand for and didn't want to drag Fleur into. It would also break any trust that still lingered in the face of Harry's defection.

"I'm going home, Viktor."

"To Voldemort?" the older boy accused.

"And Hermione," he snapped back, "and my godfathers, and Draco, and Clyde, and Ginny, and Fred and George, and everyone else who gives a damn about me for reasons other than what I can do for them."

Viktor's grit his teeth, frustration bubbling to the surface. "You told me yourself that the Dark Lord wants you did. That taking you out of Britain saved your life. I saved your life."

"So did Voldemort. So did Professor Snape and Vesper Larousse and Sirius and Remus. They all saved my life. And a dozen others made it worth living. I am not going to turn my back on them for you. I'm not going to betray them for that psycho Minister or a country that doesn't mean a damn thing to me!"

"What about Dumbledore, Harry? He could have given you life outside the killing and political games and dark magic. He still can. Just come with me and I'll take you back to him."

"And do what? Hide the rest of my life? Fight against 'evil'? I'm sorry Viktor, but I don't see a future there. I don't know what he wants, and frankly I don't care anymore. I can do more good in Britain, than I can do hiding behind his robes."

"Harry, Voldemort will kill you!"

“Not anymore, he won’t. I know what I have to do. And I know you have to do what feels right to you, but you’re not going to change my mind. I’m going home.”

Harry stepped out of the house and around Viktor, who just watched slack jawed as he walked away. He didn’t move to stop the other boy, although once he was out of sight, he curled his fingers in front of him as if to strangle the memory of Harry in midair.

“Nichts ist diesen Ärger wert!”

Fleur couldn’t help but smile at her friend’s foolishness. Viktor might not understand (or simply refused to understand) what Harry had said, but he was still a good guy. He would not force Harry to do something he didn’t want to do. Not intentionally.

“Come inside, my irate friend. I’ll make you something to drink. Something with Vodka.”

He looked ready to snap something at her, but then couldn’t seem to settle on anyone particular thing before finally giving up and slumping inside. She patted him on the arm sympathetically, and led him towards the parlor. Two Triwizard Tournament champions visiting her illegally in one day. She wondered what her future Master might have to say about that, and grinned.

It appeared as if life had no intention of slowing down for her any time soon.

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Harry and the Canis Family ordered Chinese food and crashed in their hotel room, everyone exhausted but happy with their adventure. In the evening, Harry stayed with the kids in the hotel, watching the Little Mermaid in French which Jane translated, going so far as to sing along with the songs she had memorized by heart (it was her favorite movie), while Stephen and Sylvia went for a walk in the most romantic city in the world.

When husband and wife returned, Harry had already had them bathed and put to bed. Stephen pulled Harry outside for a little talk of their own, highlighting their final plans for the next day.

"If we go to the UK," Stephen started out, "Will they let us leave or are we going to have to stay at one of these... colonies?"

Harry thought about it for a long time, and finally answered, "I don't know. I don't know if Voldemort ever intended you to get this far. He might let you go if he thought you would keep quiet about the 'kidnapping' bit or he might send you to Greyback or he might kill you just to hurt me. I really don't know."

"I can't risk my family like that, Harry. I need a plan where I know they'll be safe."

"... If I could, I'd just buy you a plane ticket and send you where ever you wanted to go, but that's more money than I have and you don't even have a passport. You and your family could stay here in France somewhere and pretend to be regular muggles for the rest of your life, and hope no one finds out."

Stephen snorted.

"The last option is that I take you straight to Greyback before anyone finds us. He's an asshole, but he takes care of his own, especially the women and children. If you become a part of one of his packs, I don't think Voldemort will try anything, but you'll never be able to leave."

They stayed quiet for several minutes, looking out the window at the city, glittering streets and buildings tall as mountains. It would be hard to give up this sort of place. From what Harry knew of them, none of the Canis family had ever lived outside of a city before, let alone out in the wilderness. They would have to abandon the creature comforts of 'civilized' living for a life they only knew about from his stories.

"Is it a good life?" Stephen asked. Slowly, Harry nodded.

"It's not an easy life, but it's a good, honest way to live. You get to punch guys who piss you off, and everyone is okay with it."

The werewolf barked out a laugh, and returned to the room, saying he would think about it. They left early the next morning, all of them sluggish and reluctant after the long day and short night. They abandoned their car at the motel and walked to the train station, purchased their tickets, and waited for nearly an hour. The entire time the adults (and Harry) anxiously scanned the station for signs of trouble, unable to believe they had made it so far without a hitch of some kind, but the time elapsed and they climbed aboard. Bobby followed them inside, and he must have possessed some sort of magic of his own, because no one looked twice the entire time. The moment they sat down they visibly relaxed.

Their tickets took them to London, a near three hour ride, and the first thing Harry did was use some of the change he had left to call Morgan, but it was a rather flustered woman who picked up.

“HELLO? IS THIS HAROLD POTTER?”

Harry pulled the phone away from his ear, and prayed that ear was still useful.

“Yes. You don’t have to shout.”

“Oh... sorry,” the woman said, still a bit loud but no longer deafening. Stephen smirked at him, and Sylvia had to hide her smile behind her hand.

“Is Chief Sentinel Morgan there?” he asked.

“Ah... no, not right now. He told me I should take a message if you called.”

“And who are you?”

“I’m Eri..er...ah... Betty. I’m his secretary.”

For some reason, Harry seriously doubted that.

“Okay, Eriarah Betty, just let your boss know I’m in London.”

Then he hung up.

Bobby led them into wizarding London through a strange portal existing on platform one and three quarters. It seemed as if Bobby knew his way around everywhere. Harry kept his the hood of his cloak up after that, which was hot and uncomfortable in the summer heat but necessary. He earned several odd looks, but rarely a second glance. It was London after all.

Harry could hardly believe he was home. After six months abroad, believing he would never get to see his homeland again, it all came at him extraordinarily fast. He was extremely tempted to run to the nearest Court Office and turn himself in, face Voldemort once and for all and finish the journey.

But before he could do that, he needed to ask Stephen his decision.

"We've never had an easy life," Stephen said, "But we've had a mostly honest one. No point in mucking it up now."

"Why, that's the smartest thing I think I've ever heard him say," Bobby said, as if awed, then fluttered out of reach when the werewolf made a swipe at him.

They had absolutely no British wizarding money to get to Scotland, and since none of them knew how to apparate, it was up to Bobby to lead them, and as knowledgeable as the raven was about magical short cuts and secret routes, it still took them two days of walking and two nights of sleeping outside, before they reached Fenrir's territory.

Harry remained at its edge, stopping the others before they tried to step over the glowing green line that marked the werewolves' domain. Once they crossed into it, they would be unable to leave without Fenrir's permission. He should probably knock first.

"Hello!" he called, and listened as it echoed through the forest. There was no reply. "Hello!" he tried again. Bobby landed on his shoulder.

"They are there. They're just hiding. Pull down your hood."

Harry did as instructed, and within seconds the foliage moved, and where once there was nothing but trees and undergrowth now stood two werewolves, a man and a woman, each armed with crossbows. Stephen let out a curse, and moved his family behind him. Bobby hopped off his shoulder and disappeared into the canopy.

"If you play games, sir, I shall kill you for this insult," the woman said, glaring suspiciously at him, even as she drew nearer. She was vaguely familiar to Harry, but he could not recall her name.

"No games or insults intended," Harry assured her, tucking away his wand. "I have returned, and wish to speak with Greyback. I have brought friends," he gestured behind him, "who seek asylum with his people. May we enter?"

The werewolf pair shared an uncertain look.

"Think it's really him," she whispered to the man. "Could be a trap. An illusion."

"You stay here and watch them," the man said, "And I'll go get Greyback. He'll know. He always knows."

"Hurry up then."

The man ran off, leaving the woman glaring at them and clutching her crossbow. Stephen nudged Harry's shoulder to get his attention.

"Are they all this friendly?"

Harry grinned. "When you first meet them? Pretty much. I got my head shoved in a mud puddle."

"Where was that story when you prattling on about Fenrir's werewolves?"

"Did I forget that one? Sorry, it slipped my mind."

Stephen glowered at him. Within minutes, Fenrir appeared, along with about half his pack, and at the forefront of the crowd Sirius and Remus. Harry couldn't help but grin when he saw their amazed expressions. He had a feeling he was going to be seeing a lot of that.

"Potter, you ballsy little bastard," Fenrir snarled, somehow coming off as good natured at the same time. "How the hell did ya get over here?"

"There was a lot of walking involved. Can we come in?"

"Get in here."

Harry stepped across the boundary, and wasn't the least bit surprised when he was swept up in an enormous bear hug and had his hair ruffled into a messy fluff. After days of travel and more than a few lingering bruises, it was painful, but he wouldn't have stopped it for the world. It was the first time in a very long time that he felt truly happy.

"Prongslet, I can believe it!" Sirius laughed, finally pulling away to get a better look at him. "Although I probably should. An entire Ministry couldn't stop you."

"Yes, well, I had a lot of help," he turned to his traveling companions and gestured for them to follow, which they hesitantly did. "This is the Canis Family. Stephen, Sylvia, John, Jane, and Noah. We sort of... escaped Germany together. They're werewolves too."

Fenrir was already before them, leering at Stephen who looked on the verge of snarling and bashing in someone's head if any of the other werewolves came any closer to his wife or children.

"I can tell. This one's got a nasty look about him," the Head Alpha chuckled, and leaned in so close to Stephen their noses were practically touching. The Canis patriarch let out a low, threatening growl. Fenrir threw back his head and laughed. "I like him! Hopefully, I won't have to break his neck."

"Greyback," Harry said, his voice laced with warning. "Leave them be. They've traveled a long way to have to deal with your particular brand of weirdness."

"Bah," Fenrir dismissed. "I wouldn't fight him now. He's as weak as a puppy. Athena! Get them settled. Make sure no one starts anything."

The alpha female appeared out of the crowd, and close behind her trailed Luna. The dream-eyed girl smiled at Harry, but didn't yet approach, following her pack mother's example and showing the Canis family the way to the settlement, leaving Harry to his godfathers and Fenrir. When all the others werewolves had left, curious about the latest additions to their pack (women were rare enough, and children only occasionally born and never just brought in), the Head Alpha dropped his amused expression.

"Does Voldemort know you're here?"

Harry stiffened, and then shook his head.

"Why not?"

"I couldn't be sure what he would do with them, so I came here first. I'll go see him as soon as I know they'll be fine."

"You'll stay here until I tell you you can leave. Are you bit?"

"What?"

"Are. You. Bit? There's been rumors floating about since you went missing. Some blaming the Germans, some blaming Voldemort, and more that few blaming werewolves. Claims that you've been infected. Is any of that true?"

"Are you serious? No, I wasn't bitten. Merlin, I don't know if I can turn into a werewolf even if I were. I spent the full moon walking around with them, and it was completely... safe. Like walking around with really big dogs. They like to be scratched behind the ears."

“Harry!” Remus said, clearly horrified at the mere thought of what he had done. Sirius looked stunned too, although Harry suspected he would be delighted once the surprise wore off. Greyback looked more skeptical than anything.

“You’ll stay here until I can get your master to come get you. If you disappear on me, one of your new ‘friends’ will pay for it, do you understand?”

“Yes.”

“Good. Blackbone, he’s your responsibility... as if you didn’t know already”

Sirius stuck his tongue out at Fenrir’s back when he turned away and Remus slapped him upside the head, making Harry grinned. He had really missed them. Sirius swung his arm around his godson’s shoulder, and led him further into the forest.

“Come on, Prongslet, you have got a lot of explaining to do.”

Harry smiled a bit nervously at that. He wasn’t entirely sure if he had enough time to explain the entire thing before Voldemort showed up and wrung his scrawny neck.

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Voldemort was very close to wringing Snape’s neck when the missive arrived from Fenrir. It wasn’t that the potions professor had done anything to earn his ire, it just so happened he was the only one in the room and frankly he was in a bad mood.

They had lost Harry. Again. In London of all places. It didn’t help that Harry had been the one to even inform them that he was in the area, and then neglected to show himself for another three days. Voldemort, who believed he had been very patient and done a good job at waiting for his re-emergence was quickly rediscovering what it was about Harry that frustrated him.

He was too damn self motivated.

If Harry had been just a little more uncertain or a little more dependant, Voldemort was positive he would never have gotten it into his head to go messing around with another man's soul and then to run around Europe like it was a bloody vacation.

To make matters worse, the potions Snape had been brewing to instill that uncertain dependency known as blind loyalty were ruined while the man was holed up in the hospital. Another reason he probably should wring the man's neck, but he had the feeling the Earth was trying to tell him not to fuck around with Harry in that particular manner and he should just let it slide. Anyway, he didn't have enough spare potions masters just lying around to where he could toss out his best one.

"Forget it. With the way things are going, you'd probably end up ingesting the potion and swear eternal fealty to Harry, and the entire situation will turn into an even bigger joke," Voldemort muttered, leaning back in his chair. They were at Hogwarts at the moment, presumably a random choice, but both knew it was on the off chance that Harry showed up there. Harry didn't really know a lot of other places.

Snape grimaced at the back handed insult, but silently agreed. If anything could possibly go wrong, Potter would find a way to make it happen.

As if to prove it, an owl flew through the window and smacked straight into the back of his head.

"Bloody hell!" Snape spat before he even realized it, clutching the back of his head. He really shouldn't have taken any Pain Relieving Potion before coming here. Nothing would ever have been able to sneak up behind him if he were sober.

"Quite," Voldemort said with some amusement then retrieved the letter from the owl now sprawled across the floor. From under his desk, he could see Nagini eying the fallen bird speculatively, and left it where it lay. He opened the letter and scanned it. A hard smile

settled across his mouth. "Harry just turned himself over to Greyback."

Snape stiffened, then nodded. "What do you intend to do?"

"Whatever the universe allows. Stay here. If Harry requires medical attention, I would prefer to avoid the public hospitals."

"As you wish, My Lord."

The Dark Lord left. Snape went to do the same, to wait in the infirmary, but paused just long enough to scoop up the owl from the floor before Nagini got to it. Not all creatures were as talented as Harry at handling snakes.

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As if out of habit, Harry remained elusive even after Voldemort arrived at Fenrir's door. The boy was not in the colony itself, and his godfathers were plainly visible at the center of the commune, sharpening knives and glaring death at him. He checked with the Head Alpha. Fenrir wouldn't be so careless as to let him slip away.

"He said something about making an offering of thanks," the old werewolf said, leaning in his chair. He looked to be in a rare, thoughtful mood, and Voldemort wondered what Harry had told him or if it were something else weighing on his mind. "He took a stool, some herbs, and a bowl, and left alone on the Western Path about a half hour ago. I told my people to leave him be. You should have plenty of privacy."

Voldemort nodded and went in search of his wayward protégé. It didn't take long to find him. Harry had moved nearly a quarter of a mile into the forest for solitude, but made not attempt at hiding. The Dark Lord did not immediately say or do anything when he found him, but watched silently with a breathless sort of fascination.

Harry had stripped down to his pants, and Voldemort could see that whatever had gained the boy his freedom had come at a cost. His

back was scrapped raw and bruised a yellowish-green, and he could count each of Harry's ribs protruding from his skinny frame. There were cuts and small bruises on his face as well, but it was odd shortness of his hair that unnerved Voldemort. Had his head been shaved at some point? Like all the rest of those Durmstrang clones?

The idea of lumping Harry into the masses set his teeth on edge. It was insult by proxy. The masses had never stood a chance at against a Dark Lord, and to suggest they were of the same ability as the Gryffidnor Prince was absurd.

He pushed the thought aside to focus on Harry's actions. Already he could tell Harry had burned some sort of ward into the ground, and was already burning sage, waving it within his protective circle and around his body so that the fragrant smoke cleansed the ward of negative energies. He cast the remnants of the smolder herb into a bowl resting on a wooden stool, the very crudest form of an altar. Beside the bowl sat a ceremonial dagger. The same ceremonial dagger he had gifted Harry with the year before to sacrifice the sianach.

His breath caught as he watched the boy drag the blade over left arm, then switched hands to cut his right arm. Transfixed, he followed Harry's every movement, his trembling arms, his pained expression, the rivulets of blood dripping down into the smoking bowl, and a mouth speaking too softly and too quickly to make out.

Voldemort felt a ripple of power escape from the protective circle and it sent a pleasant shiver down his spine. This was perhaps the crudest of sacrificial ceremonies he had ever seen, but the offering was given in such complete sincerity that its power could rival the most elaborate of performances. There was no lip service here. Harry held less guile than a house elf and enough passion to make Shakespeare weep. Terrifying and captivating traits in a pagan.

Suddenly, Harry let out a small gasp, and his head and spine arched backwards so that there was no way he could have kept his balance, and yet he did not fall. Voldemort stared directly into his wide green eyes, and wondered what the boy saw. It wasn't Voldemort. There was nothing close to recognition there.

He was tempted to try a legilimens, but he didn't dare. Madris had already proven she could hurt him, potentially kill him, and he wasn't going to provoke her by poking her worshiper with a proverbial stick while they were conversing.

Harry closed his eyes, and the stiffness suddenly left him so that he slumped forward, and landed on his hands and knees. There was soft sigh, and with shaking hands he took the bowl and flipped it onto the grown, covering the burning sage in order to smother it. The ritual was over.

Voldemort stepped forward. The boy stiffened, and slowly turned towards him.

"Hello, Harry."

"...Hello, my Lord."

"Still misplacing yourself, my friend?"

"Oh, no. I actually meant to end up here for once." He climbed to his feet. He did not have his wand on him, but his dagger remained firmly in his hand. The Dark Lord looked at it curiously.

"Do you mean to use that on me?"

"I hope not. I'm not entirely sure what would happen. You might explode. I might explode. This is far more powerful than I realized."

"And it gains power with every use."

He stepped forward, Harry stepped back. Cautious. Good.

"You betrayed me."

"Yes," Harry agreed readily, even as his expression tightened with pain at the admission. "But I never meant to hurt you. You can't claim the same."

"That's very true. Circafiat!"

The ward shattered under his spell then caught Harry up in it, sending him flying like a spinning top hurled through the air, and he crashed just as heavily. He landed with a thud, and continued to roll until he hit a tree. There was a groan and a hiss of pain. He was still clutching the knife. Stubborn.

"I should cut out your soul and feed you to the dementors," he hissed, stalking towards his fallen adversary. Greens glared up at him.

"If I have to go to one more of those stupid charity banquets I'd welcome it."

Voldemort paused, staring down at him, incredulous. "You have no sense of self preservation at all, do you?"

"No. It ran away with your guilty conscious and we haven't seen either of them since."

A grin founds its way onto the Dark Lord's face, but it wasn't the comforting sort the foolish Gryffindor was probably hoping for.

"Fio torrete!" Voldemort said, flinging his wand, almost negligently. Harry rolled out of the way this time, and the tree took the hit, shaking violently, but it gave no clues to the spell's purpose. Voldemort snapped around for another try, but Harry finally decided to start fighting back.

And fighting dirty.

He hadn't even realized what the boy was doing until the rock actually hit him in the face, smashing into the bridge of his nose and part of his right eye. He stumbled back from the blow, tripped over something, and fell backwards... into a ditch. And fuck, that hurt.

"You son of a --argh! You broke my nose!"

"Well, you cracked my ribs, you damn psycho," Harry called back.

Snarling, he wiped at the blood pouring from his nose, but it was instantly replaced, making the effort futile. He crawled out of the trench, but by then Harry had disappeared. Marvelous.

“Expelliarmus!”

“Protego!” Voldemort snapped out automatically, shielding himself. He glared over at the cluster of trees the spell originated from. “This isn’t Hogwarts, Harry. You’re going to have to do better than that.”

“I don’t want to fight you. It’s pointless.”

“On that we are agreed. You should remain still and take your punishment like a man.”

“How about I take it like a fourteen year old and sit in my room until I’ve learned my lesson.”

Voldemort let out a laugh. “I’ve missed you, Harry, I really have. No one else can survive being this cheeky with me.” Then he had to spit, as the blood from his nose leaked into his mouth. Yuck.

“I missed you too,” and that sounded sadly sincere. “Do you think we could start over?”

“This isn’t a board game, Harry. We can never go back to what we were. You’ve made sure of that.” He murmured a spell, static voca, under his breath, and moved out of view, taking a circuitous route towards Harry’s location.

“... Could we at least stop trying to kill one another?”

“I’m not trying to kill you. I just want to make you suffer,” he said, and though he was moving closer, it sounded as if his voice were the same distance away.

“How’s that working out for you?”

“I can honestly say, I’ve never had the novel experience of a broken nose. I feel obliged to share it with you.”

"I already broke my nose, remember? Moody and that damn potion."

"... Oh... how about your fingers?"

"...Yes?"

"When?"

"... Uh... at Durmstrang?"

"If you don't sound convinced of your own answers how do expect to convince me..."

Now he could see Harry's profile, peaking carefully from behind some trees at the location his voice sounded from. He had his wand now. Clever boy. Must have snatched it up before he hid himself. Not that it would do him any good.

"Would I lie?"

"Certainly," Voldemort said, dropping the spell. Harry spun around to find himself standing not three feet from the Dark Lord, and he froze like a startled rabbit. "Just not very well. Levicorpus."

The Gryffindor didn't have a chance to utter a single word before he was pulled from his feet and left dangling from the air. He cried out in pain and struggled to breath, and Voldemort remembered his potentially injured ribs, making regular breathing difficult enough. He smiled coolly at his captive, and reached out to place his hand over the crescent mark on Harry's chest. The skin beneath his hand instantly sizzled, as if touched by a brand.

His protégé opened his mouth to gasp, to scream, but he couldn't pull in the air necessary for it. He could only hang there, making feeble choking sounds until Voldemort finally pulled his hand away. A skeletal handprint in blackened flesh remained, the red crescent resting in the middle of the palm. An ominous marking.

Both the knife and wand had fallen out of Harry's hands, and the boy simply hung there limply. Voldemort thought there might be symbolism in that, but right now he was just appreciating the moment. Harry had already closed his eyes, waiting for the next blow, resigned to the pain even as he feared it. Ah, sublime submission. He let it drag on for a nearly a minute, letting suffer in the silence.

Then he flicked him on nose like a bad dog.

Green eyes flew open, and blinked. Voldemort glowered at him.

“I want you to remember this moment. I want you to remember the pain and the fear and the helplessness, because if you ever try to mess with me like that again, I will make you feel a thousand times what you are feeling right now for rest of your natural life and then I really will feed you to the dementors. Finite incantem.”

Harry fell, landing heavily and no doubt cracking a few more ribs, if his pained gasps were anything to go by, but nothing lasting. Satisfied, Voldemort walked away, leaving the boy to catch his breath and wallow in his misery. He had only made it a few steps, however, before the Gryffindor some how managed to get just enough breath for a final question.

“We good now?”

The Dark Lord turned back to him and smiled fondly. “Yes. We’re good.”

[illegible]

Book V:

Chapter 8: Serfs and Nobles

There was no comfortable position to lie in, but he was too tired to sit or stand. His entire body felt like one big bruise, aching everywhere except on his chest where the Dark Lord had scorched his mark on to his flesh. That just plain stung.

"Your bed is going to stink like medicine," Harry protested to Remus, who just rolled his eyes, and continued to rub salve gently over his chest. He had cracked a few ribs on the left side, but nothing was broken. It just made breathing about as uncomfortable as moving.

"You're not the only reckless fool I've treated in this bed," the beta said, throwing a pointed look at Sirius, who was glowering in the corner of their little house. The bed itself was monstrosously large, easily fitting five or six adults at a time, which was practical since it was shared with three other werewolves. Everything in the werewolf colony was communal, from kitchens to beds to showers, but Remus assured him he would be getting the bed to himself unless it rained. Apparently, the werewolves only bothered with a bed when it was too cold or raining outside. Most preferred sleeping under the stars if possible. "This should help with the bruising and the swelling. How do you feel?"

"Would you be mad if I told you, smugly satisfied?"

Sirius snorted harshly. "Satisfied? With what? You're a mess. You finally make it back home after half a year and the first thing the Dark Doofus can think to do is beat the crap out of you? What the fuck?"

"Sirius..." Remus said, warningly.

Harry just smiled at him cheekily. "I really did have that thrashing coming, even before I broke his nose." Sirius started to protest, but Harry held up a hand to silence him. "It's over and done with now, and I'm glad. I don't want you to get worked up over it. It was worth it."

And he didn't just mean the beating. He had been gone for six months, alone and guilt ridden, but he had learned so much along the way, and seen such wonders he could not find it in him to regret.

Sirius didn't look sure, but then Harry hadn't told him the whole story. All he knew was that Harry had allowed himself to be kidnapped because the Dark Lord was pissed at him (the specifics he didn't get into) and that he had come back on his own. Remus was more accepting, although he was none too pleased with Harry's injuries either.

"Come on, Padfoot, we had best let him rest for a bit. We should go introduce ourselves to his 'souvenirs' before nightfall."

"If Stephen is a bit snappish, don't take it personal. He's a bit defensive when it comes to taking care of his family," Harry said, leaning back more fully against his pillows. They left him to his own devices which unfortunately involved just laying around like a log. Voldemort was... somewhere, and would be there until tomorrow it seemed and left him to the care of Fenrir and his pack. Harry was happy with this, because as much as he wanted to see Hermione and his friends, family came first.

And they coddled him shamelessly. Which he needed. It had been a long, hard week. He was actually prepared to attempt a nap, try to ignore his aching body, but there was something he wanted to do first.

Very carefully, and very slowly, he pushed himself up, climbed out of the bed, and pulled his satchel out from underneath it. He opened it, and after riffling through it for a minute or two, found what he was looking for and brought them onto the bed with him. His letters, still in their envelopes, remained unopened and mysterious. He had longed to open them when he had first gotten them, but events had pushed them from his mind almost completely. There had been no time and no privacy to read them before, but now he had both and he thought he ought to read them before facing his friends.

He picked one of the four letters at random.

Dear Harry

Heard you got into a pickle. I have faith in you, though, and I'm sure you'll find a way out of it. Everyone is rooting for you. –Hagrid.

P.S. The girls, Betty and Thelma, are growing big and strong. Norbert had a bit of trouble in the beginning but he's doing well. They're all beautiful. I can't thank you enough for the recommendation to Charlie. You've made a life long dream of mine come true, and I'll never forget that. The tooth I sent is one of Norbert's. He lost it in a fight with Thelma. Get back soon, so I can introduce you to all of them properly.

Harry smiled. Leave it to Hagrid to talk more about dragons than anything else. The next one was from the Weasley's. All of them. Even the ones he didn't even know very well. Mrs. Weasley prayed for his safe return, not unlike Hagrid only with a lot more flowery adjectives, but luckily the other Weasley's offered a bit more information than well wishes. They told him about what happened at Hogwarts after he left, about Dueling Club (Ron had the nerve to threaten him to get back to handle the rookies), school gossip and simple news, National Quidditch matches, hilarious pranks, and the sort of things he would have liked to been with them to experience. Even Charlie Weasley, who Harry had never met, wrote a little something about Hagrid's rather hazardous but excellent care of the dragonets.

Next came Hermione's.

Dear Harry

I hope this letter finds you in good health and in good spirits. The papers speculate on your well-being constantly, and after a week I could not bring myself to read them. Uncle Severus assures me of the unlikelihood of you being seriously harmed, but even if you are not being tortured I know you can't be happy.

I miss you so much. Everyone does. Even those you wouldn't think of. Out of everyone, I think Natalie might be the most upset. She hides it well, but I've known her for a long time, and Draco is worried about her.

It's futile, but I wish you were here constantly. Hogwarts just isn't the same without you. I go through the day thinking 'Harry would have loved to try that' or 'Harry should be in Transfiguration right now' or 'Harry would have found that hilarious'.

I know it's a bit weird, but I started to make a log of these moments. I thought, if I ever managed to get it to you, you could read it and it would be sort of like sharing the moment together, like we should have. One day, I pray we will be able to do just that for real. Good luck, Harry.

Love,

Hermione

Harry smiled and rubbed his eyes. Dear, sweet, Hermione. He couldn't wait to see her again. Behind the letter, was about thirty pieces of parchment, consisting of the log of events Hermione had written, and he took a moment to scan them.

Jan.6

The Hogwarts Herald published its first edition of the New Year. Your kidnapping is featured on the front page. It's a really bad picture. Draco actually cringed.

Uncle Severus held orientation for Dueling Club. It had the largest turnout yet, with 55 potentials. Ron is freaking out. With you gone, he can barely keep track of the 30 we have already. We may have to divide up the club and get another instructor. I hope the newbies are joining for the right reasons.

We had potatoes at dinner.

Harry chuckled. This would definitely prove helpful when he returned to school. He had missed so much already. Melancholy threatened to invade his happy mood, so he moved to the last letter. It was from Draco.

Harry

Hope you're not dead. Get your ass back here.

Draco.

"Your wish is my command, oh Blond One," Harry chuckled.

"If that's my new nickname, it's awful and inaccurate."

He nearly jumped out of his skin, and dropped all of his letters. The move jostled his body and he grimaced at the fresh throbs and stabs of pain that lanced through his body. He turned his head to glare at Bobby, who was now perched on Remus' chair.

"Oops. Careful there. Didn't mean to startle you."

Harry sighed and resettled against his pillows.

"Where have you been? I haven't seen you since we got here."

"Exploring. Do you think all these things I know are second hand? This is an interesting place."

"Did you see Lord Voldemort while you were exploring?" Harry asked.

"Do you mean, did I see him toss you around like a ragdoll? Nope, didn't see it."

The boy rolled his eyes.

"Thanks for the help."

"Your welcome."

"You-"

"Did you tell him about me?" the raven interrupted. "I hope you didn't."

Harry looked at him suspiciously. "Why?"

“Fairies aren’t the only ones who would like to get their hands on me. These things I know are valuable. You’re lucky to have such a master as I.”

Harry snorted. “Fine. I guess it would be hypocritical of me to let the Dark Lord use you, after I escaped Germany for pretty much the same reason. The Canis’s though...”

“I’ve already talked to them. They’ll take responsibility for knowing how to get out of Germany. No one else need know I exist.”

Harry gave him another suspicious look. “How do I know you’re not a spy? Maybe the Germans set all of this up so that you could get into Britain. You never would have known how to get in otherwise.”

“Ha! I most definitely could. I work for no man or fae. Raecellos is my patron, Protector God of Prodigal Sons and Explorers, Lord and Vassal in the Court of Madris. I have endless navigational resources at my disposal.”

Harry thought on it and nodded. “I suppose that makes sense. Madris wanted me back home, so she had Raecellos send you to make sure of it. But why are you still here? Your mission is complete.”

“Because I like you,” Bobby laughed, and hopped from his chair to fly out the open window. Harry glared after him. He hated when the raven did that.

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At some point, Harry must have dozed off, because when he opened his eyes it was already nightfall. The little house was lit with lanterns hanging from the ceiling, perfuming the air with the faint scent of lamp oil. He was not alone.

On the other side of the bed, Luna and Diana had curled up around each other and fallen asleep, while Sirius sat at a small table, Stephen across from him, playing a game of cards. Both alphas

turned to him as he sat up and rubbed the sleep from his eyes.

“Where’s Remus?” he asked.

“Patrolling. We’ve had issues with smugglers tearing down the wards lately.”

“Smugglers?”

“Voldemort’s been rationing a lot of goods across the country. Makes it profitable enough for smugglers to risk their lives to make up the difference. Dumb as bricks, most of them.”

Harry nodded.

“What are you two doing?”

“Playing cards, talking, keeping watch. People don’t seem to get that you need your sleep.”

Harry looked over at the two girls, and chuckled softly then grimaced as it jostled his ribs. Apparently, he wasn’t the only one in need of rest. He turned back to the Stephen.

“How is the family settling in?”

Stephen looked thoughtful for a moment, before answering.

“I wasn’t really sure in the beginning. It’s so... different, but the kids... They’re sleeping with Greyback’s kids tonight. They’ve never had friends besides each other before. They were really excited about it. We could barely get them to go to sleep.”

Harry smiled at that. Having had few friends growing up, and none for the three years he had lived with the Dursley’s, he knew that finally finding others who understood you and connected with you was precious.

"If you need to talk to someone about adjusting, I'd ask Remus," Harry said, "He grew up as a werewolf around wizards before the colonies were founded."

Stephen nodded, but Harry thought he had probably been given this advice before.

"Does anyone know how long I get to stay yet?" he asked.

"Dark Lord Snake-breath is off blowing his own horn somewhere. He'll be back in the morning to get you, though. I recommend going for a kneecap this time around."

"Don't make me laugh, Sirius, my ribs are still soar. It'll be fine."

"You should go back to sleep," Sirius said, looking unconvinced. "I doubt the bastard is going to let you get much of it tomorrow."

"Alright, just wake me up early so I can say goodbye to everyone."

Because really, Sirius was probably right. He settled back into his pillows and closed his eyes, trying to let his natural exhaustion take him into sleep. Before he had completely descended into the dream world, however, he heard Stephen and Sirius talking softly to each other.

"I honestly didn't believe him when he said his godfather was the next Head Alpha. I didn't think he had a clue what he was talking about. He didn't seem scared enough."

"Harry is a lot like his father that way. His mother too. They were good, strong people. They judged people by their character, rather than who or what they were. Although, I don't think even they could have managed what Harry has. He finds character in the weirdest places."

"You mean the Dark Lord?"

"I mean you."

“ ... ”

“I know you didn’t just ‘come across’ Harry and instantly decide to run away with him. I’m guessing you were hired to bring him back. I don’t think he was entirely willing either.”

“... I don’t know-“

“There were rope marks on his wrist. An Auror would never have had to resort to ropes.”

“ ... ”

“I’ll assume you had your reasons. Harry obviously felt you did.”

“... I needed something better for my family. I couldn’t protect them in Germany. The entire system worked against us at every turn. I had to do something. Anything.”

“I understand. It is your prerogative as a father to put your mate and your pups above anyone else. Which is why I know you’ll understand when I tell you, that if you ever raise your hand against my godson again, I’ll kill you.”

“... Fair enough.”

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Luna woke him up in the morning by playing with his toes. He slipped on his glasses and looked down at her, as she took each toe individually and gave it a little wiggle.

“You have monkey toes,” Luna informed him. “They’re so long. You can tell where your shoes smooshed your pinky toes. They don’t straighten out all the way.”

To prove her point, she took both his pinky toes and tugged them up. They did have a little bit of curve to them. Funny how he’d never noticed.

“Rofin has an extra toe on each foot, but they’re all straight.”

“I imagine Rofin doesn’t wear shoes very often.”

“Nope. Drover only has two toes on his right foot. He lost three of them in a bear trap.”

“His shoes must be particularly roomy.”

Luna grinned up at him, and he grinned back.

“Welcome back, Harry.”

“It’s good to be home. Smooshed pinky toes and all.”

She abandoned his feet to crawl up the bed and lay beside him. He could feel her warm skin against his shoulder, and he was suddenly very aware that he was lying in bed wearing only his slacks and bandages with a girl dressed in nothing more than a one piece wrap, leaving her shoulders naked and her legs almost completely bare. He felt his ears begin to burn.

“Diana said you would be back, but she wouldn’t say when. Everyone was very sad.”

“I’m sorry, Luna. I came back as soon as I could. I didn’t mean to worry anyone.”

“I know. You had to go. It was in the stars,” she said, dreamily and closed her eyes, turning her head that her forehead rested on his shoulder. Now he could smell her, dogwood, tallow, salt, and Luna. She smelled of magic. Harry remembered she was in training to be a shaman.

“Did the Moon tell you this?”

“Mmm...”

She kissed his shoulder, and his breath caught in his throat.

"Luna, sweetheart," came a voice from the door, "please stop provoking him. He's injured."

He looked over to see Athena standing in the doorway, and the redness of his ears quickly covered the rest of his face. The alpha female didn't look bothered by the situation, which only made it worse. Luna sighed and looked up at her foster mother.

"Come on. You're helping me with breakfast. We have more mouths to feed than usual."

"Coming," she promised, then looked to Harry. "Do you prefer strawberries or apples in your pancakes?"

"Er... strawberries, I guess."

"Me too."

She crawled off the bed, careful not to jostle him, and headed for the door. She gave him a little wave at the door and disappeared. Harry let his head fall back and groaned, embarrassment and arousal warring inside him. Oh, yes, he was definitely a healthy young man, if his reaction to Luna were anything to go by.

He really hoped he didn't react this way with all his other female friends. He knew from an aesthetic point of view that most of them were quite attractive, but he hadn't thought of anyone that way since Natalie dumped him and he had been so distracted by other things at the time he had never really thought about anything beyond kissing and holding hands.

Well, he was thinking of other things now. Curse, Luna. Odd, beautiful, and completely uninhibited little daffodil that she was. Bother.

He tentatively got out of bed, and checked his injuries in the morning light. He was still bruised, but now they were yellow rather than the purples and blues of the night before. The mark Voldemort had left on

him was as tender as ever and black as pitch. He cautiously walked around the room, loosening his stiff muscles.

Not bothering with a shirt or shoes, he headed out the door and squinted into the early morning sun. The commune was just starting to wake up. The werewolves were dragging themselves from their sleeping places, a lot of them from hammocks or the roofs of their buildings, and heading towards a particular path that led out to a small creek where they all did a majority of their washing and bathing. He headed out with them, knowing it was the most likely place to find his godfathers.

Sure enough, Sirius and Remus were scrubbing down with the rest of the men folk at a spot where the creek was both wide and just deep enough to accommodate the dozen or so others. The women and children were further upstream and out of sight, although every so often you could hear them talking or laughing. Harry had already been wiped down last night to clean his injuries, and didn't bother with anything more than washing his face and wetting his hair at the edge. The men teased Harry good-naturedly about being skinny and whether he had met any cute girls, making him blush when he was reminded about Luna.

When they got back to the commune the air smelled of cooking ham, and Harry's stomach growled. They gathered together at the long tables set outside, where the cooks set out ham, eggs, and, of course, pancakes with strawberries. They waited only long enough for Fenrir and Sylvia, their pack alphas, to start eating before everyone else started digging in. The commune was loud with cheerful conversation. Several of the men had clustered around Stephen and started talking about their seasonal plans for the commune (which now included building another house to accommodate five more pack members), and some basic skills he would need to be taught right away. Likewise, the women had clustered around Sylvia, gossiping a great deal about men and fawning over her children, who ate their food as quickly as possible then ran off to play with Fenrir's boisterous bunch.

It was a happy time, and Harry soaked it up like a sponge, the feeling of belonging and community easing his sorrows and fears of the previous months. Home, Harry thought. This is home. Whether he

was a werewolf or not, they accepted him and there were people that loved him here.

His happiness high lasted until around nine, when Voldemort returned, interrupting him in a game of checkers with Luna, who kept moving his pieces for him. It was with more than a little reluctance that he pulled on a shirt and shoes, both of which rubbed against injuries he preferred to remain untouched, and grabbed his satchel. He shook hands with everyone (he really wasn't up to hugs), except for Luna, who kissed his blushing cheek, and headed out to greet the rest of the wizarding world.

Fortunately, Harry didn't have to walk far. Voldemort's black car was there to pick them up. Victoria beamed at him as she opened the passenger side door, and he couldn't help but grin back. If it weren't for the Dark Lord, she would probably have broken a rib with one of her hugs.

"You seem very happy," Voldemort observed.

"I am very happy. I'm home."

The Dark Lord gave him a considering look.

"You left easily enough."

Harry's congenial mood vanished, and he glared at the older man.

"The hell I did. I had just found out that I nearly killed you and that you were going to find out at any moment and more than likely come after me, and suddenly Viktor comes out of nowhere offering me sanctuary, and I couldn't think. I just stood there like a bloody idiot. I probably would have just kept standing there if Brennan hadn't-"

He froze. Brennan. He still had no idea what had happened to Brennan. Voldemort seemed to realize what he was thinking, and answered the unspoken question.

"He's very much dead, Harry. Unlike you, he knew exactly what he was doing when he designed that ritual."

Harry closed his eyes, a powerful ache coming over him. He had known Brennan wouldn't be spared, but to have it confirmed was painful. He had been a friend and a mentor with so much knowledge to share with him and the others. It seemed such an unforgivable waste.

"He caste an Imperius on me," Harry said, when he could find nothing else, he cast his grief aside for a better time. "I could have thrown it off, I think. I nearly broke it at least twice. I was still confused though. I didn't know if I should stay or go, and by the time I snapped out of it, it seemed a pointless question. I could either go to Durmstrang as a prisoner or a refugee. Refugee seemed safer."

"So you were just pretending?" Voldemort said coldly, his voice somewhere between disapproval and derision.

"No. I decided to be a refugee. It's not like I didn't think my life was in danger."

Voldemort nodded. "Yes, I did in fact intend to kill you those first few days."

"Er... good to know. Would hate to think I did it for nothing."

Of course, given everything he had learned in the last week, might actually have been worth the whole running away thing. Maybe. Kind of.

"What happened in Germany? Did they interrogate you?"

"They tried to threaten me into renouncing you publically, but they didn't have anything to threaten me with. Not really. They didn't know about the spell, thank Merlin, or I might have been in real trouble. Dumbledore knew though. He came to see me half way through term."

"How did that go?" Voldemort asked, genuinely curious.

“Well... he visited during the full moon. He offered me lemon drops and spiritual guidance. I threw curses at him and I blew up a room. It was like visiting you only with candy.”

The Dark Lord laughed. “Ah, I wish I could have seen that.”

“So, what have you been up to? Burn down any villages while I was away?”

“Not yet. I’m currently courting the Queen of France by post. Which is a lot trickier than it sounds. Did you meet the Minister of Magic while you were in Germany?”

“Unfortunately.”

“What did you think of him?”

“Dirty. I felt dirty just being in the room with him.”

“Intelligent?”

“Manipulative. I don’t know if he’s any good at planning or leading, but I don’t think so. No one seems to really respect him. He gave guardianship of me to Dumbledore, which was a piss poor plan. The old goat didn’t seem to think he held any real power, if he could double cross him so easily. Are you really going to kill him?”

“If his own countrymen don’t do it first? Absolutely. You’re welcome to attend.”

“I’ll pass, but thanks.”

They talked for the entire forty minutes of their drive. The tension from yesterday had not completely abated and Harry could feel the burn on his chest throb and chaff under his shirt, but the old chemistry was still there and conversation came out smoothly if not well organized. They talked of Durmstrang, Grindelwald, Dumbledore (although not about Grindelwald’s relationship with Dumbledore which Harry felt was nobody’s business), Harry’s various kidnapping attempts, the Dream Meeting, national outrage at Germany, Harry’s

various escapes, Voldemort's rationing policy, the fairy wedding, and Hogwarts. Everything had to be simplified and abridged. Time was not on their side and they knew it. More detailed accounts would have to wait until later.

They pulled up in front of Snape's house, and the potions master was already waiting for them. Staring at the menacing dark figure in doorway of the cozy little cottage, Harry was surprised to find he had missed the man almost as much as he had Hermione.

Weird.

"Mr. Potter," Snape greeted blandly, "Still alive I see."

"Now, would I do anything as cliché as dying?"

The potions master's mouth twitched, ever so slightly, but retained its usual intimidating glower.

"Put your things away, and then come back to the kitchen," he instructed, and Harry followed his orders. His room was waiting for him it seemed, the knick-knacks of last summer exactly where he left them. It was just like coming back from Hogwarts.

Elsbeth's owl stand was empty and Inana's basket was conspicuously absent, and he wondered briefly who was taking care of them. He set his satchel on his bed, and went back downstairs to the kitchen.

Voldemort was drinking coffee at the table, while Snape laid out bottles and vaguely familiar looking instruments. Harry sighed, and resigned himself to the inevitable.

"Strip down, Mr. Potter."

He did as instructed, removing everything but his boxers. It wasn't like they hadn't seen him naked before, although Harry felt distinctly more uncomfortable about it with them than he did with werewolves. Snape studied him head to toe, lingering a bit on the newest addition to his tattoo.

“You don’t do anything by halves, do you?”

Harry offered him a tired smile. “I didn’t break any bones this time.”

“Yes, I can tell. Most of them are clearly visible through your skin.”

Snape began to check him over with various little rods and disks and instruments from the table. Eyes, ears, nose, and mouth first. Then lungs (and ribs, four hair-line fractures on the left side), heart, blood pressure (high), reflexes (sharp as ever). He was also made to suck on what looked like long lollipop sticks, each turning a different color.

Snape looked at the sticks closely.

“Just as I thought, you are malnourished. You need potassium, calcium, and vitamins C and D and K. Your kidneys aren’t working well either. What has your diet been like?”

Harry thought on it.

“A lot of convenience store junk and fast food for the last week. I was skinny before that though. I don’t know. I kept getting to trouble at Durmstrang, and they’d only give me gruel to eat. I hate gruel. I started skipping meals if I knew that’s what I got.”

Snape gave him a look to show how unsurprised by that bit of stupidity he was.

“No fresh fruits or vegetables either, I suppose?”

Harry shook his head.

“Imbeciles,” Snape muttered. “Unfortunately, nutrients can not instantly be brought back to normal levels using potions or spells. Saturating your system before it has time to gradually absorb them and adjust itself will poison you. I hope you like asparagus.”

Harry’s expression stated plainly that he did not. Voldemort chuckled into his coffee.

“Where did you learn all this stuff anyway? This seems like way more than they cover in Magical First Aid.”

“I worked part time as a physician's assistant while I attended university. I dare say I learned far more than I am legally allowed to practice without a license.”

Harry tried to imagine Snape at 19 or 20, doing this sort of thing on 100 year old men and pregnant women, and was very dismayed when he succeeded.

And finally, the really unpleasant part of the examination. Musculature. Snape bent and pulled and pushed all of his limbs and back and head, testing what parts of him were pulled or sprained or torn or just bruised. And since Harry was all of those things everywhere it really, really hurt.

This was followed by treatment which was even worse.

“Your immune system is shot from stress and malnutrition, this will help fight off infections,” Snape said, handing him a bright green vile. Harry drank it and cringed as it burned his sinuses, then he bulked as Snape continued to hand him several more potions. “This will flush your kidneys of excess nitrates. This should heal yours ribs, but don't get carried away, they'll still be vulnerable to re-fracturing for another week. This is for the bruising. This is for the cuts. And this is for your teeth, because you clearly haven't been flossing.”

“Hey! I have too,” Harry protested, but drank it anyway. Ugh. He was starting to get nauseous. Snape handed him three more potions without bothering to explain what they were for. “Is all of this really necessary?”

“Absolutely not. I just get a supreme thrill out of watching you turn green. That last one was actually an anti-vomiting potions. You're really going to feel the affects of all those potions in a minute here.”

“You-“

Voldemort burst out laughing. Harry glared at him and then at Snape, who smirked at him smugly.

“Welcome home, Mr. Potter.”

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Harry was supremely unhappy once they left Snape at the house. He hadn't been entirely sure what sort of home coming he would be receiving from his guardian, but he probably should have seen this coming. His stomach rolled and squirmed, threatening to come up, but Harry knew it wouldn't. Snape had made sure of that. The bastard.

He hoped everyone didn't decide to take a jab at him for his quasi-kidnapping. If the Weasley clan banded together for it, he didn't think he'd survive. Of course, the only people who knew he had allowed himself to be taken were Voldemort, Snape, Lucius, and probably Morgan. He'd have to be careful around Lucius for awhile.

“Where are we going?” Harry asked weakly, keeping his eyes closed to stave off motion sickness. In lieu of the latest Slytherin prank, his good humor towards Voldemort had shriveled for the day. No unnecessary chit-chat this time.

“London. We're expected for a press interview. Don't worry; you won't have to say anything. A few pictures proving you're actually here should be more than enough. The kicked puppy look will tell them everything they need to know.”

“Except that it was you who kicked the puppy?”

Voldemort just smirked.

It took an hour to get to London, which was good because Harry feeling a little better by then, although still not very talkative. They were in the Court District, with all its various division houses, and it didn't take long for Harry to figure out which one they were going to.

The couple thousand people crowded outside the Department of Public Affairs was a fairly obvious give away. Harry could only gape at the gathering. They couldn't all be reporters, but what were the others doing there?

"Do they know I'm back?" Harry asked, unable to believe the crowd could have been solely for him. He might be well known because of the Triwizard Tournament and the kidnapping, but he wasn't that important... was he?

"No, they only know I'm holding a press conference. If I had told them what it was really about, we would have had to hold it in the London Stadium. You've become something of a national icon in your absence, my young friend. Your return is going to make a lot of people deliriously happy."

"Then why are there so many people, if they don't know what this is about?"

"I don't speak in public every day and only if it's about something important to the country," Voldemort said, "This is the common man's opportunity to see their ruler and history playing out at the same time. These lucky few will be the first to know of your return, to see you with their own eyes. This is a moment they will be able to share with their children and their grandchildren."

Harry didn't know what to say to that. Part of him felt numb to it. He wasn't sure if he could accept that he held that much significance to complete strangers. It was mind boggling, even though he had known for a long time now that his life was not solely his own anymore.

Thank Merlin, he didn't have to talk today. He didn't think he'd be able to do more than stutter like a fool under the weight of all that attention.

The car pulled into the secret entrance garage at the back of the building, where several Sentinels were there to meet them. So was Lucius Malfoy. They stared at each other for a long assessing moment.

"I remember you being taller," Malfoy said at last.

"I remember you being younger."

Smirks all around. Harry was still careful not to leave his back exposed to the Malfoy patriarch as they left the garage and made their way towards the front doors. As they went, one of Voldemort's assistance instructed him on where to stand and how to look and gave him a glass of water he very obviously needed.

"Welcome back, Mr. Potter," the assistant whispered, sincerely, and Harry managed a smile for him before following the Dark Lord. He had to wait just inside the doors for the first few minutes while Voldemort spoke, and during that time he could neither see nor hear what was happening, and that made him more than a little nervous. He rubbed his clammy hands on his robes and reminded himself that he didn't have to do anything other than not fall on his face or start picking his nose and everything would be fine. "Okay, now," the assistant said, and Harry opened the door and stepped out.

And nearly ran back inside, as some three or four thousand people let out a roaring cheer so loud that Harry could feel the vibration against his skin. Cautiously, he stepped forward until he was standing beside Voldemort. He smiled nervously, and photographers flashed their cameras and a few audacious reports actually tried to rush passed the security personnel.

"Mr. Potter when did you return? How did you manage to escape?"

"Mr. Potter, what happened while you were in Germany? How were you treated?"

"Do you have any insights on why Germany attacked the Dark Lord?"

"Is there anything you would like to say to your captors?"

"Is there anything you would like to say to people of the UK?"

Voldemort lifted his wand, and enormous BOOM sounded through the air, drowning out the reporters and the crowd instantly. Everyone was stunned silent, including Harry, who hadn't been expecting it.

“Ladies and Gentlemen, please,” Voldemort said congenially, a warning in the undertone. “Harry has had a very difficult week, and is in no state to be interrogated. When he is ready, there will be time for asking questions. He kindly offered to show himself today to verify his presence and well being to everyone who has shown such concern for him. For which I am sure everyone is very grateful. I could not bring myself to ask anything more of him.”

Nor will anyone else, was left unsaid but clearly heard. Harry silently marveled at the Dark Lord’s way with words. He was a scary, scary man. In the background, he could hear individual voices shouting out, ‘welcome back Harry’ and ‘way to go Potter’ and ‘we love you, Harry’.

Voldemort gestured for him to take a seat and to rest, still in view of the crowds and reporters but not at the forefront. The Dark Lord continued to speak for a few more minutes, giving a few details of Harry’s return, primarily that he had managed to return using muggle transportation and the help of werewolves (which left people gasping rather melodramatically in Harry’s opinion), and glossing over the fact that Harry was in Britain for about four days before he let anyone know exactly where he was. For this, Harry was grateful. He didn’t fancy Hermione finding out he had decided to go spelunking for a couple of days instead of letting her know he was okay. Unless Lucius had already known about it and saw fit to inform her and/or Draco.

By the end of Voldemort’s announcement, Harry was not only feeling a bit more relaxed, he was starting feel as if he owed the crowd something more than just sitting there. Like the Dark Lord had said, these people would be telling their children and grandchildren about this one day. Might as well give them something to talk about.

As Voldemort moved to leave, the conference concluded, Harry caught him lightly by the arm. He turned to him.

“What is it?”

“Do you think I could say something?” Harry asked. His mentor frowned, a bit uncertain.

"Is it incriminating?"

"Er... no."

Voldemort took another moment to think about and finally nodded.
"Keep it brief."

Harry moved to the podium. The crowd that had already started to move off, hesitated. He cleared his throat.

"I just wanted to say... thank you. I've been gone for a long time, and while I was gone I thought of home and how much I missed it. Now that I'm back, I see that home missed me, as well. It means more to me that I can clearly express. Thank you all."

There was another deafening cheer and more shouts of 'we love you, Harry's and he retreated back into the building with the Dark Lord, his cheeks burning with embarrassment. He felt like such a sap.

Voldemort, just chuckled and patted him lightly on the head.

"Charming. Positively, charming."

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McGunny was scared of muggles.

He was scared shitless of airplanes.

He could not conceive of how a multi-ton monstrosity could roll down a 'runway', let alone fly several thousand feet in the air. Crammed into rows upon tightly pack rows were the muggles he was no longer invisible from and hurtling through the air in a giant flying metal coffin, made him wish he thought to pick up some calming draught before he left wizarding Ireland, but it was too late now. He didn't dare accept the strange little pills the old woman beside him had offered. Tom kept insisting muggle medicine was poison to wizards.

McGunny wasn't sure he believed him, but he didn't dare risk it.

You could always hand over control to me for a little while. Just until we land, of course.

He couldn't reply to Tom, not when there was a little old lady to the right of him and dour looking man to his left, but he had no intention of letting Tom out. True the spirit could force it, but even he knew that was only temporary. McGunny's will to resist provided enough magic to prevent a complete take over, but if he started surrendering it, he doubted he would be able to regain control as easily. So he just closed his eyes, grit his teeth, and did nothing.

It would only be about an hour, he told himself. Then we'll be on the ground.

What happened after that, he couldn't even guess. Tom had some sort of plan, but the spirit was more ambitious than cautious and he was afraid to know the exact details. He knew it involved Dumbledore, and by extension, Harry, and for that alone he hoped it failed.

At the same time, he really hoped Tom didn't get him killed.

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When Harry returned to the garage with the Dark Lord, he was nearly thrown to the floor by a hundred pounds of best friend. He had barely stepped off the elevator, when out of the gloom came Hermione, with the largest smile he had ever seen. She came so suddenly, he didn't have time to protest when she wrapped herself around him in a hug, crushing his bruises and abrading the burn on his chest.

He clenched his teeth to keep from crying out, and hugged her back.

"I can't believe it! I knew you were missing in Germany, but I didn't know how you could have gotten home and was certain something awful had happened to you, but here you are and you look a mess but still you're alive and okay. Thank god, I missed you so much!" she babbled into his shoulder. He smiled despite the pain.

"I missed you too. I got your letter. How could I stay away after that?"

She let out a sound, half sob, half laugh and pulled back. Her eyes were bright with tears, but she was practically glowing with happiness. And dammit, he was having a repeat of the 'Luna Moment'. Stupid teenage hormones.

"I just can't believe it," she couldn't help but laugh. "I probably should have though. You've never been in a situation you couldn't get out of."

"Hey, you're making me sound very Slytherin when you say it like that."

"What's wrong with that?" came another familiar voice, and he looked up to see Draco smirking at him. He looked... a lot taller than he did last year. Stupid hormones, they're conspiring to keep him short and horney. "And break it up you two or there will be some serious dueling over her ladyship's honor."

"Draco!" Hermione protested, her cheeks burning. She did step away though, and let him in to shake Harry's hand.

"Welcome back. How was your incarceration?"

"It was cold and the food was awful, but they did have an excellent Quidditch Pitch. How was Hogwarts?"

"A lot more weepy Hufflepuffs than usual, but the food is still decent and they put back together the Quidditch Pitch. Ron about gave himself a coronary with the new Dueling Club recruits."

"Draco!"

Harry chuckled, "Sorry, I missed that."

"Honesty, the both of you are incorrigible."

Someone touched his shoulder, and he turned to see Voldemort standing there patiently.

"I hate to break up your reunion, but we must be going. I'm sure Severus can arrange a get together later."

Hermione and Draco stiffened and nodded in agreement, and Harry sighed.

"Alright. I'll see you both soon. We can make a day of it so we can catch up."

Hermione nodded, and stole one more quick hug before letting him go. Draco rolled his eyes, and hauled her away. Voldemort and Harry got back in the car.

"Where to now?" Harry asked.

"The Department of International Affairs. We're going to need a complete and formal account of your time spent in abroad. After that, you'll be taken home. No doubt, Severus still has a few more potions he wants you to try."

Harry grimaced.

"You're enjoying this way too much."

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Voldemort had made giving an account of his time in Germany sound like nothing more than a simple errand, like buying shoes or visiting a sick aunt, although if the sick aunt had been Vernon's sister, Marge, he supposed it wasn't that far off the mark. It wasn't just a re-account of what he wanted to say, it was an interrogation.

There had taken him to a court room, and sat him in a chair at the center while some dozen or so others sat in the jury box, including Voldemort, Lucius, and Morgan. He didn't recognize anyone else, but they were all stern faced and unsympathetic. Harry knew it was an

intimidation tactic, to keep him off balanced, but despite knowing that he couldn't fight back his genuine unease. They had made him hold a large yellow crystal, about the size of a banana, and informed him it would turn red if he lied.

There had been a professional interrogator, who appeared to be about the only friendly person in the room that smiled and cajoled him to into tell his story, pressing politely for more details, until Harry showed any sort of reluctance. Then he turned into an irascible bully.

The crystal kept him from lying, but Harry quickly figured out that omitting certain truths didn't affect the color of the crystal at all. Thank Merlin. There were a lot of parts to the story he would rather keep the Dark Lord ignorant of. He told them about the kidnapping (leaving out that he could have thrown off the Imperius Curse if hadn't been so conflicted), about deciding to play along with Viktor's preconceived notions, his meeting with the German Minister, his meeting with Dumbledore, his life at Durmstrang, his encounter with Fleur on the docks and his short lived escape attempt and capture, his second meeting with Dumbledore, the trip to see his parents' graves (although he mentioned nothing of Carrigan and said only that Dumbledore had indicated Voldemort was rotten even as a child, which amused the Dark Lord considerable), the attack by the aurors, his escape, his capture by the Canis family, the second Auror attack and his second escape, his truce with Stephen, the full moon and the fairy wedding (at which point everyone became very uncomfortable, and kept looking to Voldemort to make sure Harry hadn't gone crazy), the crone's message (but not Bobby's role in delivering it), the escape to France using a secret underground tunnel Stephen had heard of, his visit to Fleur (but not his confrontation with Viktor), and the final leg of the journey into Britain via the chunnel, and the longer trip to the werewolf colonies. Just for the hell of it, he also tossed out the Dark Lord beating the crap out of him.

"You had it coming," Voldemort said, looking just as amused as Harry as the other witnesses squirmed uncomfortably in the presence of their Master's insanity.

"So did you."

And his protégé's insanity as well.

It lasted a little longer, the interrogator demanding he give up any offers the Minister or Dumbledore or anyone else might have given him to betray the country, which Harry did easily enough, and attempts to make Harry second guess his decisions while away, which he did not. A few of the witnesses even asked questions, but only petty details and personal curiosities. His story was so fantastic that no one could think of anything he might have withheld without making themselves sound utterly absurd for asking.

Finally, they had thanked him for his cooperation and let him go.

"Victoria will take you home," Voldemort informed him, "I must stay and analyze the new intelligence your story has provided."

"Fun," Harry said blandly. He was starting to feel exhaustion creep up on him again, stress and fatigue taking their toll. Voldemort ruffled his hair affectionately.

"Get some rest, today was only the beginning of a very long, busy summer."

It was the first time since his return, which Harry wondered if he was going regret coming back.

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Victoria was careful not to hug him when she dropped him off at the cottage. She had seen his grimace of discomfort when Hermione had done so, and known he was injured when she had first picked him up. Instead, she squeezed his hand gently in hers and kissed his cheek, and told him she was happy that he was home.

As he wandered up the path to the cottage, he wondered if he would get sick of hearing that. 'I'm happy you're back'. 'I'm glad you're okay'. 'Welcome home'. Some how he doubted it.

He went to the side door leading into the kitchen, rather than the front, and stepped inside.

"I'm ho- who are you?!" he blurted, more than a little startled to find a woman standing at the sink, filling a kettle with water. She gave a startled little squeak of her own, and dropped the kettle. Harry almost instantly relaxed. Her wand did not appear, and by all accounts her wide brown eyes looked far more frightened of him than he did of her. She had an honest face, no make up and freckled brown from the sun.

"Oh," she said faintly, staring at the wand that had automatically jumped into his hand. He quickly pushed it back up his sleeve, embarrassed by the slip. "I'm sorry. We-we haven't been introduced. I'm Ira Beadle. I've been looking after Professor Snape for the last few days."

He blinked at her. Taking care of Snape?

"Oh," he said, "I'm Harry. Nice to meet you."

She smiled timidly.

"Your kettle is overflowing."

She let out another little squeak and spun around, turning off the water. Quickly pouring out the excess water, she moved the kettle to the stove and turned it on.

"Sorry, sorry. I was just making some tea. Professor Snape is in his lab. He should be resting, but he's really very stubborn. Of course, I'm sure you know that already."

Harry nodded, just watching her run about with a growing confusion.

"I'm sorry, but... he didn't mention you when I was here earlier. Are you...?"

He wanted to ask if she were a maid or a cleaning woman, but if she weren't that would sound extremely rude. He struggled to find an appropriate term. "...from town?"

Er... at least it didn't sound rude.

"Town? Oh no, I'm from London," she said, seeming to realize he really was confused about the entire situation. "I don't know if he told you, but Professor Snape... had something of an accident about a week ago while in London. He's an associate of my stepfather, so we looked after him at our flat for a little while. He insisted on coming home early. Stubborn, you know. So I've been dropping by to make sure he doesn't overdo it."

"That sounds like the professor, alright," Harry sighed. "Don't get carried away. He'll take advantage of anyone doing the housework for him."

"I don't mind. With classes out, I don't have much else to do. Besides, the countryside is much more relaxing than London in the summer."

They fell into conversation, a bit awkward at first but gradually it began to lighten. Ira was easily into her thirties, but she had such a sweet and vaguely insecure air about her that she seemed much younger. She worked as a research assistant at the London University of Witchcraft and Wizardry, and loved her job but hated the city. Crowded, she said, and noisy all the time. She definitely knew who he was, but she didn't ask him any questions about what had happened to him and he was grateful for that. He was getting tired of rehashing it after the third time.

They shared tea and conversation for nearly an hour, and when it came time he helped her prepare dinner by peeling vegetables and shucking corn. At some point, Snape dragged himself upstairs for a cup of tea.

"My god, there's two of you now," he muttered.

"If you could take care of yourself, it wouldn't even be an issue," Ira said pointedly. He glared at her.

“At least, I own my own house.”

When she flinched, Harry's hero complex kicked in.

“Which Voldemort gave you,” Harry said. “Don’t get self-righteous, Professor, it’s really unbecoming of a Slytherin.”

"You're right, that's more a Gryffindor trait," he sneered.

“Quite right. We’re perfect like that. Still overpaying for eggs?”

Snape just glowered at him, and headed back towards his potions lab.

“Tell me when dinner’s ready.”

After the door slammed, Harry turned to Ira, and Ira turned to Harry, and they both burst out into laughter.

[illegible]

Book V:

Chapter 9: The Prince and the Purpose

“Get up, Potter.”

“Is it noon yet?” Harry muttered into his pillow.

“Most definitely not.”

“Then nooooo...” But even as he said it he sat himself up. If he didn't get up on his own, Snape had a variety of ways of making him. He snagged his watch from bedside table. 8:45am. Good grief. He turned to glare at the potions master smirking at him from the doorway.

“Ms. Cypher is downstairs.”

“Natalie? What is she doing here?”

“If you like I could send her up and you can ask her yourself.”

Considering that Harry slept only in his boxers last night, that wasn't the best of ideas. His over enthusiastic hormones didn't agree, but they could go straight to hell for all he cared.

“Alright, alright, I'll get up. Is Ira here yet?”

“Miss Beadle has already served breakfast and gone to market. I will be in my lab researching for most of the day. Do not disturb me,” he said, and left.

“Happy hunting,” Harry tossed after him, immune to his cantankerous ways. He dressed quickly, brushed his teeth, washed his face, and hurried downstairs. Natalie sat in the living room, looking as sophisticated as ever. He paused to admire her for a bit, like Draco, she had changed during his absence. A tad more curvy,

face slightly leaner, and eyes a shade darker. Her smile was relieved and nervous at the same time.

“You look awful,” she said, as if it were a compliment. He grinned at her.

“It’s all those darn after parties. They can really wear a guy out. I got your gift. Thank you.”

She blushed a little, but quickly hid it, but changing the subject. “Yes, well, your art is all well and good, but your handwriting is awful.”

He crossed his arms and pretended to be insulted. “Oh, so that’s how it is. I suppose once I’ve mastered the pen, you’ll have me writing you poetry.”

“Oh, ha ha.”

He moved into the living room and took a chair kitty-corner to Natalie. He could see now that she had brought a very familiar looking basket.

“Is that..?”

She smiled and opened the basket. Inana immediately slithered out, climbing up the girl’s offered arm and around her neck, just as she had done with Harry countless times before. He watched in amazement as the snake settled around her shoulders. Inana had always liked Natalie best out of his friends, but he hadn’t thought the regal serpent would allow even her to manhandle her without Harry present. Obviously, he was mistaken.

Inana turned her pointed head towards him, flicked her tongue and finally seemed to recognize him.

“Where have you been? I haven’t ssseen you in agesss.”

“Sssorry. I was kidnapped, and I only got back a few daysss ago. Are you alright? What are you doing with Natalie?”

“Isss that her name? I don’t know. When you didn’t ssshow up, ssshe ssstarted visiting. She isss tolerable... for a human.”

“What did she say?” Natalie asked, gently stroking the top of the serpents’ scaly head.

“Nothing really, just... airing all your dirty secrets to me. I never would have guessed you keep that in your closet.”

“Harry Potter, you are so full of it,” she laughed. Inana had slid down from her shoulders and was now making her ways towards Harry. At nearly seven feet, she didn’t have to move much, and even seated comfortably in Harry’s lap, she still managed to keep her tail curled affectionately around Natalie’s wrist.

His laughter died off, and he stared mutely at the serpentine body connecting them. The Slytherin girl also fell into uncertain silence.

“I’ve missed you, Natalie.”

“I’ve missed you too.

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McGunny stared blankly at the German newspaper, not comprehending a word of it, but getting a vague idea of what was happening by the moving photos. It was in fact the photos that drew McGunny’s attention in the first place.

There were three photos on the very first page. Harry Potter, looking thin and nervous, standing on a dock somewhere. A picture, a mug shot rather, of another man, looking very much like he wanted to jump out of the picture and strangle someone. The third was of Dumbledore, who looked rather annoyed.

The title page read, Harry Potter zurück in London! Entführt von einem Werwolf! Dumbledore noch immer vermisst!

Out of that, the only words McGunny recognized were the names and 'werewolf'. He felt an inkling of fear. Had Harry been attacked by a werewolf? In the back of his mind he could feel Tom stirring, and then a sudden piercing headache that disappeared almost as quickly as it appeared. And suddenly he knew German.

Harry Potter back in London! Kidnapped by a Werewolf! Dumbledore still Missing!

McGunny closed his eyes, then opened them again. Reread the German script. It remained the same. He could not only read it, but he was pretty he could say it without stumbling over the unfamiliar words. Too strange.

Read the bloody article, Horace.

He made a quick look around the street, lined with small shops and busy with morning shoppers, and found himself an empty bench to sit on. No one gave him a second glance, and despite being in a hostile country, McGunny felt a lot safer among these wizards than he did among the muggles at the airport. He began to read.

'June,12- The Ministry of Magic has just released its first official statement regarding the disappearance of 14-year-old Harold James Potter, former protégé of the Dark Lord Voldemort who was rescued last December by Viktor Krum. Minister Seibligg confirmed public speculation of an attack by Death Eaters on June 3rd, during which Potter was taken against his will and his guardian, Albus Dumbledore has disappeared.

The latest intelligence puts an odd new twist to the event. A mere sixteen hours after Potter's abduction, a routine patrol by three Jr. Aurors turned up the child at a known werewolf hideout. Despite their heroic attempt to rescue Potter, all three Aurors were injured and the kidnappers escaped. The names of the Aurors and the extent of their injuries have not been released. At least one assailant was identified as Stephen Nostrom Canis, a known agitator and black market trader in the Berlin Underworld...'

McGunny had to stop, a shiver running up his spine. A hundred ghastly images popping into his head of what might have happened to his young friend while in the custody of ruthless criminals.

Don't believe it for a second, Tom hissed. The Ministry lies to protect itself. The paper lies to make a better story. You know this already. Keep reading.

He did know better. He had been around Potter enough to know when the paper made up things about him, and they frequently did, and when the 'official' story was a load of crock. He continued to read. The article went on to describe the suspicion of a Death Eater circle being set-up by disgruntled werewolves within Germany, the massive efforts to locate Potter amongst them, the half dozen arrests that had already been made, fears of Potter being infected during the full moon, and finally his reappearance in London during a public appearance by Voldemort. There was a lot of speculation about whether Harry was now a werewolf himself, and if the Dark Lord hadn't 'Imperio-ed' Harry or threatened him to insure his cooperation. The German Ministry still adamantly denied any suggestion of kidnapping Potter in the first place, and insisted that the young wizard was happy to be rescued. In fact, the more McGunny read, the more certain he became that the entire article was a load of bullshit. The few vague suggestions that Dumbledore was now dead struck him as particularly absurd. If Dumbledore were dead, the perpetrators would want that publically known. The old wizard had obviously gone into hiding.

Which meant all of Tom's plans had just gone to pot.

As the increasingly agitated spirit realized this himself, a burst of angry, wild magic ran through McGunny's body, exiting through his hands and lighting his newspaper on fire.

"Shit!" He threw down the paper and stomped out the flames. "Tom, you idiot."

The fire extinguished, McGunny looked around and wasn't surprised that half the people on the street were now looking at him like he was a loon. No point in tempting fate, he decided, and quickly walked

away. He could feel Tom raging, pounding like a tiny, but persistent hammer at the inside of his skull. When he had finally found himself on an empty street, he risked talking to the enraged spirit.

“Now what? All your efforts to get Harry out of the country were completely undone, and now that Dumbledore’s gone you don’t have any resources available to you in Germany, and we sure as hell can’t go back to England. I don’t suppose you had a Plan C?” he said, sarcastically.

Tom was silent for a long moment, but with each passing second became calmer and more certain.

I’m a genius, not a prophet. I couldn’t have predicted these turn of events, but as a genius I can find a way to turn them to my advantage. Lets find somewhere to live for now. I will need to gather information before I make any decisions.

“That’s a long winded way of saying ‘I don’t know what I’m doing’.”

You’re being awful mean-spirited, Horace.

“Go back to hell, Tom.”

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It had only been about a week and a half, but the mysterious plant Snape had brought home with him was now almost twice as large, which still wasn’t very impressive, being about a foot and a half tall with six leaves. It was rather by accident, that he discovered if he nicked a leaf or stem, it bled. It was a rather disturbing little plant.

At least it didn’t appear to actually require blood, although he found himself changing the potting soil every other day, and seemed quite content with tap water and the artificial sunlight. With this information he was quite certain he could identify the plant, if he could actually find the time to get to the library to get some books on magical botany.

Currently, he barely had time to sit down, let alone do some research, and it was all Harry's fault. Ira was still coming around to do the shopping and the housework, but there were some things she just wasn't qualified to handle. Supervising Harry was one of them. Six months abroad had done nothing to curb his willful nature, and if anything he was twice as bad as before. He was already writing letters to just about everyone, including his godfathers, without checking with Snape first and had even gone out to visit Clyde for lunch the day before without telling anyone. The sad thing was, Harry honestly hadn't seen the harm in it. The potions master was very close to ringing his neck.

On top of that, Snape found himself accompanying the boy to London almost daily for press interviews and conferences with the Dark Lord (which admittedly were more for his benefit than Harry's), and to Dueling Club tournaments (which he would have had to attend anyway as the club's adult supervisor, but now had to deal with being in charge of a celebrity at the same time). Then there was the increase in post. It hadn't taken long for people to realize that Harry wasn't receiving their mail, and much of it was now being routed through to Snape, including nearly forty betrothal offers, sixteen modeling offers by advertising companies, and a rather lot of free tickets to Quidditch matches (which he had no intention of letting Harry go to if he continued to wander off on his own). And as if that weren't enough, Ms. Cypher had returned to Harry's life, and reminded him, that yes, he is in fact an adolescent male with all the parts and instincts that entails, and therefore couldn't left alone with her. Or Hermione, but luckily she always came over with Draco.

Speaking of the Malfoys...

"To what do I owe the privilege of your company?" he asked, only mildly sarcastic, as it was a rare event that Narcissa ever visited him without her husband. She had arrived in the company of Draco and Hermione, who had quickly been sent off to find Harry, out watering the garden with Ms. Beadle. Snape put on a kettle of tea, and sat down with her in the living room. She looked distinctly out of place in his modest country house, her hair and clothes done in chicest London fashion, but not uncomfortable. She was queen of where ever she was, be it a palace or a pub.

They had been good friends during their school years and even tighter during the war, but time and responsibilities had gradually been taking them in different directions. They still enjoyed each others company.

“Lucius and I have been worried about you, Severus. After that attack in London, you just wandered out of the hospital and all but disappeared, and when you did show up you acted as if nothing had happened. Then Potter showed up, and suddenly you’re everywhere. It is a bit baffling,” she said, not looking the least bit baffled.

“You know me, Narcissa. I was never one to lie around and do nothing... even when I probably should have. You needn’t have worried. Ms. Beadle has been mothering me in your absence,” he said, smirking a bit. She smirked back. Her bedside manner had always left something to be desired, and she wasn’t the least bit apologetic.

“Ah yes, Ms. Beadle. Rather charming girl, in a mousy kind of way.”

“If you say so.”

“You must like her at least a little, if you haven’t sent her running yet,” she said, knowingly.

“She cooks and keeps house for free. I’m not going to look a gift horse in the mouth.”

“Mmm... How are you recovering?”

“I’ve been recovered for nearly a week,” he lied. Truthfully, he still had trouble sleeping at night because of the aches in his abdomen, but he was able to function for the most part.

“And your ward?”

“Potter is nearly twelve pounds lighter than when he left. You wouldn't know it for all the hell he still raises.”

“Yes, Draco mentioned he knocked one of his adversaries clean into the stands during the last dueling competition.”

Snape smirked at the memory. No one had looked more surprised than Harry when his simple disarming hex had sent a duelist twice his size nearly thirty feet. The Weasley twins had been crowing about his spectacular come back, even after he was disqualified from the rest of the matches for ‘excessive force’. Harry had turned bright red, and hadn't stopped blushing until after they left the tournament.

“I suppose duking it out with the Dark Lord and the German Aurors has made dueling against his peers seem rather tame in comparison.”

Narcissa very nearly twitched at the vague reference to Harry's fight with Voldemort. She didn't have a clue what it was about, but she did know that Harry had broken the Dark Lord's nose (not that you could tell) according to her husband, who was still reeling from the fact that the Gryffindor had not only come back to Britain on his own, but had actually survived the Dark Lord's temper tantrum relatively unharmed. The only one who hadn't been surprised was Snape, who was taking the ordeal in about as good a humor as Snape took anything.

“Yes, I suppose so. I hope you both can avoid getting into a row. He's at that age now, after all.”

It wasn't something he particularly worried about. Harry and he had been in plenty of fights, some real shouting matches and plenty of door slamming, but they had never resorted to wands or fists. There was an unspoken, but mutual agreement that violence had no place in their home. That wasn't something he felt Narcissa needed to know. It inferred things he didn't like.

“I assure you I have Potter well in hand.”

“That’s a relief. I have a feeling things are going to get very tense soon, Severus. We need you to be at your most commanding, to lead the children through the difficult times. They’re coming soon. I can feel it.”

He nodded. He felt it too. All of Britain felt it. The Dark Lord’s Ultimatum to Germany was like a ticking bomb, the entire world turned to watch as the time ran down to its final, violent conclusion. Voldemort was still demanding the German Minister be held accountable for his act of war against a ‘peaceful’ nation, and Seibligg was still denying any wrong doing. Potter’s return hadn’t diffused the situation, and had in fact made matters tenser. Germany had no hostage, and the Minister of Magic was more desperate than ever to prove himself in the right. There was no reason for the Dark Lord to hold back.

“I know. When the time comes... I will ensure that they know their duty. Especially Potter.”

And wasn’t that going to be fun.

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Harry’s life had gone from very slow and tedious (Durmstrang) to frantically chaotic (return to Britain), and finally seemed to settle somewhere in the middle at frantically tedious. Two weeks after his return, he had finally gotten tired of hearing ‘welcome back, Harry’. He had done more press interviews in one week than he had in all the years prior, met a few times with Voldemort, visited almost all his friends (thank Merlin for Ira, because Snape couldn’t be bothered to take him anywhere just for leisure), written to those he hadn’t (Elsbeth had returned on her own on the third day), helped Ira keep house (which involved a lot more work than the two bachelors had bothered with the year before), finished reading Hermione’s log, and continued Dueling practice and tournaments (and was more than a little surprised to find he was ahead rather than behind most of his classmates). He hadn’t even started on his summer school work. He was afraid to even ask about it, wondering if Snape would tell him he

would have to repeat the entire year like Cedric Diggory (whom he had visited and had a very interesting discussion about Valkyries with).

Despite his tight schedule, he made point to set aside this one particular day for a trip to London. It wasn't for interviews or Voldemort, but it was important. He had been thinking about it off and on since he had been taken to Durmstrang. Ira was escorting him this time, which was good because Snape could be damn frightening to anyone under the age of... dirt. He was could frighten just about anyone if he put his mind to it.

Even through the door, Harry and Ira could hear the sound of too many children after eating too much sugar. Laughter and screeching and singing and running feet. Harry turned to his escort.

"Are you sure you want to come in? If you want to go home and pick me up in a few hours that would be fine too."

She shook her head, and said solemnly. "Professor Snape would kill me if he knew I left you with a horde of impressionable young people."

They both laughed. One of the things Harry liked about Ira was that she was one of the few people that knew how to handle Snape. It took a thick skin, a bit of wit, and the ability to ignore him when he got testy, and if you could do all that eventually you found yourself enjoying his company. He was like drinking really strong, black coffee. It certainly wasn't for everyone.

He knocked on the door. There was a few more moments of playful racket, and then the door was pulled open by Robert Reicher, coated in a layer of glitter and confetti. His eyes widened as he recognized Harry.

"Harry?"

"Surprise?" he said, smiling weakly. It occurred to him that he probably should have sent them word in advance that he was coming,

but by the time he had remembered Elsbeth had already been sent out to deliver a letter to Hagrid.

Nevertheless, Robert smiled. "I'll say."

He pulled away from the door a moment to look behind him, then turned to Harry. "Okay, hurry in quick before they spot you. This will be a perfect surprise. I have the kitchen cordoned off for the adults."

They hurried inside and towards the back, Harry chuckling as they snuck passed the living room where a dozen or so children were busy playing a game that looked suspiciously like Twister. They made it to the kitchen safely undetected, and there found a large pile of presents and a congregation of parents. Harry set his present down amongst the rest, and looked around.

"Where's Kyle?"

"Watching the kids," Robert said, "I'll get him in just a second here. It's good you came. Morgana insisted you would be here, and it would have broken her heart if..."

"I made a promise," Harry said. "I never forget my promises. I'm sorry, I should have sent you word ahead of time."

Robert placed his hand on Harry's shoulder, and smiled. "I'm glad you're here." There was a lot said in the gesture, more so than even the words, and Harry felt familiar warmth he associated with home. Then he seemed to finally notice Ira.

"Oh, I'm sorry, we haven't been introduced. Robert Reicher."

"Ira Beadle. I'm Harry's...er..."

"Friend," Harry offered. "She's been helping me settle back in."

"Ah, well, it's nice to meet you. Let me just get Kyle. He'll ring my neck if I don't warn him in advance."

He left the kitchen in hurry, leaving the two with six other strangers, more than a few of them openly gawking at Harry.

“Good Lord, you wouldn’t happen to be-” one rather hefty looking mother started.

A father, one of two there, shook his head. “Oh, I get it, you’re a look-a-like. I’ve heard of this. You hire a look-a-like to entertain at parties, like birthdays and weddings. As if Rob knows-”

“Actually no,” Harry said. “I really am Harry Potter. Nice to meet you.”

The other parents looked uncertain for a moment, but then one of the mothers, clearly well into another pregnancy, came forward and shook his hand.

“I’m Addy Gaines. My son, Joel is in Morgana’s class.”

“Nice to meet you, Mrs. Price.”

And that started off the introductions, but they only made it half way through before Kyle came running into the kitchen as if it were on fire. One moment, he was just staring at Harry and then the next he was hugging the body like an anaconda.

“I can’t believe it! You rascal! You had me laughing for days when I heard you got back all on your own.”

“Well, I couldn’t break my promise, now could I?” he managed to wheeze out. Kyle just laughed and patted him on the back.

“It’s good to have you back. Come on out. Alyssa is already suspicious, and if she catches you, the kitchen is going to be as big a mess as the rest of the house.”

Harry took a quick moment to introduce Ira, and then followed Kyle out into the hall, the other parents following behind out of curiosity.

“Morgana, Alyssa, look who finally showed up!”

Harry had barely even stepped into view before he found himself with an armful of little girls. They cried out in delight, wrapping their little arms around.

“Harry!”

“How are my beautiful princesses?” he said, kneeling down. They were all done up in curls and pink and yellow birthday dresses, flush from laughing and running around. Alyssa reached out and touched his cheek.

“You’re so skinny!”

“Ah, well you see, I missed you both so much, I just about wasted away,” he explained, solemnly, “But then I remembered my promise, and decided I just had to escape.”

Morgana turned to a little boy, who looked a bit like Addy, and said, “Told you so!” Then she turned back to Harry. “Tell us about it! You always have the best stories! I bet this one is really good!”

Harry looked uncertain. Telling stories to two little girls around bedtime was a lot different than telling stories to a dozen little girls and boys hyped up on sugar.

“Please, Prince Harry?” Alyssa begged, which got the other children going.

“Please, please, please?!”

He sighed and nodded, and they all let out a cheer, including some of the adults in the hall just to be cute. He waded through the children until he reached the sofa, Morgana on the right, Alyssa on the left, two more kids squeezed in on both sides and the rest sitting on the floor, while the adults found seating or lounging spots where ever they could.

“Alright, where shall I start?” he asked. Morgana of course, had the answer.

“Tell us why you got kidnapped. Papa said it was because Germany doesn’t have its own prince, so they stole ours. They just have lords and ladies and a really stupid minister.”

There was soft chuckling from the adults, but Harry just nodded solemnly, the idea for the story (because there was no way he was telling it the way it really happened) already starting to take shape.

“Oh, yes, this is very true. There are many noble lords and ladies in Germany, but no king or queen or princes or princesses. All they have is Minister Seibligg, and he is quite stupid. In fact, the Minister was elected because he was so stupid, and the people thought it would be a funny joke to pick him. You see if they had a stupid ruler they thought they could have all the fun they wanted and he would be too stupid to stop them. They could skip school and sleep during work and eat ice cream every day.”

This made the children all smile. It certainly sounded like a good plan to them.

“So they had a lot of fun there?” a little girl asked.

Harry shook his head. “No, they did not. It was only fun for a few days, and then the children all grew bored, the grown-ups all ran out of money, and eating all that ice cream gave them tummy aches. So they went back to school and they got back to work and they ate their spinach.” The children wrinkled their noses. “Now the Minister thought he was doing an excellent job. For a whole week everyone was so happy, so he didn’t understand why they had all started going back to studying and working and eating spinach, and he passed a law ordering them all to stop. This made the people very angry, and they all told him he was stupid and he couldn’t make them do anything, and they kept learning, working, and eating-“

“Spinach,” several children said at once.

“Exactly.” *

Harry continued his story, weaving a tale of foolishness and bravery and magic, enrapturing the listeners, both child and adult. He told them of the Minister’s foolish plan to become king by adopting an orphan prince so that he could rule forever, and how he betrayed King Voldemort, who had just happened to have an orphan prince lying around, and stole the orphan and locked him away in an ice fortress. But the orphan was very clever, as most orphans are, and escaped by sneaking aboard the same pirate ship that kidnapped him. Once he reached land, the orphan prince met many people, some bad and some good and some strange, until at last he met the werewolves, who saved him from being lost in a dangerous wood and led him home through a secret underground tunnel.

“And then,” Kyle pitched in, “They all celebrated by eating-“

“Spinach!” some yelled, and everyone laughed.

“Ice cream and cake! Everyone into the dinning room!”

There were shouts of glee, and the tranquility of before was shattered by the promise of more sugar. Alyssa and Morgana each gave him a big hug and ran off with the rest. Harry sighed in relief, and slumped into the cushions. It was hard work telling a story for nearly an hour and keeping it entertaining.

“That, my friend,” Robert said, helping him to his feet, “Was a very good story.”

One of the other parents laughed, “I don’t suppose I could hire you on to do Rachel’s birthday party? I’ve never seen that many children sit that quietly for that long.”

Harry laughed, but shook his head. “I’m afraid I’m all booked up for the rest of the year.”

The rest of the party went off without a hitch. They had their cake and ice cream, Morgana opened her presents, and they spent about

another hour burning off sugar with several rounds of hide-in-seek, before everyone started to crash and their parents took them home. Morgana and Alyssa were very reluctant to let Harry go, so he lingered until the very end by having coffee with Robert, Kyle, and Ira until even Morgana and Alyssa were struggling against sleep.

He kissed them both on the forehead, wished Robert and Kyle goodnight, and followed Ira out into London. The sun hadn't quite settled below the skyline, but the afternoon heat was quickly fading. They were both tired, but in a pleasant, drowsy sort of way.

"You really are a prince, you know that?" Ira said after a block.

"I've heard it said, once or twice," which was as far as he was ever going to be to admitting it.

"You made those little girls very happy today."

"I also made them miserable for six months worrying about me. Do you think a few hours makes up for that?"

She looked at him startled. He was still smiling, but it had taken on a melancholy air she had assumed was simply fatigue.

"It's hard being my friend," he said, "It can even be dangerous. Trouble finds me and I seek out trouble, and bad things happen sometimes."

"That's not your fault."

"Do you think that makes it better? I love my friends, I care about them, and for the last six months they had to wait here and wonder if I was ever coming back or if I was even okay. Before that, they had to wonder if I was going to survive the bloody Triwizard cup and before that being stalked by a terrorist and before that it was... something else... and something else before that... It's always something, and there will always be something."

She couldn't say anything to that. She didn't even know how the subject had come up, but she was feeling distinctly out of her element.

"I like you, Ira. You're a nice lady and easy to talk to, but you need to understand what caring about me entails. I get into dangerous situations sometimes. I have a lot of secrets that I'll never tell you. I practice the kind of magics that can tear apart a person's soul if they're not careful. I enjoy the company of werewolves, and do things with them that no sane person would dare. I talk to snakes. Oh, and Voldemort wants me to help him rule the UK. That's all the major things, I think."

She just blinked at him, and then swallowed thickly. Now, she was feeling just plain out of her league. The things he was talking about she never expected to face, not in a hundred years, but that was the everyday existence for Harry. A life so fantastical it couldn't be anything but lonely.

He looked so small walking there beside her.

"You have to think this through, Ira," he continued. "I've given you fair warning, which is more than anyone else ever got when they fell in with me. It's not all going to be tea and birthday parties. Just ask Snape. He can rant for days on the subject."

"You're tired, Harry."

"Yeah, but I'm not lying."

"I know. Lets just get you home."

He smiled bit more authentically. "I'm already home. Everyone welcomes me back where ever I go. Complete strangers, even. It's weird, but kind of nice. I bet I could stop anyone on this street and introduce myself, and they'll say. 'It's good to meet you, lad. Welcome home,' or 'Oh yes, I've heard of you! Good to have you back!' I'll bet you a whole galleon, that's what they would happen."

"You're probably right," she said. "They all mean it too."

“And that’s just what the king intended”

[illegible]

Harry sprung up in his bed, staring wide eyed into the darkness of his room. He could sense it was late into the night, possibly even the early morning before even a hint of pre-dawn light.

“Bobby? Elsbeth? Is that you?” he whispered, searching blindly for his glasses and his wand on the bedside table. He cast a Lumos on the darkened room, bringing his wand to a gentle glow that wouldn’t hurt his eyes.

There was no Bobby or Elsbeth, but there was an owl standing on the owl perch, unfamiliar, but with a very obvious roll of parchment on its leg. He dug some own treats out of his bedside table, gave one to it while he untied the message. Unrolling it, he found a letter in familiar flowing script and a newspaper article. He read the letter first.

Dear Harry

I was relieved to hear that you had returned home safely. I knew you could do it. Your escape, however, has had some unforeseen consequences that I know you would want to be made aware of as soon as possible. There are werewolves trying to get into France without permits or papers, and while this isn't uncommon, we have never seen so many at once. I did some investigating, and what I learned breaks my heart.

The werewolves in Germany are being hunted. There is no telling how many have been arrested, but those who have managed to make into France insist the number to be in the hundreds and dozens have been killed already. The Ministry is accusing them of being Death Eaters, but even if it were true their tactics are too extreme to be legal or moral. They are even arresting the people who are hiding the werewolves, and there has been rioting in Munich and Stuttgart.

The Queen intends to renounce their actions formally soon, but she doesn't hold much sway in Germany any longer and we do not have the resources to handle so many people so suddenly. If there are accidents, and a werewolf hurts or kills someone, she will be held accountable.

I know you care about these people, so if there is anyway you can convince Lord Voldemort to help us, I can almost guarantee France will accept it. If anyone can convince him, it's you.

It wasn't signed, but then Harry already knew it was Fleur. The article she had sent him was in German, detailing lie after lie about Harry and his escape from Germany. There was nothing of the Aurors who had attacked him, which he wasn't expecting, but describing Stephen, a family man through and through, as a lone dissenter attempting to raise a covert army was absurd. There was no mention of his wife and children at all. He stared at it, baffled for a long time. Then realized what was being done was a lot more important than what was being said.

The werewolves needed help. They needed help, and while he wasn't sure how he played into it, he was certain it was at least partly his fault.

The weight of an overwhelming responsibility began to settle on his shoulders. He didn't know if he could do anything. He had no power of his own, only what Voldemort gave him, and he didn't know if he could beg this boon from him so soon after his return, the ashy taste of betrayal still fresh in the Dark Lord's mouth.

Unless...

"I have to make it appeal to him," he said softly to the dark.

He lit the candle on his desk with the flick of his wand, and pulled out some parchment, a quill, and ink. For ten minutes, he simply sat there and tried to clear his mind of images Fleur had conjured in her letters. Images he associated with the Jews and gypsies of World War II; entire families hiding in attics as soldiers hunted the house for them,

desperate dashes for freedom in the dark of night, and lines of the captured marched into the back of trucks never to be seen again.

He couldn't use those. The Dark Lord wouldn't care, and all they did was weigh him down with guilt and responsibility. He had to shove them aside, and find a reason that would make Voldemort want to help them. To find the advantages in a situation that should be resolved for solely moral reasons.

When he could finally push aside his own feelings, he was amazed that reasons were abundant, all of them cold and amoral, but plentiful. Quickly, he began to write.

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"I need to see Lord Voldemort. Today."

"Certainly. I'll just cancel your appointment with the Spanish Minister and bump that meeting with the Pope to three," Snape said, not looking up from the forty-second marriage proposal. Once you got passed the flowery introductions, they were actually pretty funny to read. Like James Potter's love letters to Lily. The man couldn't write a poem unless it rhymed and that had resulted in some interesting similes and metaphors that rhymed with 'Lily'.

Ira was at the stove, making eggs, as if she had never left. She looked over at him curiously, but didn't ask. This clearly didn't involve her.

"It involves his relations with France. It's important."

Snape looked up from his letter, curiosity peaked.

"And how would you have come across information relevant to the Dark Lord's relations with France? And what makes you think he doesn't know what you know already?"

“I have friends in France. How do you think I managed to get through it without getting arrested? And I’m sure the Dark Lord knows what I know already, but just to be sure...”

“If you just tell me-“

“It involves me too.”

Snape’s eyes narrowed in suspicion. Harry tried to smile innocently, but he had been up in his room all night brainstorming and then picking apart his own ideas like Hermione had taught him to do, and was too tired for anything more enthusiastic than darkly amused.

“I could make you tell me...”

“I’m not eleven anymore, Professor. Do you really want into see what’s floating around in my head? Even the Dark Lord shies away from it these days.”

“You’re getting better at this,” Snape remarked, and turned back to the letters. “I’ll send him a missive. If he can spare the time, we’ll go.”

“Thank you,” Harry said, sincerely. The potions master sighed.

“And you were doing so well up until that point. I almost forgot you were a Gryffindor.”

“Gryffindors get the toast that’s less burnt,” he said, smirking up at Ira as she set down his plate in front of him. She just rolled her eyes. Snape, however, double checked to see if it were true.

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Voldemort did, in fact, have time to spare for them, and a quarter before noon, they walked into the Department of Foreign Affairs, Scottish Branch in Glasgow. Harry made it a point to dress in his interview clothes, freshly spelled free of wrinkles and shoes shined.

He had Fleur's letter and his own list of ideas folded neatly in his breath pocket, but he hoped he wouldn't have to take out either.

They went through the usual security checks, and entered the Dark Lord's office. The style was distinctly gothic, narrow pointed arches at the windows and door way, and high vaulted ceiling making the room feel more like a medieval church than an office. The Dark Lord's desk however, made of ancient timbers and inlaid with dragons and horses and gods would never have been at home in a church. He leaned against his high-backed chair as they entered, his interest immediately settling on Harry.

"You wished to talk to me about something?"

The Gryffindor swallowed thickly, and took a seat nearest his desk. Snape, however, remained near the door with his arms crossed, stating without a word that Harry was on his own here.

"Yes... have you... have you received any letters from France recently?"

He raised a brow.

"I have."

"Then you know of the werewolf situation?"

The Dark Lord smiled knowingly. Out of the corner of his eye, Harry saw Snape shift, and thought if he turned to him he would see one very pissed off potions master.

"Do you intend to help?"

"Do you?" Voldemort asked, curiously.

"...I only have the power that you give me," Harry said cautiously. "If you give me the power to help them, I will."

“A very good answer. And how would you help them if I granted you such power?”

That was a tricky question to answer. If Harry asked for too much, he would be denied, if he asked for too little opportunity would be lost. He decided to aim high. He might be able to argue his way up.

“Offer to take a few hundred of the refugees off France’s hands and set them up with Greyback, perhaps set up additional colonies in France with their permission.”

Voldemort let out a snort. “A few hundred refugees? Do you think Greyback have that much room to spare? They’re hunters and gathers, not urbanites. I would have to hand over half the forests in Britain, including the Forbidden Forest to accommodate that many werewolves. And then I’d have to re-open all those cells in Azkaban because there was no more openings left for the felonious amongst the furred.”

“They’re people,” Harry said pointedly, “They can adapt to being something other than hunter gatherers. They can be farmers, and still live off the land and provide a service to wizarding kind. Or shepherds. Dairy farmers. Anything that gives them space away from witches and wizards.”

Voldemort conceded the point with a gesture.

“Alright, I could take a few hundred people off their hands. Now tell me why I should?”

“Aside from the fact that the Queen of France will love you for it?”

The Dark Lord smirked. “Aside from that.”

“You’ll have hundreds of very grateful people, seriously pissed off at the country you intend to go war with for one.”

“Oh, I like that one. Greyback won’t let me take them out of his territory for military purposes though.”

Harry thought for a moment. "He'd probably let you take a lot of the men if you negotiated for it. There are a disproportionate number of men to women in the colonies."

Voldemort conceded that point as well. Harry let out the breath he was holding. So far, so good. Naturally, the Dark Lord had to throw a curve ball.

"I doubt I'll be able to get the Brits to agree with you though. They're still grumbling over the monopoly on furs and forest goods the wolves have going. If the system didn't work so well, the trade guilds would still be pushing to dissolve the colonies."

Harry didn't know anything about the trade guilds opposition to werewolves, but he had factored in the public's reluctance to let more werewolves into the country after only a few years of having control over their native population.

"I'll convince them."

"You?"

"I'll convince the people that it's the right thing to do. That it is the right and honorable thing to do. Isn't that what you wanted? For me to sell the people on an idea that you can't? I think that's what you said."

Voldemort's smile faded, and he stared at Harry thoughtfully.

"And do you think you could do it now? Are you that brave? That strong? Once you start down this path you can't step off of it. You will be identified by your cause, and there are going to be a lot of people who hate you for it, strive to dishonor you and those close to you, mock your every decision and action."

Harry remained quiet, truly thinking about what the Dark Lord was saying. Life was already difficult without public criticism, but he wasn't naïve enough to think it wouldn't have ended up that way. Voldemort wanted his prince, and the prince was always more vulnerable. The

least he could do was have the subject of criticism be something he could support whole heartedly.

“I am a child of the Moon,” Harry said, “And they are my brothers and my sisters. What is the mockery of men compared to their suffering? If you give me the power, I will help them.”

“And if I don’t?”

“Then I’ll have to find the power elsewhere... and that is a scary, scary thought.”

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“This is the stupidest idea you’ve had yet,” McGunny hissed under his breath, wandering down the darkened street. Blood Row. Vampireville. Coffin Corner. That’s what they called these places in England. The one or two blocks the vampires kept themselves to in any given city, where a mortal only came under the protection of one of its inhabitants or if they had a death wish. McGunny didn’t have either, but Tom had taken control over his limbs just to get him there, and now was moving him about with the sort of confidence that kept even the most suspicious shadowy figure from looking twice at him.

They are powerful here and numerous. Just the allies we need.

“Can’t we get allies that are breathing and vegetarian instead?” he muttered.

Sure, if we were raging a war against cancer and obesity.

The apartments and shops along Blood Row (he had no idea of the street’s real name or what the Germans called it), were all dark and all open, the soft glow of candlelight peeking out of the odd, open curtain. Pale men and women walked the street, dressed in either elegant black, whites, and reds or tattered grays, and music flowed from every shop, all varieties including folk and acoustic guitar. There was a lively air about the place, despite most of its occupants being

dead, and if it weren't for the poor lighting he might have passed down this street without even realizing where he was.

“Aren't you a little young to be out on your own, little man?” a voice suddenly purred in his ear. If McGunny had had any control over his body, he would have jumped near out of his skin, but Tom didn't allow him to so much as flinch. Instead, he turned to the male vampire smirking at him. He was slender, almost sexless in shape, with narrow eyes and a wide mouth that made him look like a snake.

Tom liked him instantly.

“Who is the Master of this Row?”

“Who is asking?”

Tom/McGunny handed him a card, black with an elegant golden V, and nothing else. The vampire took it, but there was no recognition.

“Give it to the Master of the Row. He will know what it means or else he is not worth talking to.”

The vampire's eyes widened and he hurried off, disappearing into one of the shops. They didn't have to wait long, before the slender vampire returned.

“Mistress Katiana will speak with you.”

Splendid.

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Harry stood at the podium, his hands clenched against the wood to keep them from shaking, and looked over the some six-thousand people gathered into the square in the London Court District. It had only been two days, and despite what he had said to Voldemort he didn't feel the least bit prepared.

He had helped write this speech with one of Voldemort's professional speech writers, who had then made him practice it over and over so that Harry didn't even need his cards (although he still kept them just in case) and didn't sound like he was just reading at the audience. He had practiced it in front of Sirius and Remus and Luna while Voldemort negotiated with Greyback, and they insisted it was a good speech. Diana had even given him her blessing.

He was as prepared as he could possible be, but still felt like he was going to freeze up and fall over before a single word escaped his mouth. Closing his eyes and taking a deep breath, he reminded himself why he was doing this in the first place. People were suffering out there, people like the Canis's and his godfathers, and if he could do something...

"Hello and good morning," he said, his voice magically amplified to rise above the natural din of the crowd. Everyone settled fell silent to listen. "Thank you all for coming on such short notice."

There was the expected shout of 'We love you, Harry', somewhere in crowd, and he ducked his head shyly, before forcing himself to look up and continue.

"Now I am afraid I must apologize. You see, I invited you all here under false pretences."

There was a confused murmur through the crowd.

"I did not come here to talk to you about what happened in Germany or during my journey home. You can read that in any newspaper from here to Dublin. I have had ample opportunity to share my story with you, and you have been captive audience. No, I do not come before you to speak for myself. I speak to you on behalf of those who have no voice. I speak on behalf of werewolves."

The crowd reacted as Voldemort had predicted and the speech-writer had warned. Outrage and indignation, but mostly confusion. A press release had been given the day before, detailing the German Minister's anti-werewolf campaign and France's only dilemma in

taking in those who fled the country, so at least some of them had an idea of what he was going to talk about. Harry took a long slow breath, fighting down his instinct to run from the stage. Now came the really hard part.

“Please,” he continued, and the ruckus died down a little, “let me say my part.”

He gave the crowd another few seconds to settle, and eventually even the dissenters quieted.

“I know it isn’t easy for you accept werewolves. We have had a long, dark history of fear and violence between us and them, and it can not be erased or forgotten in the course of a few years, and nor should it. Their existence is made more tragic and more frightening in their humanity. They are all children and siblings and spouses and friends to us, and it is only bad luck or bad choices that keeps them from sitting at our dinner table, shopping in our stores, and going to our schools.”

Harry had to stop for just a moment, forcing back the emotion that was threatening to choke him. He was thankful everyone remained silent until he was ready to continue.

“As many of you know, my godfathers are werewolves and they have saved my life more than once. The Canis family, also werewolves, risked not only their freedom but their very lives to bring me across hostile country to my homeland. I owe them all a debt of gratitude and eternal friendship, so when I received word that the German Minister has begun a campaign of tyranny against their native werewolf population and any who would attempt to protect them, using my escape as an excuse, lying to save face...”

The anger here was genuine. Two days and Voldemort’s explanation of the Minister’s tactics had fed a deep seated hatred for the man. Tactics, Harry now realized were dripping with spite directed at Harry himself, a way to hurt him while at the same time rescuing himself.

“I can not remain passive as my actions are being used to persecute a people who has no voice, no means of defending themselves. I make my stand here and now. With help from the civil rights group, Voice for All, I am submitting a proposal to the Wizengamot to open sixteen new colonies...”

Some of the crowd started to protest, but Harry continued to plow through before they gained momentum to drown him out.

“... consisting primarily of farmland, rather than forest...”

That shut up nearly half the protestors right there.

“..so that we might accommodate some three hundred displaced werewolves within our nation’s borders and also send twenty or thirty native werewolves to France to help them set up werewolf colonies of their own. The proposal is called Proposal 4-66, and will be released for public scrutiny in two days. I am requesting your support.”

There were more protests, although most of the crowd now looked more torn than anything. Most people had no real opinion on werewolves, who were so far out of their realm of experience as to not warrant thinking about, and being forced to do it so suddenly left them uncertain. Voldemort told him it would be his job to lead the uncertain people to his way of thinking. That was a politician’s job.

“I know this is a sacrifice,” Harry said, raising his voice, drowning out all others. “I am asking you to sign over lands that can no longer be held for public use. I am asking you invite strangers into your backyards. I am asking for you accept that added risk of more werewolves. And I am asking you to do this with no offer of compensation. By all accounts, I probably shouldn’t bother asking at all, and if I didn’t know a few things I wouldn’t. But I do know some things.’

‘What I know is that our nation has integrity. I know that you want to do the right thing the right way for the right reasons. Even when it’s scary, even when its hard, even when others say it’s wrong.”

Protest died right there, and there was a small murmur of agreement.

“Do you know how I know this? I know this because you are standing in front of me right now. I know this because fifteen years ago you all took a stand. While thousands fled for reasons both legitimate and false, you or your parents took a stand to hold firm. And when the fires burned out and the future remained unknown, you rebuilt from the ashes your homes, your businesses, and your communities. I know I can ask you this unreasonable request, because I know you are not strangers to unreasonable expectations. Because I know you no strangers to tough decisions.”

Now everyone was starting shout out their agreements, a sense of pride swelling in their chests. Harry could feel the end of his performance drawing near, and his terror was greater than ever, knowing if he fumbled now he would have blown the entire thing. His mouth was dry as sand paper but he didn't dare take a drink and disrupt the flow of enthusiasm he had finally gathered from the crowd.

“You know, over there,” he said, pointing east, in the general direction of Europe, “They think it was the good people that left during the war. They think only the smart and honest people left, but I know the truth. I know the real quality witches and wizards stuck it out. I know the loyal, the proud, and the courageous stuck it out.”

The crowd was cheering now, shouting out at the end of his every sentence, the crescendo to a line of music.

“And do you know what? We're going to prove it to them! We are going to show them that the United Kingdoms do nothing by halves. We will show them not only through our great deed of magic and business and art, but also through our great deeds of compassion and humanity. Right now, we have the opportunity to save hundreds from persecution, in a way that no one else can. We have first and only completely successful program for dealing with werewolves, that not only maintains public safety but also the dignity and well-being of person infected. We have not only the obligation, but the honor of sharing this knowledge. In the years to come, what we decide to do today may save the lives of thousands. So if I were to ask you now,

for the betterment of our witches and wizards, both here and abroad, will you support Proposal 4-66, what would your answer be?"

"YES!"

The cry rang out through the square, possible through half the wizarding part of the city, and Harry nearly stumbled backwards. I did it! he thought weakly, torn between relief and awe.

"What is your answer?!" he shouted out again.

"YES!" they cried louder than before, and began to chant, "4-66! 4-66! 4-66!"

Harry stepped away from the podium, the chant of the crowd at his back, and entered the Court Building. Voldemort stood beside the door, smiling like the devil and applauding his performance. Harry was very tempted to vomit on his shoes, but politely refrained. One the interns got him a chair and he collapsed into it.

"I feel like I'm going to die," he moaned. "Please tell me I don't have to do that again."

"Not today," Voldemort said cheerfully. The day had been a marvelous success, and not just because for Proposal 4-66, but for Harry himself.

Harry was now, officially and undeniably, the Prince of Britain.

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1. I ended up writing a lot of Harry's tale before I realized it could make a chapter all its own, so I will be posting it separately in a few days so that it doesn't take up too much of this chapter.

Ack! My notice didn't post! I actually posted a notice on Thursday, or thought I did. Apparently, it didn't show up on . Sorry about that. No one said anything until today so I honestly didn't realize anything was wrong. This is the message I sent:

Hello boys and girls, sorry about the delay in posting. RL has been particularly chaotic this week. I now have a new job, and am spending half the remaining week visiting family before it starts. With my new upcoming job schedule and my college classes due to start in a few weeks, I have decided it would best to move my posting day to Mondays. I know you have all become accustomed to Friday posts, but I think this will work best in the long run. Chapter 10 will be posted this Monday, barring any further RL complications.

Book V:

Chapter 10: Political Unrest

Katarina, Mistress of Berlin's Vampire Row, was not a typical specimen of vampirism, but then most Masters and Mistresses were not. It took a rare sort of vampire to look beyond the moment, beyond the despair of an unending existence, and plan for themselves and for others. Katarina was the type to laugh at stereotypes and ideology without substance. She did not wear black or red, as was customary among vampires, but preferred bright colors; violets, blues, yellows, and greens silks and velvets, and perhaps a little more gold jewelry than was strictly tasteful. With her dark skin and kohl painted eyes, McGunny found himself thinking of Egyptian Queens, even though her dress was pure European.

McGunny noted her appearance and demeanor as merely a second hand observer. He had surrendered his body to Tom for this meeting, as much he hated it, with the understanding that if he tried what Tom was doing, the vampiress would see him for the liar that he was and kill him.

"It is happening just as he predicted," Tom said, idly stirring his tea. He was sitting across from Katarina in the living area of squalid, little apartment she had provided him. Originally there had been no furniture in the apartment except for a lumpy mattress on a creaky iron bedframe, but he had started transfiguring some crates and abandoned rubbish into furniture on the first day there, and after six days, the apartment had actually started to look homey, which no doubt irked the vampire. She obviously wanted him to squirm, while she thought over his proposal.

She said nothing at first, merely staring at the newspaper article in her lap. The German Ministry was on an anti-werewolf campaign. This wasn't unusual. She had been through several campaigns in her seven hundred years in dozens of different countries. The UK and France offering sanctuary wasn't odd either. Countries often offered refuge to the victims of their enemies, out of spitefulness or to recruit more soldiers, just as Europe had done for the refugees of Voldemort's coup d'état. However, it was the very fact that there was

nothing unusual about these events that concerned Katarina. She had lived long enough to know what would happen once the Ministry ran out of werewolves to torment.

“Your people will be next,” the young man who had called himself ‘Horace’, barely more than a schoolboy, stated plainly. “The werewolves are already fleeing. When they are all gone, the Ministry will turn on the other non-humans. Veelas. The half-fae. Goblins. And most especially-”

“Vampires. Yes, I know that. I have danced to this tune more than once, child,” she said, shortly. She really didn’t like wizards. Their arrogance always astounded and disgusted her. The fact that the Dark Lord had sent this toddler to negotiate with her didn’t endear her to either of them.

He made no acknowledgment of her irritation. His palms didn’t sweat, his body didn’t tense, and his eyes didn’t widen. He merely sipped his tea and continued as if she hadn’t interrupted. She was really starting to despise him.

“Then you know you have three options. One, you can ignore the danger, and wait till the Ministry decides to burn this neighborhood to the ground in the middle of the afternoon. Two, you can gather your people and flee ahead of the danger, leaving behind your land and businesses for the Ministry to seize and redistribute as they see fit, starting over at some other city until the cycle is renewed yet again. Or three, you can ally yourselves to the Dark Lord, and take control of your destinies.”

She snorted.

“What can your Dark Lord offer us? The vampires of your country have no more rights or liberties than we do in Germany or anywhere else for that matter. Do you expect me to risk myself and my family to maintain the status quo? We will liquidate our assets through a muggle company and transfer them to another country. When the fighting is done, we will return. I am not interested in playing your master’s game.”

He smiled, a decidedly unpleasant look that reminded her of Goethe, the very messenger who had brought this boy before her.

“The vampires of the UK have no more rights or liberties, because they did not earn them. They played your game, dancing out of the way of danger. Risking nothing. Gaining nothing. If they had sided with the Dark Lord during the war, like Fenrir Greyback did, they too would be enjoying the benefits of his gratitude.”

“Crammed together in the middle of the boonies where the fine witches and wizards of Britain don’t have to deal with them? How wonderful that would have been.”

The look he gave her suggested she was being particularly stupid, and she had to fight herself to keep from ripping out the fool’s throat.

“They are not ‘crammed’, and for your information, they are living exactly the way Fenrir Greyback negotiated for. Their lifestyle is suitable for their condition. You have the opportunity to make a similar negotiation. Think about it. You could have a voice in the government, equal rights to wizarding folk. No more hiding. No more running. No more depending upon the tolerance of others.”

She snorted.

“Until the Dark Lord dies, of course. Then we will once again be dependant on the tolerance of his successor,” she said.

“Madam, the Dark Lord will more than likely out live you and everyone in your coven. It is not a matter you need to worry yourself over.”

This little tidbit silenced her for some minutes. She had heard the rumors, of course, that the Dark Lord had somehow managed to make himself immortal through the Dark Arts. At nearly eighty, and not looking a day over thirty, this wasn’t hard to find plausible. It changed the game somewhat. If the Dark Lord were indeed immortal, and had plans on Germany (and possibly all of Europe), it might be a

very bad idea to get on his bad side. A mortal could only hold a grudge for century or so, and their ability to exact revenge was even more limited. An immortal, however, was a different matter altogether.

“Why you?” she asked, changing the subject before he realized he had unbalanced her. “Out of everyone he could have sent, why a scrawny little nobody like you?”

She was starting to descend into pettiness, but she didn’t care. His presence was insulting, and she didn’t feel inclined to tolerate it. He didn’t rise to the bait.

“My Lady, now you are just being rude. It is quite unbecoming,” he chided. “I assure you I am somebody. Somebody Lord Voldemort would no risk for just anything. He chose me specifically as a demonstration of his sincerity.”

“Just who are you, then?”

Tom tilted his head, as if considering. “You won’t believe me. Not unless I show you something first. I beg your indulgence, for just a minute. Serpensortia!”

The vampires leaped to her feet and across the room before he even finished his incantation. She had no wizarding magic of her own. Her only defense against it was retreat or attack before a spell could hit her, and she never forget this while in the presence of a witch or wizard. Her caution and quick reflexes had saved her more than once. She needn’t have bothered this time. The spell had done nothing more than summon a large snake, which was harmless to her kind, poisonous or not.

The boy blinked at her, as if surprised by her reaction, but she knew damn well he was more amused than anything. The snake he had summoned rose up and flared its hood, and she could see the telltale markings of a King Cobra as it hissed and made a mock strike at Horace’s outstretched wand. He didn’t seem the least bit alarmed, and even pocketed his wand.

“Assskuuu ssstisss muisss,” he hissed, and immediately the snake’s hood collapsed. The boy held out his hand, the unprotected flesh mere inches from death. “Kissshhh ne sssisss inusss.”

The snake immediately curled around his outstretched arm, and made its way over him and into his lap, where it curled up like an affectionate housecat. Katarina could almost imagine it purring. She could only stare, dumbfounded.

“You are a parselmouth.”

“Yes. A trait I inherited from my grandfather.”

“Who...” she trailed off, realizing the stupidity of her question. “You are the Dark Lord’s son.”

“His grandson actually, but yes.”

“But... how...”

“The usual mechanics, I imagine. Do you believe Lord Voldemort holds to the idea of celibacy? I assure you, before and after the war, he indulged in more than a few trysts. Witches are very good about taking contraceptives. Muggle women are not. You are aware of Harry Potter’s lineage?”

She thought about lying and saying she didn’t. It was a matter of pride that vampires abstained from wizarding tabloid fodder, but Potter was one of those universally entertaining characters. Her goblin banker and she liked to share gossip on him during their monthly transactions. She nodded.

“Pureblood father. Muggleborn mother. Lived with his mother’s muggle sister before he was discovered. No other living relatives.”

“Lily Evans was no muggleborn*. She was a half-blood. Her mother got into it with Voldemort at some point, when he was nothing more than handsome young college student, traveling for the holidays. My father’s mother has an identical story.”

“Why would he keep that a secret? If he has heirs-”

“And inform the entire world that he’s a hypocrite and philanderer? I’m sure you are aware of his public policy against wizarding and muggle interaction, and his youthful exuberance would not be looked kind upon even sixty years later. Additionally, we are not the Dark Lord’s heirs. He has no heirs, as he will not be dying any time soon. Announcing our existence as his brood would not only endanger us, but place us in a position where we could be used against him. No, no, we will never be officially claimed. However, that does not mean we do not hold any importance to him. Potter is a fine example.”

Katarina moved back towards him, staring down at him in fascination. This was a completely new game. The Dark Lord had sent her his grandson, his kin. This was no small thing to a vampire. Vampire clans were tight knit and protective. For a Master or Mistress to send out one of their own offspring was only done in extreme circumstances. It spoke volumes about the Dark Lord’s sincerity. She settled back into her chair.

“Very well. Give me a few more days. I will need to discuss this matter with my coven and decide upon the terms of our agreement. In the meantime, I will see that you have accommodations more... suitable to your status.”

He nodded appreciatively.

“Thank you. I ask only that you keep my relation to the Dark Lord to yourself. I have been given permission to tell you this only as a means to convince you of the importance the Dark Lord has placed on our negotiations. Under no circumstances is this to become public knowledge.”

“I understand.”

She left the room, feeling shaken but refusing to show it. She had so much to think about, and she had wasted too much time already. A wave of resentment rose up against the young interloper. If he had

told her of his lineage when he had first been introduced, nearly three days ago, she might have taken his presence more seriously. As it was, she saw him as no more than a half-hearted attempt at recruitment into a questionable endeavor.

Well, that and perhaps Sunday's dinner.

Goethe was waiting for her at the end of the hall. He had been the one to inform her of the boy, known only as Horace, and given her the Dark Lord's card, and she had subsequently assigned him to look after the mysterious mortal.

"I want him moved to one of the private suites on the East End. He is to be treated as a prince and protected the same way. The Ministry cannot be allowed to know of his presence here. Is that understood?"

"Yes, Mistress," he said plainly, his wide mouth stretched into a serpentine grin. He was having way too much fun his new role, in her opinion. He had always been a troublemaker, only happy when things were going wrong. If he weren't so damn good at spying, she would have thrown him out into the sun decades ago.

"And don't you dare bite him."

"Not a nibble. I swear," he said solemnly.

She glared at him. His lips started to twitch. She stalked away before he lost it completely. It wasn't like Goethe was a real threat to Horace. If the boy really was the Dark Lord's grandson, then the vampire was in need of protection far more so than the mortal.

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Climbing down from the stage and disappearing from the view of thousands of people calling his name, Harry accepted the glass of water from one of the 'Voices for All' aides. His stomach was still fluttering with nerves and threatening to empty itself, but he managed

to keep it all in. He escaped into the sanctuary of a nearby office that had offered its space to Voices for All and Harry for the rally.

This was his third public speech, and it wasn't any easier than the first. If anything, it had been harder. There had been more hecklers and protestors this time around, attempting to throw him off balance and turn the crowd. It had taken a longer to get the crowd enthusiastic about his message this time, but eventually they were won over. The Wizengamot was in three days. The Ultimatum deadline was in five. The next full moon in seven.

Political rallies and protests and pamphlets were on every street corner. The UK was anxious. The newspapers were flooded with speculation of Voldemort's next course of action and the possibility of war with Germany and peace treaties with France. Harry's own cause was quickly being shuffled towards the back of the papers, but his popularity wasn't fading. The rallies he had spoken at were all packed, and he had interviews daily, often multiple times by newspapers and magazines and once even for wizarding television. He had been shuffled from London to Glasgow to Dublin in the last week, and was exhausted.

"Harry!" He turned and smiled as Hermione and Draco came into view. Hermione threw her arms around him. "Harry, that was wonderful! I'd read you were a great speaker, but I had no idea!"

"Not bad," Draco conceded. "A bit preachy for my tastes, but that's just me."

"Thanks...I think. I'm not entirely sure if either of you are being entirely complimentary."

His friends had come along on his trip to Dublin, insisting to see him in action after all the hype in the newspaper. He was glad for their company. After days of nothing but speeches and meetings with Voices for All and hotels and reporters, their presence was grounding and comforting. Snape was already strung out, and currently refusing to say anything to anyone for fear of hexing someone without realizing it.

Suddenly, there was someone standing between him and his friends. He looked up to see a handsome man in an impressive Brass Cult uniform, his smile so white it looked like a Lumos had been cast on it.

“Excellent presentation, my good man. Very good show,” the man said, taking Harry’s arm before he could even react. “I’m Gilderoy Lockhart, but I’m sure you already knew that. I’m quite famous, you know.”

Harry thought the name sounded vaguely familiar, but he would be lying if he said he was familiar with witch and wizarding celebrities.

“Er... yes, of course. Good to meet you, Mr. Lockhart,” he said, and looked around for an escape. Hermione and Draco were looking somewhat horrified at the beaming man, and Harry didn’t think that bode well for him.

“It’s Admiral Lockhart. See the fancy uniform? And good to meet you at last, Harry. You don’t mind if I call you Harry, do you?”

“Actually-”

“Excellent! It really has been too long. We should have met ages ago! We have so much in common. Powerful, intelligent, popular... and devilishly handsome if I do say so myself,” the man laughed, even as he preened in a passing mirror. Harry was feeling increasingly awkward, but Lockhart hadn’t released his arm and was starting to lead him off to Merlin only knew where. “Of course, you could use a few minor adjustments. Nothing to be ashamed of, of course. Just a tweak here or there. A bit of advice from someone who’s been there before. For instance, have you considered growing out your hair? Ladies love that. Or taking off those glasses? Not all the time, mind you. Glasses make one look very clever in the right circumstances, but they look rather nerdy sometimes don’t you think? It’d be a shame to waste your green eyes-”

“On anything as trivial as reading,” Snape’s acid tone cut in. They both turned, and Harry felt a wave of relief at seeing his dour

guardian glaring death at his would-be fashion advisor. Hermione or Draco must have found him. Lockhart was still smiling, but he suddenly didn't seem as confident. "Admiral, I am rather surprised to see you here, as busy as someone in your position must be."

"Oh, Professor Snape, yes, well... I happened to be in the area. Photo shoot just a few blocks over, you know. Thought I'd drop by and introduce myself."

"Yes, that's very generous of you. I am sure we all appreciate you gracing us with your presence, but I must ask you to leave. This area is a restricted. Your military training should make you aware of exactly what that means."

"Er... yes, well, military personnel. Higher security clearance and all--"

Snape didn't wait for his fumbled explanations. He grabbed Harry and hauled him back to the other side of the room, making a physical barrier between the man and the boy. When they were far enough away, Harry turned back to him.

"Thanks, Professor."

Predictably, Snape sneered. "You can escape werewolves, German Aurors, and the Dark Lord's wrath, but you can't get away from that imbecile on your own? You're slipping, Potter."

"Who was that guy anyway?"

Draco and Hermione rejoined them, and they made their way towards an empty office Harry had been given for his private use. There was long table piled with food and drink and Harry's own itinerary and half completed speeches. The three teenagers set themselves into the comfortable chairs, while Snape set about making himself some tea.

"Admiral Gilderoy Lockhart," Draco offered, "The most useless pillock in my father's army."

“Draco,” Hermione began to chastise, then seemed to realize he was right and didn’t finish. Oddly enough, it was Snape who disagreed.

“Admiral Lockhart is not useless, Draco. He performs the function your father intended quite admirably. And I remind you that the Brass Cult is not your father’s army. It is the Dark Lord’s, and I recommend you not forget it again.”

“What is Lockhart’s function, then?” Harry asked.

“Publicity,” Hermione said, looking disgusted, “He doesn’t command any troops or have any combat experience. He just goes around the country and looks handsome in his uniform and tells outrageous stories in order to convince people to join the Brass Cult. It’s disgusting.”

Draco laughed. “Didn’t you used to have a huge crush on him?”

“Only for like... a week! Then he opened his mouth.”

Harry laughed and shook his head. He had missed this. Sitting around talking with his friends, getting in and out of strange situations, and even Snape’s dark, witty practicality. More than ever before, he wished the summer were over and he were heading back to Hogwarts, surrounded by his friends and a comfortable routine of classes and club activities.

“I hate to be the bearer of bad news,” Snape said, smirking a bit at the looks that statement earned. “None of you will be entirely free of Lockhart for quite some time. He’s been offered a part-time position at Hogwarts.”

Hermione looked positively horrified. “As what?”

“Introduction to Military Training Instructor. Supposedly, it’s a pre-requisite to officer training in the Brass Cult.”

“Remind me not to join that class,” Harry muttered.

“It is only open to seventh years, fortunately. It’s a complete publicity stunt, but the Dark Lord went along with it. You will find several differences at Hogwarts this year to accommodate the war effort.”

“We’re not at war,” Harry said, hopefully.

Snape just gave him a look, and didn’t deign to reply.

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Viktor and Tonks sat on the garden wall and looked out across the South Aegean at the collection of islands, lined in the stubby white buildings that typified the region. The sun was hot, but the wind coming off the sea made it tolerable, and either of them felt any desire to move into the shade.

“He makes it very hard to hate him, doesn’t he?” Tonks said, staring down at a newspaper. It was a Wizing Weekly, only two days old, and sharing the front page with the usual doom and gloom article about the tensions with Germany, was Harry and his outrageous and heroic mission to ‘save the lycanthropic victims from the tyranny of Minister Seibligg’.

“Yes,” Viktor agreed. “He’s a good guy. He just has lousy taste in father figures.”

“I wonder what he would think if he knew Dumbledore was helping get werewolves out of Germany?”

“He’d probably be grateful, just not grateful enough to switch sides.”

Tonks sighed, and ran a hand through her leopard print hair. She missed the days when you could support your allies with the same enthusiasm you could oppose your enemies. Seibligg had ruined that for them. The previous minister, Janis Handel, had been a good man with a generous heart and an iron will. He had led his countrymen

through the dark days of Voldemort's assault on Britain, preventing the Death Eaters from getting a foothold in Germany and opening his doors to those who were forced to flee. However, the strain had been too much for his health, and he could not continue another term. Seibligg had shown promise, but his own conceit and secret disdain for foreigners had weakened the Ministry and confused the public.

The rallying against the werewolves was the final act of a desperate man still clinging to power, and Tonks knew it would only serve to weaken the country in the long run. The people were divided, resources were being wasted to persecute a make believe enemy, and their allies were turning away in disgust. More than once, Tonks had wondered if it wouldn't be better to just let Voldemort have the place and straighten it out once and for all. If she hadn't remembered exactly how the Dark Lord straightened out countries, she would have just given up.

"Do you think we can win like this?" Tonks asked. "We can't even stay in the country, and Seibligg just keeps making things worse everyday."

Viktor didn't say anything for a moment. Leaving Germany, he thought, was the best thing they could have done. It was so much harder to think objectively about Germany's future while surrounded by its chaos. In the South Aegean, where news travels slowly but thoughts had plenty of time to settle, he was starting to see things more clearly.

"Dumbledore thinks we can. Seibligg's time is running out. If he can be replaced with a strong leader before the Dark Lord can get a strong enough foot hold, then they might just have a chance."

"That's a big 'if'."

"I prefer to think of it as a 'do or do not'. If we don't find a way, we are all royally screwed," Viktor said.

"Well, since you put it that way, I feel much better," she laughed.

“She likes you. I knew she would,” Voldemort teased.

“I’m going to get you for this later,” Harry said, glaring up at the man. There were nearly twenty other men and women in their entourage, all of them Wizengamot or Court officials, or in Lucius’ case, both. Snape was somewhere, probably the royal library, but Harry had to wonder why since he couldn’t read French. They were all dressed to the nines, and even Harry had been shoved into a brand new and ostentatious set of suit and robes. He supposed meeting the queen of France warranted looking good, but he suspected something more significant was happening than a simple meet and greet. Voldemort being very nearly cheerful convinced him of it.

“What are we doing here, exactly?”

“We’re signing a treaty.”

Oh. Now that he thought about it, that was pretty obvious. Stupid residual hangover.

“For the werewolves?” he asked, not entirely certain. Voldemort seemed entirely too pleased for something that simple.

“Part of the treaty includes the establishment of new werewolf colonies, but that is only a minor part. The United Kingdoms and France are ending the embargo and resuming trade and travel, formally renouncing Germany actions against us, and allowing us to open four military bases along its border to France.”

Harry could only stare at him. This was HUGE. Way larger than Harry felt qualified to deal with. This was the sort of event Toure made them study in the History of Magic. At least he didn’t have to make a speech.

“Seibligg is going to piss himself,” Harry finally blurted out. Several of the other officials in the room chuckled. “But why am I here?”

“You are an honorary guest. Proposal 4-66 was essential for this treaty, which would not have been possible if I could not demonstrate

an immediate benefit of our alliance. The queen needed something to reassure her people of our intentions before she could agree to it. You have earned the right to witness these proceedings. Besides, the French like you.”

Merlin, was he serious? Had his efforts with Proposal 4-66 actually made this treaty possible?

He was still wondering this when a valet arrived and escorted their party to a conference room. Voldemort, Queen Ophelia, and all other their officials were set at the table, while Harry sat with a small group of attendants along the wall and watched. There were speeches made by both the Dark Lord and the queen, words of welcome and hopes for peace and prosperity and strength through their alliance. The treaty was read, then passed around and signed. There were more speeches by another official. A Catholic priest blessed the document (and surprised Harry by not immediately bursting into flames when Voldemort not-so-subtly glared at him). Photographs were taken. Drinks were handed out to everyone to toast their work. And finally, finally it was over, and Harry still had no idea how he could have possibly brought any of it about.

Merlin, he hoped Snape didn't hear about any of this. He's accuse him of having a big head before he could even bring himself to accept even partial responsibility.

Voldemort and Harry stayed at the queen's palace for two more days (as did Snape although Harry didn't see him at all until it came time to leave), and Harry spent a majority of that time wandering around and making sketches. The Dark Lord was absent more often than not on official business or merely conversing with the queen, but in the evening he would take some time to talk with Harry.

“Do you think Seibligg will have to resign after this?” Harry asked, staring out the window in Voldemort 's bedroom. From here he could see the internal courtyard, where several couples and friends were wandering about and enjoying the evening. The Dark Lord was at the desk, signing paperwork, and drinking sherry.

“It doesn’t really matter one way or the other,” he said, not looking up. “The due date for the ultimatum has passed. Germany has done nothing to make amends to me, and allowed the perpetrators to remain unpunished. They could have saved themselves a lot of grief, but now they will have to face the consequences of their actions.”

“What sort of consequences?”

“Bankruptcy for one. France is the largest importer of German goods, particularly potion ingredients and certain types of manufactured products like cauldrons, which they will now be getting primarily from the UK. The embargo from ten years ago has made them the primary supplier to Europe for several years now, but they’re not ready to face competition with British suppliers again. Chances are there will be a recession in Germany.”

Harry let out a mental sigh. Being poor sucked, but being blown up was worse. If Germany’s punishment was strictly financial, Harry wasn’t going to utter a single complaint.

“Of course,” Voldemort said, “Recessions make for very bitter, angry citizens. I doubt this little slap on the wrist is going to be the end of the matter.”

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Daigon Alley was crowded with students and their families, as was typical at the beginning of August. There was something festive about the gathering, like a carnival with shops instead of rides or Christmas shopping without the dreary weather. There were even street vendors standing about selling funnel cakes and popcorn, and colorfully dressed men singing out the inventory of their particular shop, enticing buyers to enter. Cages with owls, cats, rats, snakes, or other sorts of familiars were carried about by eager looking first years, who grinned and cooed at their new pets lovingly.

It was amazing considering only a month before people were practically frantic over the due date of Voldemort’s ultimatum. It

turned out the first strike against Germany, had led to nothing short of prosperity for the UK. With the 1995 Treaty of Paris (also nicknamed Potter's Treaty and the Werewolf Treaty), the demand for goods had skyrocketed, leading to a rise in cauldron prices and potions ingredients, but also to a high demand for new employees. The unemployment rate had dropped nearly twenty percent in a month and expected to drop another fifty percent during the holidays, and Gringotts Bank was practically throwing out money for starter businesses.

Everyone was brimming with enthusiasm for the future, and it showed in the faces of the people.

Ira watched it all from the corner of Banikey's Books, trying not to hover as Harry and Professor Snape's godchildren hunted the store for their school books. Snape himself was at Olivander's, escorting several first years as they acquired their wands, and had Ira had offered to keep an eye of them. She had made the mistake of mentioning it to her mother, who had quickly invited herself along.

"I have barely seen you at all this summer, Ira. I've missed you. This will be a perfect time to do a little shopping together," she insisted, but Ira knew better. Her mother was nosy and always would be, and the fact that Ira actually was involved with the daily affairs of interesting people had presented a temptation she couldn't pass up. Especially not since Snape had come back from Paris with gift.

The scarab broach was iridescent green, like the real beetle, and masterfully crafted. It was worth several galleons, and no one had been more surprised than Ira when Snape had given it to her. He had called it a 'thank you' present, and it probably was, but her mother insisted it meant more.

"When a man starts buying a woman jewelry, expensive jewelry from Paris, it means more than just 'thank you'," Susan said to her daughter knowingly. Ira kept looking out at the street and pretended she hadn't heard her. "It means, 'I want you to wear something I gave you so everyone will know you're mine'."

Ira immediately turned bright red, and looked around quickly to see if anyone heard her.

“Honestly, mum, you’re making something out of nothing. He was just being thoughtful. Harry probably put him up to it.”

Ira immediately looked back towards the store, and spotted Harry’s black cloak immediately. The boy had taken to wearing the hood up while out in public to avoid being recognized, even though he looked more than little conspicuous. His friends, Draco, Hermione, Natalie, and Clyde, were doing the same thing, partially to tease him and partially because it made the hoods look less suspicious and more like fashion statements when they all did it. She couldn’t help smiling as she watched them together, laughing and stealing each other’s books out of their baskets and pretending to be vampires.

Harry had a difficult life, filled with stress and intrigue and unscheduled international travel, but he also had wonderful friends. She wondered how Snape, whose life was likely just as difficult, perhaps even more so, managed to keep it all together with seemingly no friends at all.

“Posh. I’m telling you, Professor Snape likes you, he’s just stoic. That’s why he asks for your help all the time. So he can have your company and not be labeled a sap. Andreas is the exact same way.”

Ira rolled her eyes. Snape didn’t ask for her help. She offered it without him having to ask, and he just never bothered to turn her down. She enjoyed both Harry’s and Snape’s company for different reasons. Harry was sweet and interesting. Snape was frank and interesting. She had some of the most enjoyable conversations of her life this summer, and she would miss them terribly when the summer was over.

“Mum, that’s not how it is. For heaven’s sake, he lost his fiancé little over a year ago. Besides, even if he were interested, it would never work out.”

“Never work out? Of course it would! You’re perfect for each other. Quiet, academic types, the both of you, without an ounce of romance between you. He’s a highly respected professor and war hero, obviously ready to settle down if he was intending to marry. I don’t think you could do any better if you tried.”

Ira said noting for a moment, a deep depression settling over her. She did like Professor Snape. She found his taciturn manners strangely charming and his dedication to his duties was admirable, but she couldn’t give him what he really wanted.

“He wants children,” she said.

This stumped Susan for a moment. “...Are you sure? I mean, he doesn’t really seem the type...”

“He does. His house... it’s made for more than just him and Harry. And sometimes, I’ve seen him looking at families with this... longing? Maybe? I don’t know. But I can’t give him that. Winston made sure of it.”

She tried to hide her bitterness at that man’s name, but it leaked through anyway. Her mother fidgeted uncomfortably. She never liked to discuss Winston. She would like nothing better than to forget he ever existed, and Ira would too if it were at all possible.

“Maybe he would be willing to adopt?”

“Mother!”

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“All hail Harry Potter, King of the Werewolves.”

“Do shut up, Weasley,” Harry said cheerfully as he squeezed into the train compartment, and sat next to Natalie. He handed her Inana’s basket, which she happily accepted. The compartment was crowded with his friends (and Ron), but he wouldn’t have it any other

way. The summer was over and he was going to his true home. His political career was officially on hold until the end of term.

Perhaps the only one more excited about the upcoming school year was Hermione, who was practically buzzing in her seat. She was now the official editor of the Hogwart's Herald, and couldn't wait to get started. She was looking through her notebook and stressing about her first meeting with her staff and their first paper.

"Hey, Harry, you're not going to have to repeat the year, are you mate? I don't think I could get through potions without you," Clyde said, looking genuinely terrified at the thought.

"Nope. No repeating for me. It's not like I wasn't learning anything while I was away. The professors are going to test me individually to see if I've fallen behind on anything then work something out if I have to catch up. Things are going to be crazy this year though. Make up classes, quidditch, Dueling Club, and O.W.L.s."

Draco merely smirked at him. "Don't worry, Potter. I'll make sure you don't have to worry about the final quidditch match while studying for final exams. We're going to kick your ass this year."

"Dream on, Malfoy. If I can beat Krum at quidditch, I can beat you."

Harry instantly regretted his words, his eyes immediately darting towards Hermione, who was still looking at her notebook, but not reading it. Inwardly, he called himself several unpleasant names. One of the few things Hermione and he had not been able to bring themselves to talk about was Krum. He had betrayed them both, in different ways, and they were both too conflicted to talk about him even with each other.

"Ha!" Ginny but in, rescuing the companionable atmosphere. "You can't even guarantee your spot on the team this year. I'll be trying out for Seeker, this year."

Natalie made a rude sound and rolled her eyes.

Harry blinked at her. "You play quidditch?"

"Of course I play quidditch. Everyone in the family plays quidditch! Even Ron plays a pretty good keeper, once he stopped falling off his broom."

Ron just scowled at her then resumed his previous silence. In fact, he seemed to be all out brooding, which was a step up from his usual sulking, but not much.

"What's with you, Weasley? You're... quiet."

"Shove it, Potter. I don't care about this stupid shit," he snapped, then stood up and walked out. Everyone just stared after him, then back at each other.

"That was... different," Harry said.

"And the Asshole Award goes to..." Clyde muttered.

"Shut up," Ginny snapped, surprising everyone all over again. She bit her lip, and looked down. "It's not his fault. He's just... he visited dad a few weeks ago. I think... It was really bad. So just give him a break, okay?"

They stayed silent for a bit. They all knew Arthur Weasley was in Azkaban, and had been for the better part of eight years, and his was not an enviable fate to even most depraved masochist.

"Of course," Hermione said first, then nudged Draco with her elbow.

"Hey, don't look at me. If I start acting all sympathetic it'll probably induce a stroke."

"Draco!"

“Fine, fine! I won’t go poking him with sticks or whatever. I’ve survived more than one of his little pissy fits before, thank you very much.”

“Thanks. I think,” Ginny said.

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Snape stared at the once mysterious little plant, that was now not so little and not so mysterious. Concealed in one of his many secured cabinets in his private Hogwarts laboratory, the Body Tree stood taller than him and was lush with reddish foliage. He had finally discovered the plant’s identity in France, finally left alone to pursue the mystery.

McGunny was still missing, and he had given hope of finding the boy on his own. If he had managed to slip into the muggle world undetected, the chances were he could go underground for years and Snape would never find him. He had neither the time nor the resources necessary.

Discovering McGunny’s intentions was a different matter altogether. Because, right now the Body Tree was bearing a ‘fruit’. Fruit that was looking very much like a complete human fetus.

Now what exactly would someone want with that? he wondered. A thousand different possibilities came to mind, and none of them good.

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1. Lily Evans was 100% muggleborn. Tom is lying through his teeth in order to win Katarina’s trust. Suggesting he is Voldemort’s son and proving it with the use of Parseltongue is a good way to do that.

Book V

Chapter 11: The Courtier

Entering Hogwarts for his fifth year was as strange and overwhelming to Harry as it was during his first. He knew each hallway and tower, almost all the other students' faces (if not their names), and the thousand little tricks that allowed veteran students to bypass or take advantage of the schools innumerable eccentricities, yet he felt everything had shifted into something slightly different since he was taken and all the certainties of the previous year were now frail as spider silk.

The hallways and towers held the history of the second semester he had missed, the stories of battles and gossip and couples sneaking kisses. The students all looked strangely older and keeping their company, however brief, was strained and awkward, as if he had been gone for nine years and not just nine months. Most seemed genuinely pleased that he was alive and returned safely, but his celebrity status in the political world had left them baffled on how to approach him. What did you say to a guy who blended into the sea of students more often than not and at the same time held the influence to sway the vote of the Wizengamot? Talking about the next quidditch match or the merit of noblesse oblige each seemed to present their own pitfalls, and they were as confused on how to treat him as he was them.

There were new tricks to the castle that hadn't been present before either. Giant stone gargoyles now guarded the entry way to the castle; their cold eyes followed him as he stepped through the castle portcullis with Hermione and Draco.

"You get used to it," Hermione said, catching his uneasy look. "They're enchanted to guard against invaders. Hogwarts had some like this already guarding the towers, but Lestrage started having a whole bunch of them put in last spring. I wish you had been here then. I think you would have made some really nice ones. All mine look like demented monkeys."

“Make them? You mean the students made these things? How many are there? Why not hire professionals?”

“And waste perfectly free student labor?” Draco sneered, obviously bitter about the matter for what ever reason.

“What’s going on?” he asked. Hermione sighed.

“There’s been work done on the castle in the last months of second semester, and a lot of it was done in the guise of student coursework. Draco isn’t the only one who feels we were taken advantage of. Some of the things we did would have earned an artist or professional enchanter several galleons, and all we got was the threat of failing a class. The gargoyles aren’t the half of it.”

“And what do you think?”

“...I think we learned a lot of practical and useful things we wouldn’t have otherwise,” she said, ignoring Draco’s irritated snort. “But I also think we should have been compensated in some way. Not necessarily money, but... I don’t know. A party? A special field trip? Something to acknowledge what we did for the school.”

Harry wondered if he could have done something he had been there. Blackmail Lestrage? Technically, he still had her last attack on him hanging over her head, and that had kept her successfully away from him but would it have been enough to force her into making concessions? He didn’t know, but with his latest successes in politics he might have the power to do something if she tried to take advantage of everyone again.

He was jarred from his thoughts when someone rammed against him, knocking him to the ground and nearly tripping up Hermione as well. He landed heavily on all fours, the stone floor bruising his knees and scrapping his hands painfully.

“Watch where you’re going, Potter!” someone sneered.

“You’re the moron who ran into me!” Harry snarled, jumping to his feet and spinning around. Dorian Whitmore, possibly the biggest boy in the school towered above him, his beefy arms crossed over his chest. Whitmore was a sixth year Gryffindor last year, although not the sort that particularly impressed Harry. He was a big and moderately intelligent, which led him to be something of a bully, usually to Slytherins but occasionally Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws as well. It appeared as if he had decided to include Harry to his list of targets for whatever reason.

“Sorry, Potter. I didn’t see you there. I would have thought with all the time you spend with werewolves, you might have gained a little of their reflexes and instincts but I guess not,” he said, his voice dripping with condescension.

Harry just looked at him like the idiot he was. “Riiii-ght.”

Hermione gave him a warning look. “Don’t, Harry.”

“I didn’t do anything.”

“Yet,” she said knowingly.

Students were starting to slow down their trek to the Great Hall in order to watch what was going on. Whitmore was still standing there as if he expected something, and Harry had no intention of walking around him. His pride wouldn’t allow him to surrender the unspoken challenge the larger boy had set down.

“What do you want Witless? I mean Whitmore. You’re blocking the hall.”

Whitmore stepped up to him, towering nearly a two heads over him, and leaned in so that their noses nearly touched. Hermione instinctively stepped away, but Harry held his ground and stared straight back at him. If the fool thought his physical stature would intimidate Harry, he obviously hadn’t considered the sort of people Harry hung out with on a routine basis. This guy had nothing on

Fenrir Greyback. Or Snape for that matter when he was in one of his moods.

“I want you,” Whitmore hissed, too low for most of the other students to overhear. “To spend a full moon with your fucking monsters and then tell me they deserve to live. If you’re still alive to tell anyone anything.”

Harry burst out laughing, causing Whitmore to jerk back in surprise.

“A full moon, Whitmore? I’ve spent more than one full moon in the company of werewolves. Did you know their fur feels like a real wolf’s? The top coat is wiry and rough, but the undercoat? Soft as rabbit.”

The larger boy paled.

“You... you freak!”

It had been years since anyone had called him that, not since his three year stint with the Dursley’s, but it felt like peeling off a scab. Hermione’s hand tightening on his shoulder was probably the only thing that saved Harry from doing something very foolish... in front of McGonagall no less.

“MR. WHITMORE!”

Everyone turned at once toward the other side of the hall. McGonagall’s tall, rigid frame was easy to make out amongst the sea of students, and her expression was livid. She cast piercing look at the students loitering about, and they quickly began moving again towards the Great Hall, stopping only to let her pass as she made her way towards the two troublemakers.

“Mr. Whitmore, I would remind you that as a new seventh year, you set an example to all your underclassmen, and that example should not involve juvenile name calling. Since you seem to need some reminder of proper seventh year conduct, we will discuss it further in detention. Monday, 5 o’clock sharp.”

The older Gryffindor's ears burned with her chastisement, and he mumbled a quick 'yes, professor', before hurrying off. Harry smirked, but quickly hid it when McGonagall turned her displeasure on him.

"What precisely was that all about, Mr. Potter?"

"Er... Political differences, Professor. I don't think he cares for werewolves very much."

The old witch pursed her lips. "Ah, that would explain it. I doubt he will be the last to confront you. For now, I will simply remind you that while you are entitled to your opinion and they are entitled to theirs, you must still conduct yourselves appropriately. I better not find you started tossing around hexes in the hallways because of someone else's careless comments."

Harry shrugged. "If anyone starts tossing hexes, I won't be the one to start it."

"See to it that you are not. What I said to Mr. Whitmore about setting a good example applies to you as well, more so, in fact, than it does him. Carry on, Mr. Potter."

"Thank you, Professor."

Harry continued on with Hermione and Draco, who was glaring back at McGonagall but didn't say anything.

"You know she's right," Hermione said, earning her a sour look from both boys. She just rolled her eyes at them. "You're famous, Harry. Lots of people looked up to you before... what? They did! All the rookies in Dueling Club adore you! Not to mention... anyway, you do need to watch how you behave. If you start having fights with every Whitmore who tries to start something, others are going to start doing the same thing just to impress you."

"It's true," Draco said, surprising Harry. "Luckily you already killed that last dragon or we'd have a lot of very crispy classmates."

Harry rolled his eyes. They made it to the Great Hall without further incident. There was the predictable amount of staring and whispering at his back, but this wasn't the first time he had been forced to deal with it. Freak echoed in the back of his head, the voice a mixture of the Dursley's and Whitmore's. He did his best to ignore it, and once the Sorting Hat began started off the night's sorting, it was easy enough to drown it out with cheering and clapping for the new first years.

At the teacher's table Harry could see Lockhart, but also a few other faces he did not recognize. One was a middle aged man, his expression benign, his shoulder length hair a few shades darker than Weasley red. He wore Druidic robes, and Harry felt a pang of grief when he realized that he must be Brennan's replacement. Sitting beside Snape, was another stranger, dressed rather lavishly for a teacher in a tailored suit and robes that complimented even his rounded physique and an impressive walrus-like beard that distracted from his shiny bald head. He had to be the new DA&D instructor, and looking at his less than impressive physique gave Harry a sinking feeling that he had been sent by the Court just as Umbridge had. He would ask Hermione what she knew about him later.

With the first years sorted, it was finally time for the Headmistress to address the students (Voldemort was too busy for once to make an appearance for which Harry was secretly grateful). There were the usual warnings to the first years about the Forbidden Forest, an announcement that internal construction on the new Hogwarts wing would be continuing and certain sections of the castle were off limit to all students, and quidditch would be resuming as usual this year. Then she finally got around to introducing the new teachers.

"With the re-opening of the DA&D position, I have been forced to do a little rearranging with the professors. Professor Severus Snape will now be teaching Dark Arts and Defense, and Professor Horace Slughorn, our previous potions professor, has come out of retirement to take up his old post."

There was round of uncertain applause. Potions without Snape appealed to most students, but having him in a class that likely involved curses was more than a little unnerving.

Harry blinked in surprise and turned to Snape, who was smirking at him. The sneaky bastard! He hadn't mentioned this at all! He tried to imagine what DA&D would be like under Snape. It couldn't be too different from Dueling Club could it? Except with homework. Mountains of homework.

He looked to Slughorn to reassess him based on this newest information. He too was looking at Harry, but it was with an expression he didn't know how to read. Uncertainty, maybe?

“Admiral Gilderoy Lockhart is on loan to us from the British Assembly of Cultural Preservation and Protection to teach a new class, Introduction to Military Training, open to all seventh years interested in becoming Sentinels or soldiers.”

Lockhart stood and beamed at the gathered students, preening as several girls let out longing sighs and the hearty round of applause. Harry was seriously tempted to chuck a roll at him. He very briefly considered doing that to Snape, but even in his head his sense of self-preservation told him what a very bad idea that was.

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McGunny walked through Valkyrie Square, soaking up the sun and trying to banish the corrupting darkness of the vampire world he had been subjected to. Tom's power over him had increased, and the nights now belonged to the charming devil as he looked on through eyes he no longer controlled. He had seen things in the last month that he had never imagined, and never wanted to.

We're not here to sightsee, Horace.

“Shut up, Tom,” he muttered under his breath. “You might enjoy living like a ghoul, but I don't. I'm going to enjoy myself while I can.”

He purposely spent several minutes watching the large fountain at the center of the square as statues of giant winged horses frolicking and splashing playfully at its center. He took what meager satisfaction he could out of Tom's growing impatience.

This was the first time he had been let out of the apartment. Not that any of the vampires could have kept him there against his will, being weak as kittens during the day and vulnerable to magic. It was just the first time he had a legitimate excuse to leave the protection of Katarina and her clan, having been provided with all that he could possibly require. It was also the first time he felt legitimately alone enough to talk to Tom. No one bothered him during the day, but he never felt comfortable speaking out loud even in an empty room. Vampire strength waned during the day. Vampire hearing did not.

"Are you really Voldemort's grandson?"

Tom howled in laughter, making him feel small and absurd for even asking.

No, absolutely not. As if he would have associated with filthy muggle whores. I am actually older than Voldemort, at least as you know him now.

"What does that mean?"

He killed me, Tom growled, sidestepping his question. I have a right to take revenge.

That certainly explained any animosity the spirit held against the Dark Lord.

"How exactly? How does tricking the vampires into serving him help you do that?"

I am going to take his place. I'm going to take the Dark Lord's body and rule in his stead. It will only help me to strengthen his position in the world until I destroy him from the inside.

“You’re mad. He’ll destroy you. He’ll destroy all of us,” McGunny said, terrified and hopeful all at once. He didn’t want to be a part of Tom’s grand schemes, and the more he uncovered them the more appealing self-destruction was starting to look.

The vampires will provide me the opportunity and the resources I need to get close to the Dark Lord. They will produce the chaos necessary to create opportunity.

“How?”

You’ll see. Now go over there, to the building with the statue in front of it. I think that’s where we’ll find what we’re looking for.

McGunny sighed and did as instructed. He didn’t really know what Tom was looking for or why, but if it left him free to spend a majority of the day outside in the sun, surrounded by people of the living variety he was willing to run a few. Even if he had a feeling he was going to regret it later.

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Settling back into his old school routine was difficult even before it had really started. Once ensconced in the familiar surroundings of Gryffindor tower, his entire House had seen fit to pounce on him for a full debriefing regarding his kidnapping and eventual escape, keeping him up well into the night until McGonagall had shown up and sent everyone to bed. He had been grateful until he climbed into bed and discovered it had an Itching Curse on it. It was a petty prank and easy enough to fix, but it left him paranoid for the rest of the night. He suspected Whitmore, but it could just as easily been someone else, even his own dorm mates.

He barely slept, and the first thing he did upon awakening was reward his trunk and place protection charms on his bed. The same ones he’d used at Durmstrang, and the idea that he might have to live like that again did as much to exhaust him as his sleepless night.

He met Natalie in the Great Hall for breakfast, both of them being some of the first students up. Natalie was now a prefect, which shouldn't have surprised Harry as much as it did. She was an excellent student and more than happy to boss people around. Draco and Hermione would also have been prefects again, but they had other activities that made the additional responsibility impossible.

"Do you want me to bug him?" Natalie asked after he told her about his confrontation with Whitmore. He hadn't mentioned the Itching Curse. He didn't want the culprit to even know it had worked, let alone was still bothering him.

Harry grinned at her. "So you can get in my good graces and still deduct points from Gryffindors? I don't think so. Besides, don't you think it's a little earlier to begin abusing your authority?"

"Don't you think you're playing the martyr by not letting your friends help? Opportunity only knocks once."

"Thanks, but I think McGonagall has seen that justice was served."

She let it drop and they discussed classes they were interested in taking. It was a lot more fun to do this with Natalie than with his other friends. Hermione took everything too seriously, Draco too contemptuously, and Clyde was clueless more often than not. They talked and laughed over simple school things, and Harry forgot about his worries for at least a little while.

Harry was a bit annoyed to find he had potions first thing in the morning with Professor Slughorn, who he still had reservations about. Hermione only knew that he had taught at Hogwarts for nearly fifty years before his retirement during the war. He had kept a low profile during the fighting and after until he had shown up last night.

"I'll write to Narcissa to see what she knows," Hermione said. "He had to have taught when she was going to school."

Draco had a somewhat better idea. "Don't bother. I'll write to father myself, and then we can get a reply from the both of them. Uncle Severus might know some things, but I doubt he'll have kept tabs on him after he graduated."

"You're all paranoid loonies," Clyde said, exasperated.

"Considering Oblitz was a spy, Larousse wanted to adopt me, McNair was pure evil and Umbridge was a pink toad, I think I'm entitled to be concerned about Headmistress's hiring standards," Harry pointed out. Not to mention Brennan used me to try and assassinate the Dark Lord.

"Touché, mate."

They entered the potion's lab, and immediately hesitated. The dungeons had always had a gloomy chill to them and the potion's lab was no exception... until today. It was still cool, but it was of the pleasant variety and the classroom somehow seemed a little brighter than anyone remembered it. It almost looked... non-dungeon-like.

"Holy Hellhounds," Clyde remarked, baffled by the change in atmosphere. "If Snape's absence affects the dungeon's this much, I wonder what his presence has done to the Dark Art's classroom."

"You'll get your chance to find out, Houghton," Draco sneered.

"Is that young Mr. Malfoy I hear?" came an unfamiliar voice, which was soon followed by Professor Slughorn stepping out from behind a cabinet door. "Ah, and gracious me you've brought friends."

He looked at each of them, his thick mustache curled up in an affable smile. Harry stiffened. People who were happy to meet him for the first time brought up nearly as much suspicion as those who presented too much hostility.

"You've all arrived here ahead of your classmates. A sign of ambition and studiousness if ever I saw one. Traits that deserve

encouragement. Why don't you sit down and take out your books. There's something I'd like for you to do."

They gave each other uncertain looks but did as he instructed. Draco and Hermione sat at the front middle table and Harry and Clyde sat to their right. When they all had their books out in front of them, Slughorn spoke again.

"Now then, since you four are the first of my students to arrive, I am going to have you help me decide on the lesson for today. I would like each of you to select a potion from your book, any potion at all before chapter twelve. When the rest of the class arrives they will vote among your selections. Keep in mind you will be able to keep any potion you brew after it has been graded. You have five minutes."

They each shared a quick look, then quickly sorted through their books. In the five minutes that went by, half of the class finally arrived, but aside from looking at them curiously they didn't express any real interest in what they were doing..

"Time's up," Slughorn said. "Have you made your selections? How about Mr. Malfoy? Ah, the Belfax Heating Potion*, a tricky potions sure to impress even your father and Professor Snape, both men known for their exacting standards. You Miss Granger of Malfoy? Evergreen Potion, I should have known. By far the most ingenious potion in the whole book. McGonagall said your desire for ever greater heights of understanding were limitless."

Draco smirked and accepted the praise with his usual ungracious preening, while Hermione flushed with pleasure. Slughorn turned Harry and Clyde.

"I'm terrible sorry, young man, your name is one the tip of my tongue but I just can't quite," he started staring at Clyde who was closest.

"Er... Houghton, Clyde Houghton of the Stone family, sir."

“Oh, of course! I know your grandparents. Bernadette and Xavier! Tell me, does your grandfather still make those beautiful grandfather clocks? You know he gave me one when he first started his business, and it still runs perfectly.”

Clyde blinked at him in surprise. “Why, yes sir, he still tinkers. It’s more of a hobby now. He leaves most of the work to his apprentices, but he’s still making designs.”

“Well next time you see or write to them, tell them Horace says hello. Now what did you pick? Recitation Draught? Ha ha, hoping to quote some poetry to one of the bonnie lasses, are you? Ha, ha.”

He looked to Harry, who was regarding him suspiciously. There was a moment of hesitation, but not exactly fear, merely a moment to plan his approach. Harry pointed to the potion he had selected from his book.

“Wound-cleaning potion? Hhhmmm... that’s a bit middle of the road. Any particular reason you would choose that potion, Mr. Potter?”

“I want to send it to my godfathers.”

Slughorn blinked and then smiled. His expression was more that of relief than the friendliness he had shown to his friends, and Harry wondered if he hadn’t just passed some unspoken test. “I see. You know, when I taught your mother to brew Rhumid’s Draught, the first thing she did was send it to her grandmother? The Ministry nearly had a conniption fit when they found out she had tried to send a powerful potion like that to a muggle. She never did apologize for it either. She cared for her family as fiercely as any pureblood I ever new, and never would have apologized for it. I see you take after her in that respect.”

Harry’s voice caught in his throat, his eyes widening. Slughorn knew his mother? Of course he did, he was teacher at the time she was at school, but so were McGonagall and Flitwick and even Snape had been in the same year as her and they never spoke her like Slughorn

did. No one talked about her, period. He wondered for a moment why he had never asked.

Harry fell into a daze. Hermione noticed right away and quickly changed places with Clyde so they didn't end up blowing each other up. The rest of the class arrived and voted on the Recitation Potion, likely for the same reason Clyde picked it. It was the easiest of the four choices. There was a brief lecture on the potion, and then the potions master set them off to work.

Harry prepared the ingredients, endless detentions with Snape making the preparation a thoughtless process, and wondered at Slughorn's reference to his mother. It took him a while to realize it was a calculated maneuver on his part, just like the flattery of his friends had been calculated. Once he realized this, he began to take watch Slughorn out of the corner of his eye and listen to him with half an ear. The potions teacher wandered about the room correcting or complimenting a potion with the same genial tone, easing the students' minds as he went. Every so often he would stop at a particular student's work station and make brief conversation over the person's family or school achievement. There was nothing sly or misleading in his approach, and for all intents and purposes he just seemed like a friendly guy interested in his student's lives.

It made Harry nervous.

"Harry, are you alright?" Hermione asked quietly, as they waited for their potion to start boiling before they could add anymore ingredients. "You've been really quiet since he mentioned your mother..."

Harry shook his head. "I don't know... I don't like him trying to use her as a conversation piece."

"Oh, Harry, I don't think he... I don't think he meant to be disrespectful. He seemed genuinely sad that she was...gone."

Yes, he got that feeling too, which was half the reason he couldn't sort himself out. It was one thing if Slughorn was just sharing story

about his mother out of genuine fondness, but something else altogether if he was trying to express some false sympathy with him.

With Hermione's help they managed to finish a successful potion. They bottled their brews and turned them in on Slughorn's desk, but before Harry could walk away the potions master stopped him.

"Just a moment, Harry, before I forget. The Headmistress informed me that I would need to perform an assessment to make sure your potion instruction at Durmstrang meets Hogwarts's requirements. Are you free this Thursday, around seven?"

Harry's thoughts scrambled at the unexpected approach. His first instinct was to say no, to prevent being trapped alone with a stranger, but he did need to do his assessment and he couldn't think of any reason why he would need Thursday evening off during the first week of school.

"Er... sure. Thursday at seven is great."

"Excellent. I'll see you then."

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"Are you alright?" Natalie asked, looking across the checkered blanket at Harry. As per tradition, they were all enjoying their first lunch at school outside. Hermione had already left for some lunch meeting with the Hogwarts Herald staff, and Clyde was running away from Draco across the lawn for some rude comment on his hair style. Ron was there as well, but was quietly looking off in the distance across the lake. Anger had faded to apathy for the youngest Weasley son, and that was something they were all more comfortable dealing with. Ginny had come and gone, stuttering something about Gerald St. James, a sixth year Hufflepuff she was apparently dating. That left Harry and Natalie to make conversation. He was enjoying himself, the warmth of the sun and the company around him doing much to lighten his mood, but he still felt distracted by what happened that

morning in potions. "Did Slughorn say something to you? You looked bothered when I arrived. I don't think you even noticed I was there."

He smiled apologetically to her. "Sorry, it's nothing. I'm just wondering if I can trust him or not."

"You think he might be another psycho teacher?"

"Psycho? No. Manipulative? Yeah."

"He is a charmer. You should ask Snape about him. The guy was his Head of House once upon a time."

Harry frowned. He had resolved that the next time he saw Snape he'd give the greasy git a piece of his mind for not warning of the abrupt faculty change. If he was going to ask for the man's advice, he was going to have to give up the opportunity to vent at the man first.

Discussing the matter with Hermione on their way to DA&D brought things into perspective.

"Are you really to go up to Professor Snape and demand an explanation for not receiving special treatment? I think you're pushing it just asking him about Slughorn. If he thought the man was a threat he would have told you in advance."

"Not necessarily," Harry muttered. "Snape tends to wait for me to approach him rather than volunteer information. Either it doesn't occur to him to tell me or he gets some sort of power kick out of it."

Hermione just rolled her eyes and called him a dramatist.

Entering the DA&D classroom was even more jarring than entering the potion's lab. It was still recognizable, the desks and the various displays of Dark Artifacts and cabinets chained shut, but there were some changes. For one, there were several new displays, including a chart on plants commonly found in poisons, several glowing orbs about the size of tennis balls, and many more items Harry couldn't identify. The back of the room had been expanded and emptied of

everything except some mats on the floor and walls, which he suspected would be used for practical displays. Most striking of all was the desks.

They were radiating magic.

“Hermione, wait-”

Too late he turned to warn Hermione, but she had already sat down. He stared at her wide eyed, and she frowned at him in concern. She opened her mouth to say something but nothing came out. Her eyes widened as well.

It wasn't till then that they noticed the dozen other students already sitting down and staring at them glumly. Hermione tried to get up from her seat, but found herself stuck.

“I do believe the desks have been cursed, Hermione,” Harry said, trying very hard not to laugh as she bounced in her seat trying to break free. She glared at him.

“You are correct, Mr. Potter,” Snape said evenly, although there seemed to be some underlying irritation. Harry suspected he was disappointed that all the Gryffindors hadn't been forced to sit down and shut up. “I should like to know how you figured it out so quickly.”

Harry smirked. “I can feel the magic. Like feeling humidity or smelling ozone before it rains.”

“Magus hypersensia. The ability to detect magic as one or more of the five senses. A very useful skill. Have you been drinking any potions lately?”

“Er... not that I know of. Why?”

“You will find out during lecture. Now take your seat.”

“But they're all-”

“Cursed to make you sit silently. Oh, the horror.”

Harry glared at Snape’s back as the man returned to his desk. He turned to a desk next to Hermione, and cast a few curse detection spells he had learned during his semester of Curse Breaking at Durmstrang. Sure enough he found a silencing curse and a sticking charm, and deactivated both before sitting down and casting the same thing on Hermione. She let out an irritated huff.

“Of all the silly...” she muttered, but didn’t finish. She looked at him speculatively. “I didn’t know you had magus hypersensia. When did that happen?”

“You make it sound like have some sort of fungal infection. And I don’t know. I always thought I had it, but I’ve only been able to sense magic consistently since...”

Since the Winter Solstice Ritual.

“...second year, I think.”

She looked ready to question him further, but Snape was already starting class. As Harry predicted, Snape ran DA&D the same way he ran Dueling Club, emphasizing a disciplined and thorough approach as highlighted in their syllabus with a heavy dose of personal responsibility for ensuring their own safety. Getting stuck to their desks and silenced definitely ensured that everyone paid close attention as he lectured, especially when he assured them that there would be similar tests in alertness throughout the year and not all of them would be as painless.

“For the next three weeks, we will be studying the various ways of detecting curses and defensive charms. There are many resources available that will help you avoid the situation you currently find yourselves in,” Snape said, smirking a bit at the angry students squirming in their seats. “Finite Incantatem omnis.”

There was an audible sigh that rang through the classroom as they were all released from the spells.

“Perhaps the most convenient means is magus hypersensia, the ability to sense magic as one or more of the five senses, which allowed Mr. Potter to avoid your unenviable fates.”

Harry stiffened in his chair as he felt several eyes fall on him, none of them particularly friendly.

“Magus hypersensia can be induced temporarily by ingesting certain potions and through the use of magical artifacts. There are spells that have some limited success but are ultimately unreliable. Many witches and wizards, particularly those who practice the Dark Arts or are frequently exposed to strong magic, develop magus hypersensia naturally, theoretically as a subconscious survival mechanism against harmful magic. A rare case does emerge every so often where a witch or wizard is born magically sensitive, but this usually occurs along the bloodlines of Seers and Prophets.”

I guess it makes sense, Harry decided, that I would be sensitive to magic after screwing around with gods.

The rest of the lecture went on to other detection methods, many of them Harry was already familiar with from Curse Breaking. The last half of the lecture was a practical in the use of Orbis Comperius, the magical orbs Harry had noted at the beginning of class, that could not only sense spells but would turn different colors depending on the type of spell and ever darkening shades depending on how strong the spell was. They were made to go around to a dozen magical objects that had different spells on them and write down their color and intensity, informed by Snape exactly what spell was cast on each object, and then made to write a brief explanation on why the orbs turned that particular color for that particular curse according to the information in their books. On top of that, they were given another assignment to find three different methods of detecting curses that they hadn't discussed in class.

By the time the lecture was done, everyone was tired and bitter with their long assignments on the first day of class, except for Hermione

of course, who was all enthusiasm and Harry who had had nearly identical assignments at Durmstrang.

“Professor.”

Snape didn't even bother to look at him as he proceeded to re-curse the desks for his next class. This time it was a Sneezing Curse.

“What Potter?”

“I was wondering if I could talk to you about Professor Slughorn.”

Now Snape did look at him, his expression shrewd.

“What about him?”

“I...Is he a trustworthy person?”

The potions master's expression became very bland, very quickly.

“I mean... he said something before potion's class today... about my mother.”

“What precisely did he say?” Now the professor's countenance had shifted to alert and defensive, a complete turn around from the moment before.

“He said she cared about her family and would never apologize for it, and he told some story about her sending Rhumid's Draught to her grandmother.”

Snape smirked, and looked away. “Yes, I remember that. The Ministry threw a fit. They wanted the Headmaster to suspend her, but he never did. All the teacher's loved her.”

“Did Slughorn?”

Looking back to Harry, his expression hardened again. “I think what you're really asking is if Slughorn means to use your parent's memory

to harm you. I can honestly say it is unlikely. He is not a cruel or vindictive man, but he is a manipulator. He will use your vulnerabilities and your pride to collect you.”

“Collect me?”

“Yes. He enjoys collecting people. It’s a very lucrative hobby of his. Voldemort brought him out of retirement specifically for his collection skills.”

“Why?”

“For social networking purposes. Hogwarts is thick with talented and powerful witches and wizards, boys and girls who will graduate to run the country. Professors, researchers, politicians, sentinels, writers, athletes, businessman. People who will go on to influence and lead hundreds, maybe thousands of others, and who will only grow more powerful by the associates they make here in this school. Hogwarts itself works hard to promote loyalty to the Dark Lord and Britain, which makes its students’ influence on the rest of Britain that much more desirable. You in particular would benefit from the support of your peers now and in the future.”

Harry blinked. Whatever he had been expecting it certainly hadn’t been this. He didn’t quite know how to react to it. Snape turned away from him again to continue with what he was doing.

“You would do well to take advantage of his interest, which will bring mutual benefits to you both. The Dark Lord desires it.”

“ Oh, well, since it’s what the Dark Lord desires,” Harry said sarcastically. Then he thought of something. “Did bringing in Slughorn force you to take the DA&D position?”

Snape stiffened.

“You should go now.”

Harry very wisely made his retreat.

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“I am sorry, Minister, but I’m afraid there is nothing I can do,”
Dumbledore said evenly, staring across the desk at Seibligg who was
becoming an ever deepening shade of red. After months spent hiding
in Greece, the old wizard had seen the situation deteriorate in
Germany to the point where he felt reasonably confident that Seibligg
would speak with him.

Several hundred small businesses in Germany that had been
depending on its sales with France were now preparing for
bankruptcy, and that was affecting everyone. The banks had put a
hold on lending, home sales were down, newly graduated students
with loans were finding it difficult to find work, and the people were
trying to save rather spend which only worsened the situation. It was
only going to get worse and everyone knew it.

And everyone blamed Seibligg.

Oh, there were a few who supported his anti-werewolf campaign and
more who supported his anti-Voldemort attitude, but it was just barely
enough to keep him in office and reasonably protected by his own
Aurors. Soon the public would demand he step down, and once he
did that he had no illusions about his safety. He would be dead within
the year, either by assassins or an embittered mob.

His only hope had been Dumbledore, who most of the public didn’t
even know was alive, but who was quickly becoming the proverbial
saint who could have lead them all through darkness if he had made
himself known.

“You’ve sown poison into your own garden. There is no way for me
to save your political career and frankly, there is no reason why I
should. If, however, you are willing to gracefully step down from your
office I am willing to place you under my protection,” Dumbledore
offered.

Seibligg didn't appreciate it one bit.

"You... You, self righteous old fool! The Triwizard Tournament was your idea! Potter escaped because of you! You got me into this mess, you damn well better get me out again," he snarled.

"The matter of the Triwizard Tournament was barely an issue until you threatened Mr. Potter and sent him running back to Britain and called the whole matter into question. Likewise, your persecution of the werewolves was ill planned. The initial enthusiasm for tightening werewolf restrictions quickly turned to disgust as the public was forced to face the consequences of their own petty fears. Saying you will hunt down Death Eater werewolves is one thing. Publically beating women and children in the streets is something else altogether. Voldemort's treaty with France, on the other hand, was sheer genius on his part. Not even I had realized he had an ongoing dialogue with the Queen."

Seibligg could only sit there and glare, disarmed by the truth. Dumbledore wasn't going to help him. His offer to protect him was flimsy at best. Once he stepped down, Dumbledore would likely throw him to the wolves in order to promote the candidate of his choosing. Maybe he would even run for Minister himself, even without the little technicality known as citizenship.

The only way to save himself was to stay in office long enough to organize a turn around.

"Minister, you've made a mess of things and you are not capable of fixing them. For once in your life, do something for the benefit of your countrymen. Step down before you're dragged down and take everyone else with you. A legal re-election could reunite the country and bring about an administration fit to deal with the current political climate. If you wait any longer, you will only bring chaos and civil. That is just what Voldemort wants."

"Get out."

Dumbledore just looked at him, looking neither surprised or angry. Finally he stood and left, leaving Seibligg feeling more desperate than before. Why hadn't the old man begged? He should have begged for him to reconsider, to think of the people, to relinquish his power. He hadn't though. Perhaps Dumbledore didn't think he had enough power left to beg for.

"I'll show you," he snarled under his breath. "I am the Minister. No one has more power here than I do. It's about damn time everyone else remembered that."

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By the end of the week, the awkwardness of Harry's new celebrity status had faded into tolerable levels. There were a few confrontations and snide remarks about werewolves from others, but nothing he couldn't forget about at the end of the day. If anything the sudden increase of female admirers was harder to handle. More than once a girl had pulled him aside to ask if he had plans for the weekend or knew who he was going to the Halloween Party with, and he could do little more than stand there and ogle them until Hermione or one of his friends rescued him (although the Weasley twins following him around and pretending to be his secretaries in charge of his social calendar for most of Friday had been more annoying than helpful).

His assessment with Slughorn hadn't been as painfully awkward as he thought it would be, and he left the man's office with a few more stories about his mother and the assurance that he wouldn't need any additional tutoring for potions.

His other classes had mixed results. He would essentially have to retake the second half of fourth year History of Magic and Astronomy (it was so overcast at Durmstrang most of the time that the subject wasn't even offered there). He only got through runes because he had a strong enough knowledge of it beforehand that he was about even with everyone else once he returned. He also broke even with transfigurations and herbology. He was actually ahead in charms, arithmancy, and DA&D (but then almost everyone in Dueling Club

was). He had already elected to take Introductory to Magical First Aid again since he had missed it the year before, and Introduction to Magical Theory. Second semester involved a mandatory Sex Education class that Harry was dreading.

He had dropped Celtic studies. He went to one class, and knew immediately he couldn't stay. The new teacher, Professor Alexander Seamus, had looked at him through the entire class as if he had killed Brennan himself.

It was just as well. He had moved beyond what someone like Seamus could teach him.

Now it was the second Wednesday of the school year and Harry was at the first varsity Dueling Club practice of school year. Cedric Diggory had been forced to step down as team captain because he was too old to participate in competitions and Ron had lost his captain's status with the rollover, leaving Angelina Johnson in charge. The attack she had suffered during Harry's second year had made her almost semi-paranoid and an avid fan of self-defense. If he had been impressed with her on the quidditch pitch, it was nothing compared to his admiration for her on the dueling platform. She was efficient, ruthless, and adaptable.

He was less impressed when he found out Lockhart was sitting in for Snape, and was already making things unbearable.

"While I've never officially been a part of a Dueler's Association, I am an Admiral and you don't get that sort of position without knocking a few heads together," Lockhart preened, walking up and down the dueling platform like a model on the catwalk, soaking up that dazed, smiling faces of adolescent girls.

Harry seriously hoped he would get over himself in time for them to actually get some practice in. Beside him, Hermione was scribbling ideas in her notebook for the first edition of Hogwarts Herald due next Sunday and next to her Draco and Natalie (she had quit Riding Club after rather nasty fall off a Hippogryff) were having a thumb war (which she won by stabbing Draco with her nail).

“I’ve found that fighting with a bit of a flare does wonders for increasing your chances of winning. A show of absolute confidence will intimidate your adversary... and impress anyone who just happens to be watching,” Lockhart laughed, flipping his wavy, golden hair over his shoulder. Harry quickly looked elsewhere before he got violently ill.

His gaze found Ron, at the other end of the Dueling Hall, casting spells at his dummy. He wasn’t saying the words out loud, just moving his lips, which was the only reason no one else had noticed him up until now. Harry felt himself reluctantly admiring his cleverness, but quickly realized the other boy wasn’t having much luck. Whatever he was casting didn’t seem to have nearly as much strength as his spells cast out loud, and his dummy just wobbled a bit on its stand and nothing else.

“Now who would like to come up and have a match with me? Anyone? I promise not to be too hard on-”

“Spira mobilis!” rang out through the hall as Ron, finally fed up with his failed attempts at wordless magic, finally snapped it out. The dummy he sent the hex at spun around like a top for several seconds and fell over. Everyone turned and stared. Ron looked back them and scowled.

“What? I’m not allowed to practice?” he snarled.

“Well,” Lockhart said, his tone a bit irritated after having his limelight stolen. “Why don’t you come up here to practice with me since you are so eager?”

Ron smiled unpleasantly. “I’d be honored.”

Lockhart actually smiled at that, completely missing the sarcasm. Harry looked to his friends. Hermione shared his worried expression, but Natalie and Draco looked more than happy by this little turn of events.

“Oh, this should be fun no matter who loses,” Natalie chuckled.

Ron and Lockhart both got into position, and saluted each other. Lockhart, however, was almost immediately distracted by someone shouting 'go Lockhart!' and Ron's hex hit him before he could get a shield up.

"Spira mobilis!"

The spell sent Lockhart spinning like a top and when he stopped he was dizzy and staggered and sent a Petrifying charm straight into a window.

"Turbulentus!"

The platform beneath the admiral surged up and knocked the man off his feet and painfully onto his back.

"Amburo!"

"Ron, no!" Hermione shouted, jumping to her feet. It was too late. Lockhart's robes had already caught fire, and the wizard panicked and flailed about trying to beat out the flames. Harry stood, ready to cast the counterspell, but before he could someone beat him to it.

"Madefacio!" The Soaking Spell washed over Lockhart, dousing the flames with a loud hiss. Snape stalked across the room and onto the stage, snatching Ron's wand out of his hand as he passed. "You will get this back after we discuss the merits of self restraint, Mr. Weasley."

He moved on to Lockhart who remained on his back, too dazed to move. His robes were scorched and wet and thoroughly ruined, but he didn't appear hurt. Snape didn't look the least bit sympathetic.

"Are you injured, Professor?"

"Er...I... don't..."

“Yes, Mr. Weasley is something of a spitfire. I suppose I should have warned you,” he said, then looked around at the students who had all gotten to their feet. “I need volunteers to take Admiral Lockhart to the infirmary.”

Several girls raised their hands, but Snape ignored them and selected Cedric another seventh year boy to help carry him away. Harry glared up at Snape suspiciously. It seemed more than a little convenient that the man should just happen to show up when needed, especially when he had told Lockhart that he wouldn't be able to attend practice at all that day.

He turned to Hermione to ask her opinion, but she was gone, disappeared amongst the crowd of students during the excitement. He searched for her, but never did find her.

It wasn't until he made his way back to the common room that he realized he hadn't seen Ronald Weasley either.

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“Will you hold on for just a second?!” Hermione demanded, practically jogging to keep up with Ron's long strides. He turned back to glare at her but didn't slow down.

“I don't need a lecture from you, Granger. I'll get one from Snape soon enough.”

“I'm not here to lecture you. I'm here to find out what is wrong! You've been acting weird ever since the train. What is going on?”

He stopped abruptly, his face pinched in frustration and hands clenched. Throwing caution to the wind, she stepped closer to him. She did not honestly believe he would hit her. He could be an absolute racist idiot, but there were certain lines he never crossed. Using his physical strength against girls was one of those lines, and there had been times when Natalie had made particularly acidic comments where even Hermione thought a slap had been disserved.

“You’re not my friend. I might hang out with you because of your brother sometimes, but I’m not about ready to spill my guts to you just because you make with the puppy dog eyes.”

She rolled her eyes. “Bollocks!”

He jerked in surprised. Hermione never swore.

“We’ve been friends since we were primary school together... even after you turned into a grade A jerk, and I’m worried about you. I’m not my brother and I’m sure as hell not Natalie. I’m not going to laugh at you or use whatever’s bothering you against you later. You obviously need to tell someone because you can’t keep going on like this. Why not me? I promise I won’t tell.”

He grimaced, but didn’t immediately shout at her or stalk away which she took as a good sign. His faced twitched and shifted, running a gamut of emotions she could just barely catch before it changed again. Frustration, anger, sadness, disgust. Finally, he pulled away and walk around her.

“Just leave it alone, Granger. It’s none of your business.”

She let out a frustrated noise but let him go. He obviously wasn’t ready to talk to her, and if she kept trying now she’d only drive him further away. She would try again later, after they both had time to cool down. After all, she was nothing if not persistent.

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Belfax Heating Potion- a tasteless and non-toxic potion. Adding it to water can cause it to heat up. Can be used for cooking when a fire cannot be built, to keep beverages hot, or for heating bathwater for example. Belfax is the inventor of this particular potion. There are other heating potions used for other purposes, such a raising a person’s body temperature due to hypothermia or to turn metals into their molten liquid state. Evergreen potion- is used to keep flowers

and plants from wilting after they have been cut and placed into vases. It's use is simple, but it's brewing is difficult. It's also highly toxic if ingested, and is not used to preserve anything other than ornamental plants. Recitation Draught is used to help the drinker memorize what they've read for perfect recitation later. Great for making speeches or like Slughorn points out, quoting poetry to your sweetheart later. It is the easiest potion to brew in the entire book, which is the real reason Clyde picked it (and Slughorn knows it). Wound-cleaning potion is exactly what it sounds like. Rhumid's Draught is used to treat arthritis. If you're wondering what happened to Felix Felicis, it's being used as a reward for Advanced Potions, not fifth year potions, just as it was in canon.

Book V

Chapter 12: Lords of War

Snape stared at the six vials of potions, flabbergasted by his results for the first time since he had graduated university with his mastership in potions. There was not an error. Three of the six vials showed the intended result; names in silvery script floating in a solution of dark blue.

Severus Snape

Harold Potter.

Cedric Diggory.

He had collected a vial of blood from each of them, including himself, presumably to use in a demonstration of blood curses in DA&D. Not entirely false, but he had taken a few drops specifically to use in this experiment, as controls to ensure the potion worked properly. And it obviously had.

Which left him wondering why the other three vials had turned black.

The Blood Identification Potion was a standard potion in both medical, legal, and law enforcement fields and he was well familiarized with it. He taught it to his Advanced Potion's students nearly every year.

Well, he had when he was actually the potion's professor.

And wasn't that just a bitch? Lestrangle had had quite the gloat-fest when she had handed down the Dark Lord's intention to substitute him with Slughorn. One day he intended to get even by replacing her as headmaster, but that time was not quite yet.

He needed to figure out who or what the Body Tree was growing at this very moment in the secret room in his living quarters. He had a sneaking suspicion it was a copy of Harry. It would explain why McGunny had helped the Germans escape with the boy. Having the public lose track of Harry, and then replacing him with a replica could

serve any number of purposes, not the least of which was getting close to Voldemort.

But the blood he had collected from the fetal 'fruit' had not revealed a name, and in fact the corruption of the potion suggested it wasn't even human. Could it be some human-like creature, a fae of some sort or veela? Or was it a copy of a biological construct such as a golum? Maybe a being that started out looking human and matured into something else like a changling?

If the thing possessing McGunny had not originally been human, it would not be unreasonable to assume that the new body it was attempting to create for itself would not be human either. Even if it intended the body to look like a specific person did not mean it needed the person's exact internal body specification. There were definite benefits to creating a body that was more than human.

Confusing the hell out of Snape himself being one of them.

With a wave of his wand, he vanished the potion and all proof that he had brewed it. He would need to perform more experiments to determine the species of his current project, but not tonight. He had essays to grade.

He secured the supply cabinets and ingredient's cupboard, and stepped out of his private laboratory. Lestrangle had tried to deprive him of this too, but Slughorn had insisted he keep it. For all that Snape resented his removal from his potion's position he could not bring himself to resent his former mentor, who had done much to foster his self esteem during his school years and even now the man's positive regard acted as a balm to his wounded pride.

His rooms were still in the dungeons as well, but there had been no question of Slughorn staying there. He enjoyed his creature comforts more than his privacy, and was housed beneath the Ravenclaw dormitory. Yet even the forbidding gloom of the dungeon's was not enough to ward off everyone, as was evidenced by the envelope poking out the side of the portrait that guarded his rooms.

He immediately noticed Draco's sharp, elegant scrawl and after a simple revealing charm proved the letter devoid of magic, he grabbed the letter and brought it in with him. The missive inside was simple and short.

Uncle Severus

Mother would like to invite you to see a play next Saturday. Benjamin and Bailey*. Bring a date. – Draco

Snape smirked. Narcissa, for all her class and breeding, lacked the ability to extend invitations graciously or even courteously more often than not and Draco had inherited her lack of tact. She was fortunate, however, that he actually liked that particular play and that he could actually think of at least one woman he wouldn't mind bringing along to see it.

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"I swear if that...girl tries to slip one more article under my nose I'm hanging her by her thumbs in the dungeon," Hermione snarled, throwing down a stack of parchments on the table and taking her seat. Harry and Ginny, who had been discussing the upcoming quidditch tryouts, blinked at her.

"Are you referring to any girl specifically or should all the resident females fear for their auxiliary digits?" Harry asked. He grinned at her, pleased he even managed a sentence that clever on the fly.

"Trudy Sabbat. Second-year Ravenclaw and know it all. She wasn't even a part of the staff last year and when she joined she just knew she was the paper's rising star. As if we have or need a star to begin with, the little snot."

Harry couldn't help but smile. Hermione was one of the most tolerant people he knew, and even people she didn't like tended to get some sort of rationalization. It took a rare soul to get her to spout out insults about them.

“Don’t laugh. She’s convinced that her success rides on making you out to be some sort of insane monster bent on over running the wizarding world with werewolves.”

“Oh, her,” Ginny said, her eyes widening in recognition. “She came up to me in the library and had the nerve to ask me if I’d made a pledge to you to become a werewolf once I graduated. Of all the stupid things?”

That was funny too, but suddenly Harry couldn’t bring himself to laugh. Someone had tried to get into his trunk two nights ago, and when they failed they settled for writing nasty things over it. Prior to that he’d had a homework assignment stolen in the library while he was looking for more research materials, and found it replaced with sheet of paper reading ‘Traitor To Your Species’. He would like to blame Whitmore, but Harry suspected it was more than one person. There had been more than few hostile stares in the three weeks Harry had been back in Hogwarts.

Why exactly had he thought coming home would be easier?

“She’s not very bright for a Ravenclaw,” Hermione admitted, “But she is persistent. Eventually she’s going to figure out she can’t write a story without facts, but she can write an opinion piece. I might have to print it to keep from being accused of being bias. The first edition came out so perfectly, why is everything turning into such a mess now?”

The first edition of the Hogwarts Herald had been a raging success, assuaging the fears of many of the students that the paper would get dull after being taken over by its new, bookish editor. Hermione had been a high-strung, yet happy mess until the day it was handed out in the great hall. Now she was just high-strung.

“The solution should be obvious, Granger.”

“Ron!” she blurted, then cringed. She hadn’t meant to use his given name in public. He was looking as angry and irritated with the world

as ever, arms crossed with some parchments in his hand. He moved in set them on top of her pile.

“I want to write the article before Sabbat does and embarrasses the rest of us. I actually have some legitimate questions I’d like to ask Potter.”

There was a glare directed at Harry, who just smiled back stiffly and raised his glass to him. Meanwhile, Hermione was looking over his proposal, her pinched features relaxing into interest.

“This is really good. Really really good. Do you think you could have this ready by next Monday?”

“You can’t be serious,” Harry said. “I might not trust Sabbat to write a fair article about me, but you want me to trust him to do it?”

Ron sneered. “Get over yourself. I’m not writing a story about you. I’m writing a story about Proposal 4-66 and the treaty with France. You just happen to be the only first hand source available.”

“Which means anything negative you write about them reflects back on me. No thanks.”

“Harry,” Hermione broke in. “A lot of people have very real concerns about the influx of werewolves, and even if you don’t share it, it doesn’t make their concerns any less valid. You have a responsibility to answer their questions as best you can. Even if it makes you uncomfortable to do so.”

“What she said, Potter.”

Hermione glared at Ron. “And I will be present during the interview to make sure the questions are on subject and not taken out of context.”

“Whatever you say, luv.”

Ron grinned cockily and strutted his way towards the Slytherin table. Harry gave Hermione a dirty look, which she returned. “Don’t be such

a baby, Harry. You've done this sort of thing loads of times, and you could do a lot worse as far as reporters go. He always writes a well balanced article."

"Please, Harry," Ginny said, "Don't be stubborn about it? I know you and Ron don't get along, but this might be just what he needs to snap him out of this funk he's been in. A non-funky Ron has to be better than a funky one, right?"

Harry chuckled at her description of her brother, but nodded in agreement. They were all right. He did need to face the other students and their questions. If he were lucky maybe it would stop the harassment he had been getting. For once, he would just have to bow to the inevitable.

By the next morning he had managed to stir up some enthusiasm for the upcoming interview. It couldn't hurt to work on an open dialogue with the rest of his peers. If only to remind them that he was still Harry, and they could still talk to him and not be ignored or dismissed. He missed a lot of the easy banter he had held with his classmates and Dueling Club partners.

His optimism for the day was dashed, however, when Snape handed him letter from his godfathers over breakfast. He read the letter. He read the letter again. Then a third time.

"Harry, what is it?" Clyde asked, "You look like someone killed your dog."

"Huh," he laughed, wrung from the irony of his friend's words more than any humor in the situation itself. "Sirius and Remus are going to France."

Clyde blinked. "Oh... Sorry, mate."

"Yeah..."

"Does it say how long they'll be gone?"

Harry shook his head, still trying to wrap his mind around the idea. It shouldn't be that disturbing. It wasn't as if he would have been able to visit them until next summer, and letters from France only took two or three days more to reach him than those from the Goddess Colony. And yet...

Britain would feel a little less like home when they weren't in it.

According to the letter, it didn't sound like they would be back any time soon.

He was distracted and depressed for the rest of the day, turning his toad into fish rather than an ottoman (when precisely would that ever come in handy?) in transfiguration and charming his tea set to electrocute rather than warm beverages in charms. Hermione was even getting frustrated with him, until Clyde tipped her off in Arithmancy, and then she became all quiet and sympathetic which was worse in a lot of ways.

"Do you need to talk about it?" she asked during their study period together.

"No... I... I just need to get used to the idea. Maybe..." he paused, a thought occurring to him. "There's something I need to do. I think you might be able to help me with it, but not for a few days."

She asked him what he needed to do, but he wouldn't elaborate. She wouldn't understand until he showed her. None of his friends would.

The next day was Friday, the evening of the interview. Ron had spent the last few days going around the castle and asking people if they had any questions they would like to ask Harry about Proposal 4-66 and the 1997 Treaty of Paris, and had quite the list when they met in one of the abandoned classrooms.

Sensing they would be there for a quite a while, Hermione had transfigured the desks into soft easy chairs and Harry brought up some snacks from the kitchens (the castle house elves still regarded him as their hero and had been tittering happily to themselves at his

personal request). They made themselves comfortable and got down to business.

“Who came up with the idea of Proposal 4-66?” Ron began.

“I did. Or at least, I suggested helping France with the werewolves they were getting from Germany. Most of the actual plans were thought up by Lord Voldemort, Fenrir Greyback, and Voices for All. Personally, I thought most of their ideas were quite ingenious.”

“And why did you make the suggestion? How did you even know what was happening? Britain did not seem aware of the situation until a few days before Proposal 4-66 was made.”

“I had received a letter from a friend in France. This person was aware of my connection to werewolves, particularly that my godfathers are werewolves and that it was a werewolf family that helped me get back to Britain safely. The letter contained a German article about the ministry attempting to round up werewolf ‘Death Eaters’ conspiring with Lord Voldemort. It was all lies. Even Stephen Canis, the werewolf who helped me, was painted as some sort of lone rebel bent on toppling the government, when the truth was that he’s just a father trying to do what’s best for his wife and children. When I realized what was happening, and that they were using my escape as an excuse to persecute innocent people, I went to Lord Voldemort.”

The interview lasted for nearly an hour and a half, with only a ten minute break for snacks and drinks, and it was by far the longest interview Harry could ever remember doing. Ron insisted on asking every question he had been given, everything from where the new colonies would be located (Ireland, where there aren’t enough wards to safely protect wizarding folk against the native fairy population) to his belief in werewolf equality (equal, yes, the same, no- who could they? They had completely different cultures) to granting citizenship to non-British or Irish werewolves (no, once the colonies in France are set up, they’ll return there, unless they find mates and wish to stay).

“Okay, last question,” Ron said, his voice starting to go raspy with talking. “There are several people of the opinion that taking in the additional werewolves presents far greater risks than it does benefits. What would you say to those people?”

“I’d say they’re entitled to their opinion, but I hope they have something to back it up, because I’m not too impressed with it right now. The same safety features that have kept werewolves and humans from harming each other in the last fifteen years are still in place, and the benefits from our decision to aid the werewolves have led to a friendship with France, which can only help us.”

Ron wrote out his response in the short hand gibberish that only he could interpret and snapped his notebook closed.

“That should be it. I’ll write the article up Saturday. Front page stuff this is,” he said, waving his little notebook. Harry rolled his eyes and got up to go.

“If that’s all then, I think we should get back to our rooms. Curfew’s almost here.”

“Actually, Harry,” Hermione said, “I need to talk to Ron. About the paper. So... you should probably go ahead without me.”

He felt immediately suspicious, but didn’t push. If she wanted to talk privately with Ron, he wasn’t going mother hen her. He wasn’t Draco. He did, however, linger for a minute behind the door. It didn’t take long for the conversation to start up again.

“I’m not going to talk about it with you, Granger. And stop calling me Ron.”

“I’m not calling you Weasley, and I didn’t ask you to talk to me about the ‘it’ you haven’t defined. Unless ‘it’ is your article. At which point, I’ll talk to you about it as much as I want. That’s the benefit of being the editor.”

“Playing dumb doesn’t suit a know-it-all like you. Knock it off.”

“I’m just worried.”

“You’re just nosy. I’m fine. Look at me, productive member of society, writing for the school paper and not setting anyone on fire for a whole week.”

Harry walked away after that, rolling his eyes. If arguing with Ron is what she wanted, she could have it.

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Snape glowered at the small package on his kitchen table, and considered forgetting about it for the day. It had arrived at his breakfast table via owl post, and even before checking the address he could tell its source by the eager way Harry had watched the package land. He really did hate being that boy’s private postman.

He performed the usual curse detection spells and opened the package. There was a spear head inside, wrapped in a piece of paper.

‘For use in spell. Don’t touch.’

What was that boy up to now? He put the spear head back in the box, careful not to touch anything other than the paper. He’d give it to the boy later. Maybe. After he found out what it was for.

He spent the rest of the morning in his lab, brewing potions to help him identify the Body Tree fruit, which had developed from ‘fetal’ to ‘infant’ with a healthy crop of fine dark hair. By three he was finished for the day, and would not be able to continue his potions for another twelve to sixteen hours. He set them aside, and headed above ground to one of Hogwart’s many towers. He found McGonagall already pouring herself a cup of tea and set himself down across from her.

She always had her tea here, everyday at the same time, and while he didn't always join her, he knew he could always depend on intelligent company for at least an hour out of any day. She poured him a cup of Earl Grey, and a bit of milk but no sugar, just as he liked it. He smiled his thanks, thin and strained as it was. The tea set was Larousse's. It had been donated, along with most of her belongings, to Hogwarts and Snape had made it a point to instruct the castle house elves that it should only ever be used by McGonagall or himself. He didn't think of it too much at the time, but he wondered now if he hadn't been a touch mad when he done it.

"Hogsmeade weekend is next week," McGonagall said, skipping over the pleasantries. Snape cringed, and shook his head.

"Has it really been that long already? I suppose I'm on gate duty this time."

"I'm afraid so. Lestrangle really seems to have it out for you lately. I think she's jealous that you got to go to Paris."

"I don't know why. It's a dirty city, everyone smokes, and the women all dress like muggle hookers."

"By what you're describing it's possible that what you saw were muggle hookers. Wizarding and muggle Paris are a lot more interconnected than wizarding and muggle London. I hear the art district is nice."

Snape shrugged. He hadn't ventured far into that part of the city. He had only stopped at a jewelry booth on his way to one of Paris' many historic libraries when he had seen the beetle brooch and been reminded of Ira.

"I have a date," he said, now that he had been reminded of the woman. McGonagall blinked at him, her honest surprise more than a little unflattering.

"A date? With a woman?"

“I believe so. I’ve only ever seen her in a dress, although Ira is more traditionally a man’s name.”

“Ira? She doesn’t sound familiar.”

“Ira Beadle. She never went to Hogwarts, but she must have done alright for herself. She’s a research assistant at the University of London. Entomology.”

“Really? What’s she like?”

Snape nearly smirked at her dubious expression. No doubt she had in her mind a pure-blood intellectualist, Voldemort-approved, and greedy for Snape’s influence with Harry and the Dark Lord.

“A Hufflepuff if ever I met one.”

McGonagall blinked. “You haven’t imperio’d this poor woman, have you?”

“Amazingly enough, no. Something about a bachelor and an orphan living alone together tugs at her maternal instincts, and I haven’t been able to get rid of her since.”

“So you decided to go on a date with her in an attempt at reverse psychology?” she asked, smirking herself now.

“Narcissa invited me to a play I actually liked on the stipulation that I brought a date. No offense Minerva, but you’re a bit old for me.”

She chuckled into her tea. Severus was a strange, infuriating, funny man. Any answer he gave you that was longer than ‘yes’ or ‘no’ was never straight or un-mined. Conversing with him resembled dancing more than anything, and one misstep sent you falling all over yourself.

Sometimes it was necessary to change the song.

“How do you like DA&D? I have to say I’ve never seen so many students afraid to sit down in their desks in all the time I’ve taught here.”

Snape tilted his head. “I see now that it’s a good thing I was transferred. Their knowledge is spotty at best. Too many teacher changes half way through the semester, and Quirrel’s been too lazy to do the job properly since his supposedly last year of teaching. There’s no discipline to it, and they’ve forgotten almost anything useful they learned from Larousse and Oblitz. I don’t know how any of the previous seventh years managed to pass their NEWTS.”

McGonagall nodded. She often wondered the same thing.

“Then it is certainly a good thing that you are there to guide them. I suspect the knowledge to protect themselves will become increasingly important in the coming days. I have to say, I’m particularly impressed with what you’ve managed to pass on to Mr. Potter and Mr. Weasley. I saw them at the Junior Dueling League Championship. They were both amazing. All of your duelists were.”

Snape acknowledged the compliment with a nod, inwardly pleased. McGonagall and he had not been friends for long, but he knew she was hard to impress and offered her praise sparingly.

“Speaking of which, what has Lockhart been up to? He’s been avoiding me lately.”

McGonagall took a sip of her tea to hide her less than polite smile, and set it down again once she had regained her composure.

“Yes, well... I do believe he’s rather afraid you’ll ask him to step in for you again, despite the fact that he was playing down his own defensive capabilities in order to build up Mr. Weasley’s self-confidence. Aside from that, I suppose he’s doing a pretty decent job. Most of what he does is show his ‘recruits’ how to take care of their uniforms and perform drills so that they look impressive. There’s very little spellwork involved, and for that I’m sure we’re all grateful.”

“Count our blessings, as the saying goes.”

“Exactly so.”

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It took some convincing on Harry’s part to get Remus’ package from Snape. He had to go from the Great Hall back to his dorm room and then back to the Great Hall to get the book containing the spell he wanted to use the arrowhead in. It had taken another twenty minutes explaining the basis of the ritual magic and reassure the potions master that the spell was perfectly safe and would not end up transforming him or anyone else in the school into pigeons.

It took some convincing, but he had it.

“What precisely are we doing?” Natalie asked, voicing the question all their friends were wondering. “And where did you get a bucket of cow blood?”

Harry had asked his friends to help him with a spell, but it was the sort of spell none of them had any experience with. It involved the Old Magicks, which they only knew of from history books and fairy tales. Most of them were only half convinced it would work.

But they were his friends, and they were curious. So Natalie, Hermione, Draco, Clyde, Ginny, the Weasley twins, and Ron (because once he started following them there was no shaking him) had helped him gather the supplies from around the castle and followed him for nearly an hour out across the lake where they would be assured their privacy.

“Did you know the house elves butcher most of the meat we eat?” he said, glancing back at them to make sure no one had fallen behind. “They’ve been very helpful. I never would have found half of this stuff without them.”

“And what is all of this stuff for?” Ron snipped. He would have guessed Dark Arts with the blood, but he had learned enough from DA&D to know most of their supplies were perfectly harmless. Candles, white linen, mason jars of grains, wine, and milk. They may as well be coming out to have a really weird picnic.

“A protection spell for my godfathers. I told you that already,” he said, then pointed to a spot a little ways in the distance. There was a rocky beach with plenty of room for all of them.

“Why not just cast a protection charm on them and be done with it? Or give them one of those protection relics are something?” Draco asked, perhaps the most put off out of all them. He didn’t own the sort of shoes this sort of spelunking required.

“Too weak. Much, much too weak and they fade too quickly. I need to cast a spell tailored specifically for them that will last over a year. One that won’t be canceled with a simple finite incantatem. Don’t worry, Draco, I promise I’ll make this worth your while. You’re going to get such a buzz from this.”

“So that’s why you needed the mushrooms,” Fred laughed, shaking his jar of dull brown fungi.

“I am so not eating those,” Ginny insisted.

“Don’t worry, they’re not for eating. They’re an offering to Raecellos, the God of Traveler’s. He’ll carry the spell to France once they leave Britain.”

There was a moment of silence, and then Ron spat out, “Are you fucking serious? You’re a loon.”

“If you really think so, you can go. You invited yourself along if you’ll recall.”

No one said anything else as Harry had them help lay out the white linen for his spell. They spread it out over the rocky beach and weighted down with stones. Harry then stripped down to his pants

and undershirt and had everyone step back towards the edge of the trees. Out of all of them, only the Weasley twins looked more eager and curious than uncertain and skeptical. It didn't matter; Harry thought to himself, they would understand when they experienced it themselves. He should have shown them last year, but at the time he had been so concerned with other things and paganism had seemed more like a secret club than a way of life.

He took his keystone from Hermione who had been carrying it and showed it to all of them.

"This is my keystone. I've been storing up magic inside of it for months. I'm going to use it to charge the cow blood with my magic. It will take the place of my own blood."

The keystone had been set to absorb his excess magic, but it only took a moment of intense concentration for him to reverse the flow. Immediately, he could feel his magic flowing back into him and he could tell by everyone's expressions that they felt it too. Quickly, he dropped it into the bucket of blood, and watches as it rippled restlessly for several seconds, refusing to settle with the steady current of magic pouring into it.

"Whoa."

Harry grinned at them. "You haven't seen anything yet."

He took the bundle of sage from Clyde and lit it, releasing a fragrant smoke into the air. He spread it around the white linen, himself, and his friends.

"This will purify the area of malevolent energies that could influence the spell. It also keeps several sort of spirits away."

"Spirits?" Hermione asked, "Like ghosts?"

"No. Like wraiths or unseelie fairies. We're so close the Forbidden Forest, I have to be extra careful. I'd keep your wands ready, just in case."

They shared uneasy looks and brought out their wands. Harry grabbed a paintbrush, twice the width of his thumb, and the bucket of blood and carried it over to the white sheet. He dipped his finger into the blood then brought it up to draw a line across his forehead.

“For concentration,” he said, without looking at the others, then dipped in his brush and applied it to the white canvas. The brush did not drip, the lines were perfectly straight where he needed, curved where he needed, and when he was done his diagram was more precise than anyone without a specific spell should have been able to manage. This was no artistic skill on his part, but the blood itself was now an extension of his will, and he had willed it to be perfect. The diagram itself was three overlapping circles, a symbol for eternity. From Ron he took the jar of milk, added a drop of blood to infuse it with magic, then poured it out in a circle around the blood circles, and then a little at its center. He drank the rest.

In the spaces between each of the lines of the circle, he began to spread out his offerings of grain, wine, honey, mushrooms, fruit, three silver sickles, three fishing hooks, and three small fish. Symbols of bounty all. All native grown or forged, making them symbols of home. At the edge of the circle, three short, fat white candles were set the exact same distance from each other and remained unlit. At the very center of the diagram he placed two items. The first was Sirius’ fang and claw necklace, the one he had been given the summer before his first year and the only item he had that was completely untouched by anyone’s magic but Sirius’. The second was Remus’ spearhead, forged and fished with by him personally for several years now.

Harry stared at his work for several minutes, double and triple checking to make sure it had been put together perfectly, and then turned to his friends. Their expressions were all the same now. The skepticism, uncertainty, and curiosity had all been replaced with fascination. They didn’t understand what he was doing, but deep inside their magical core hummed and brought forth instincts of ancient days before wands and textbooks, when even the most powerful could only unleash their magic at the will of the divine.

“Whatever happens from here on out, you mustn’t interfere. I’m not entirely sure how this is going to look to you, but I don’t want you to be afraid.”

By now the sun was low on the horizon, and the shadows of the surrounding trees had blanketed them in shade and the half moon rose pale in the sky. Across the lake they could see distant towers of Hogwarts and the flicker of torches being lit. Harry removed his shirt and set it aside, earning a gasp from several of his friends. They all knew about the crescent mark tattoo, but none of them had seen skeletal hand print that now surrounded it, courtesy of one very irritated Dark Lord. He didn’t think now was the time to explain (or lie about) it. Natalie held the very last item that he required, and as he stepped towards her she hastily drew out the carved wooden box. He opened it and pulled out the sacrificial knife. Her eyes grew huge.

“What are you-“

“You’ll see. Don’t be afraid.”

He turned his back towards them and stepped into the center of the diagram, his feet straddling the necklace and spearhead. His keystone would ensure the blood he was using counted as blood sacrifice, but a little pain was still required. With the dagger he pricked the tip of first finger and held it over one of the circle so that it would dripped down into it.

“I call upon Madris, The Queen Goddess of Home and Family, to alight upon me a blessing of protection. Before thee I make an offering of my blood and the bounty of my hearth. If this pleases you, I beg of thee a sign.”

Around him he could see and hear and feel the stones along the beach rattle and shake, and one of his friends gave a little shout of surprise. The candle at the edge of the circle directly in front of him suddenly lit itself. One blessing down. Two to go.

He turned himself to another circle and pricked another finger to bring new blood.

“I call upon Rhiannon, Goddess of the Moon and Inspiration, to alight upon me a blessing of creativity in the face of many difficulties. Before thee I make an offering of my blood and the bounty of my hearth. If this pleases you, I beg of thee a sign.”

At the edge of the shore, a wave suddenly drew up and crashed against the beach; bring water up to the very edge of the white linen, like a tide pulled in by the moon.

The second candle lit.

He turned to the final circle and pricked his third finger.

“I call upon Raecellos, God of Traveler’s, to bare these blessings to Sirius Blackbone and Remus Slivermoon upon their journey and until such time as they return to their native soil. Before thee I make an offering of my blood and the bounty of my hearth. If this pleases you, I beg of thee a sign.”

Raecellos apparently wasn’t as into large gestures. Yet out of all of the signs he had received, Bobby landing on his shoulder was definitely the most startling.

“Little scrapper,” Bobby laughed, ruffling his feathers. “You know you interrupted a very interesting exploration of the Selkie Coves off Malin Head?”

“Missed you too, Master,” Harry hissed under his breath. He glanced at his friends, but they didn’t seem to realize the raven was talking. He looked back towards the edge of the circle to see the third candle was lit. The ritual was over. He had all three blessings.

“Well, back to France for me then,” Bobby sighed. “I’d barely touched Ireland. I hope you’re happy.”

“Ecstatic. Now off with you. You’ve got some blessing to deliver, don’t you? My godfathers are leaving tomorrow.”

“Yes, yes, big hurry and all. You owe me one.”

Bobby dove from his shoulder and onto the ground, where he quickly snatched up a silver sickle from Raecellos’ circle and flew off with it. Harry let out a sigh of relief and stepped out of the circle. The evening air settled over his skin, making him shiver and he quickly moved to redress. It wasn’t for some moments that he noticed that his friends were being awfully quiet. He turned around and blinked.

They were crying. Shimmery wet trails fell down their cheeks, their eyes staring at him with disbelief and amazement. He was stuned. Had this been what he looked like to Voldemort when he had first felt the touch of the Earth? The way he and Fleur had felt when they had seen the blessing* of unicorns?

“What’s wrong? Are you alright?”

His words seemed to pull them out of their shock, and immediately hands went up to their faces to wipe away the tears there and everyone avoided looking at each other in embarrassment. Natalie pulled herself together first, and a few snuffles later you wouldn’t have known she had been crying at all.

“What was that? It felt all.... Weird. Tingly and weird.”

“That’s three gods dropping by to say hello. Well, them and one rather obnoxious messenger. Is everyone okay? We really need to leave the area now.”

“Why,” Ron said, his voice still rough with emotion. “What’s going to happen?”

Harry pointed towards the white linen piled with offerings.

“That all belongs to Them now. They’ll send their followers to collect it here shortly, and those tend to be fairies. Just leave it all here. I’ll come back tomorrow and pick the jars.”

That got everyone moving quickly off the beach and back towards Hogwarts. Harry followed at the rear, taking a moment to wash off his keystone, forehead, and knife in the lake. He wasn’t even completely out of sight before he saw the first scavenger arrive, a deer-like animal as black as coal with red antlers pulled itself from the shadows of the trees and began to eat of the grain offering from the Rhiannon’s circle. He didn’t call the others back see. He had no idea how safe they all were while painted in divine magic.

No one said anything on the walk back to the castle, and Harry was starting to think he made a mistake in showing them this. He hadn’t wanted to frighten them. More than anything he just wanted them to understand this part of his life that was so important to him, that had brought him home to them in the first place. As they reached the edge of the castle portcullis, the sky now sunless and burning brilliant pink and orange, Harry broke the silence.

“Someone say something.”

As one, they all stopped and turned to him. There was no more tears, but their expressions weren’t entirely clear. Hermione stepped around the others so she could stand directly in front of him. She looked pained and he felt his heart clench.

“I had no idea,” she said, “I knew you were a pagan, I knew you did magic that was different than what we learn in class, but I didn’t... I never even imagined magic could be like that. It was so...so... raw and organic. And you just...you were so in tune with it and... and...”

And her arms were suddenly around him, holding him tightly as her entire body shook with tears all over again.

“You were so beautiful, Harry.”

"I like being around you," she said.

“Well, then maybe I’m a Benjamin, and you just don’t realize what you’ve gotten yourself into.”

“I don’t think so. I’ve known a Benjamin in my time, enough to appreciate a Bailey.”

“Do you fancy yourself an Agatha?”

She ducked her head. “No, I’m not pretty enough to be an Agatha. Maybe the barmaid... just not as buxom.”

Snape chuckled. The barmaid had been one of the funniest and most jaded characters in the play, refusing to be charmed by Benjamin or anyone else for that matter. He was feeling uncommonly relaxed. He’d had a wonderful evening, even with Lucius throwing thinly veiled barbs at him about Lestrage and Narcissa’s obvious disappointment in his choice of dates. Ira had been charming and witty, any associated arrogance muted by her nervousness to be dressed to the nines in a demure but tasteful black evening dress. He felt strangely pleased to see she was wearing the brooch he had given her, the back clasp transfigured so that she could use it to pin up her hair. She had a very graceful neck, he noted.

“I’d like to do this again,” he found himself saying, completely unplanned. He waited for the usual feeling of regret when he spoke without thinking. He noticed her stiffen, and felt the urge to kick himself.

“You mean see a play?”

“I mean, go on a date,” he clarified, figuring since he had mucked things up already he’d do the Bailey-thing and bury himself with his own honesty. A blush stole its way across her face, and he wondered if he hadn’t completely overstepped his bounds after all, when the carriage came to a stop in front of her flat.

“I... I really don’t think that would be a good idea, Professor,” she said quickly and scurried out of the carriage without waiting for the driver to open the door for her. He watched her entire escape from

his seat, saw her stop twice as if she were going to turn around and rush back, but eventually she passed through the front door and disappeared.

“Well, that went just splendidly,” Snape sneered to himself. “It could have been worse I suppose. She could have said yes and I would have had to put up with this lunacy on a regular basis.”

She had wanted to say yes. He could tell that much, but that didn’t illuminate her reasons for refusing. Maybe she really was a man. Maybe she was seeing someone else. Snape snorted and rolled his eyes. It didn’t matter. This was their first and last date, and since he had enjoyed it for the most part it wasn’t as if the evening had been wasted.

Just unpleasantly concluded.

There was always tomorrow. Stupid bloody optimism.

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What are you doing?

Tom frowned behind his mask, but gave no indication to the vampires, two on either side of him, that anything was wrong. He stood on the roof of a town house and stared down coldly at the domicile across the street. It was nearly midnight, and this far into October the air was cold and damp. He could feel his excitement growing, and perhaps that was what had roused Horace from his sleep in the quiet corner of his mind. He tried to gently push the boy back into the world of dreams, but now that Horace was awake he resisted.

What are we doing here? Why are they wearing masks?

He could not answer him, not with the Katarina and her minions standing on either side of him, waiting for his signal to start. He wished he could though, knowing the truth might be enough to send the boy scurrying into the shadows to hide from what was about to happen. To hide from what he had made possible by going the

Ministry of Magic and pulling the information he needed from the Department of Public Records.

It really was amazing the information you could find just lying around. Names, occupations, criminal histories... addresses.

“Now?” Katarina asked, her expression a mystery behind the full white Venetian mask but her voice thick with impatience..

“Midnight. Not a minute before and not a minute after. We cannot give the Aurors time to gather themselves and-“

A bell rang, deep and low, through the night. Tom stiffened, and so did Katarina. He turned back to the house and with a few violent slashes with his wand, wordlessly destroyed the house' protective wards.

“Now. Quickly.”

If vampires were anything, it was quick. Katarina leaped off her perch and landed lightly onto the house across the street, her brood following closely behind. From here they looked like dementors, their black cloaks floating behind them as they ghosted over the rooftop. It only took them five seconds to find the unlocked window and slip inside.

What are they doing?

“What do you think they're doing?” Tom whispered.

The silence that followed was answer enough for the both of them.

“You should go back to sleep, Horace.”

Why are you doing this?

Tom closed his eyes. If he listened very closely, he could hear panicked shouting but it only lasted a moment. When he looked up,

he could see the full moon staring down at him, yellow and wicked. He smiled.

“This is what I do, Horace. I tear things apart so that I can build them anew, better than they were before. You don’t have to understand it, but you would do well to respect it.”

Monster.

“Yes, now be quiet. It’s almost over.”

He felt Horace attempt to push him back into the darkness, but it was weak. His host had grown complacent, giving him too much power at night and now he could not take it back. If he wanted to, Tom could steal his days as well, but that sort of continuous concentration was more than he was willing to pay for a luxury he didn’t need. Eventually, Horace gave up, but he did not retreat. Perhaps he was waiting for a moment of distraction on Tom’s part or even to see exactly what atrocity had been committed below them.

It only took three minutes for Katarina to complete her mission and return to his side. Her mask was painted in blood. Tom spared her cool grin.

“Did you enjoy yourself, my Lady?”

She gave her answer by lifting a bloody finger beneath her mask sucking it clean.

“Charming,” Tom muttered, and apparated back to Vampire Row. He intended to be there when the other minions he had sent out returned to report their mission’s outcome.

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“She’s pretty flashy for a wallflower,” Natalie grouched, glowering at Ginny Weasley as she flew circles around the pitch, attempting to catch the Snitch. Harry was in his usual top form, but though Ginny

lacked his flying precision she was an aggressive flyer and had kept him from grabbing the Snitch twice. They had been going at it for nearly twenty minutes, and she was starting to get anxious about the outcome. There was no way Harry could ever lose to a nobody like Ginny.

“It must be that new boyfriend of hers, I think that’s him over there. She just wants to impress him.”

That consoled Natalie, but only a little. It had been a little over a week since Harry had shown them the true strength of his magic down by the lake, and she was feeling decidedly territorial over him. Hermione had been right. Harry had been beautiful, his power flowing over them like a warm bath even as the scarier magic of something else had cackled in the air like unborn lightening. For a few brief moments, Harry had been more than himself, a representation of something magnificent and untouchable and powerful, like a phoenix in rebirth. He had glowed with benevolent magic.

For the briefest moment she had thought him an angel.

And wasn’t that a sacrilegious thought considering?

They had been too shocked to react immediately after, but as the days passed the surprise faded and was replaced with a renewed sense of affection. Harry had been magnificent, but in the end he had looked at them with those wide green eyes that just begged for their acceptance. It wasn’t hard to give. In fact, it was probably a lot easier than it should have been.

She was getting rather fed up with competing with the rest of his friends for his attention. Even Ron was being nicer to him...well at least he wasn’t as much of a jerk. In fact, he was the one she was most irritated with. Not only was he being friendlier (sort of, in a Ronnish way) to Harry, he had written that article for the Hogwart’s Herald that had boosted Harry’s popularity all over again so that everyone and their cousin was trying to talk to him during meals and in Dueling Club and the hallways and in the bloody bathroom about the silliest things like whether his French source was that gorgeous Fleur girl or the Queen herself!

She could hate Hermione instead, but there was something about Ron that was just so satisfying to hate. Harry was less likely to hold it against her too.

A loud shout drew Natalie out of her sulking, and Draco was already out of his seat and rushing towards the edge of the platform. She hurriedly followed, and felt a bolt of panic when she couldn't immediately spot Harry.

"What happened?"

"Ginny hit the pole and fell off her broom. Harry tried to catch her but got hit by a bludger and fell too."

They quickly climbed down the platform and made their way onto the pitch where the rest of the players and audience was now flocking. They were closer than most of them, but not quite fast enough to stop what happened next. Harry was crouching beside the youngest Weasley, holding her hand, and didn't appear to have been hurt.

"Oh, God, what is Lockhart doing?" Draco groaned, watching with growing trepidation as the man lifted Ginny's shoeless foot. They didn't hear the spell he cast, but they did see the result. Ginny's entire leg suddenly became as limp as a noodle. She let out a ear piercing scream, which sent both Lockhart and Harry into a panic. The admiral lifted his wand in an attempt to fix his mistake, and Harry dropped Ginny's hand and used his wand to blast Lockhart several feet across the field. Natalie gaped, not sure whether she should laugh or scream. This was getting very bad, very quickly.

At least Ginny stopped screaming, and had settled on whimpering instead.

"Oh bloody, fucking hell," she moaned, staring at her useless leg. Someone reached out to poke it and she gave them a look that promised instant death. Harry gave her an apologetic eyes, which she ignored. Professor Grimms, who had been standing on the sidelines, finally reached them. He gave Ginny's leg a weird look but

assured her it was completely fixable, and then went to check on Lockhart.

“Gin?! Ginny?! Are you alright?”

“Gerry?”

“I’m here, luv. Sorry, I was on the other side of the field. How do you feel?”

She tried to smile at her boyfriend but it came out as more of a grimace. “Well, it doesn’t hurt anymore. Lockhart didn’t lie about that.”

Natalie had to fight back a chuckle. It was awful and mean, but it was damn funny too. Harry, however, was looking horribly guilty. She best get them all sorted out before this turned into a teenage angstfest.

“St. James, why don’t you take Ginny-“

Before she could even finish her sentence the Weasley twins appeared on the field with a stretcher and quickly shuffled her onto it, then carried her off the field.

“What a way to start the season, little sister,” Fred said cheerfully.

“Nothing to worry about, though. Harry got that bad, bad man,” George laughed.

Gerry, however, didn’t agree. “It’s Potter’s fault she was knocked off her broom in the first place!”

Harry grimaced, following the procession off the field towards the infirmary. Behind them, Grimms was pulling a dazed but otherwise unharmed Lockhart to his feet.

“It wasn’t his fault I couldn’t make the bloody turn,” Ginny snapped, at her boyfriend. “I knew better, but I tried it anyway, and then he got hurt trying to save me. How’s your arm, Harry?”

“Just a bit bruised.”

“What a minute!” Gerry protested, “I saw him. When he turned he knocked you into the post with his foot!”

Several eyes turned to him at once, wordlessly warning him about continuing that train of thought, and he kept his mouth shut until they reached the infirmary. Ginny’s prognosis was good, but she was in for an unpleasant night. Gerry glared daggers at Harry the entire time. Madam Pomfrey gave Harry a pain potion and some salve for his arm, and released him to the care of his friends while Gerry and the twins remained behind to keep Ginny company. Harry left a message with George that he would be back to visit when her boyfriend wasn’t hovering, but otherwise was completely silent.

“So what happened exactly?” Draco asked as they made their way towards the Great Hall. Harry ducked his head in embarrassment.

“I didn’t mean to knock her into the pole. She was hovering so close to me I sort of freaked and kicked the end of her broom to put some distance between us, but she ended up veering. Shit, I didn’t mean to get her hurt.”

“We know that,” Natalie said, “And so does Ginny. Quidditch is a rough game and accidents happen. It’s not your fault.”

“Well, technically,” Draco contradicted, “It’s illegal to kick or punch another player or their broom in Quidditch, so you’ve probably lost your spot on the team this year.”

“Shit... I suppose I deserve that after putting Gin in the infirmary.”

“Oh please, Lockhart’s the reason she’s stuck in the infirmary. Don’t beat yourself up over it. It’s kind of annoying.”

In typical Harry fashion, their Gryffindor friend brooded the rest of the afternoon over what happened. It didn’t help that news had already spread about Ginny’s fall, and the story had already mutated several times to include Harry intentionally shoving her into the pole and

breaking her leg. Draco and Natalie had forced him to remain in the Great Hall playing cards with them and pretending nothing was wrong. Hiding would only serve to imply his guilt. So he stuck it out, trying not to flinch or glare at those who stared and whispered as they passed. Eventually, apathy settled over him and while he couldn't gain any enthusiasm over cards, he could ignore the extra attention.

That is until McGonagall stalked into the Great Hall looking for him.

He very nearly bolted, but quickly realized how stupid that would look. Instead, he just sat beside Natalie and tried to look contrite. The transfiguration professor spotted him quickly.

"Mr. Potter, if you would follow me please?" she said seriously, and escorted him from the Great Hall. Natalie squeezed his arm comfortingly, and watched him disappear.

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"I swear, Professor, it was accident!"

McGonagall looked back at Harry in confusion. "What are you talking about, Mr. Potter?"

"Ginny and the quidditch tryouts... isn't that why you're here?"

"Heaven's no. I talked with Ms. Weasley earlier. It was obviously an accident. As for what happened with Admiral Lockhart, however..."

Harry cringed. He had nearly forgotten about that. Hexing a teacher had seemed a small issue in light of hurting his friend, but now he realized how much trouble he really might be in.

"...we'll consider that an act of defending your friend just this once. There's no telling how much more harm he would have inflicted if you hadn't stopped him."

He released the breath had been holding. “Thank you, but if that’s not why you’re here than why did you...?”

McGonagall’s dismissive attitude vanished, replaced by a hard expression. The change in demeanor caught Harry off guard, and he stepped back instinctively. It wasn’t until he nearly ran into a familiar suit of armor that he realized they were heading towards Voldemort’s office.

“He’s back? The Dark Lord, I mean?”

“Yes. He arrived about half an hour ago and demanded the Headmistress’ presence and then Professor Snape and yours. I am afraid I don’t know what it’s about, but it appears very serious. He was definitely agitated.”

Harry nodded, and tried to think what could be bothering the Dark Lord. He hoped it wasn’t something he had done personally, like the protection spell he’d done last week, but at the same time he was afraid of what anything more serious might mean. She escorted him the rest of the way, but left him at the entrance. She had not been invited and more than likely she didn’t want to be there. He entered the office and found himself the last to arrive.

Voldemort stood at the window, his expression sour and his fists clenched. Snape was in his usual spot, leaning against the door and LeStrange had taken residence on the sofa. Harry couldn’t help but note that they had both positioned themselves as far away from the Dark Lord as possible. He made it a point to stand in the middle of the room.

“What’s happened?”

Voldemort turned away from the window to glare at Harry, but the brat just glared right back at him and waited. LeStrange made an involuntary hissing sound that could either have been anger or surprise.

“I have just received word of attacks in Germany. Attacks Minister Seibligg is blaming on werewolves and myself, which would be all well and good except I have no idea what he’s talking about.”

“Attacks? What sort of attacks?”

“Twenty two Ministry officials and their families slaughtered in the middle of the night during the full moon. All of the officials worked in the Berlin offices and all of them were killed within ten minutes of each other. The current death toll is thirty seven, but it’s likely higher. The Aurors are apparently having difficulty adding up all the body parts together.”

Harry felt suddenly dizzy, and quickly moved himself into the nearest chair, which happened to be in front of Voldemort’s desk.

“Merlin...”

“Yes,” Voldemort agreed solemnly. “It’s an obvious act of war, but not one that I authorized. Who ever did this is well organized and intelligent, but self-serving. Rebel werewolves are the most likely culprits, but they had to have had outside resources. They don’t have the freedom of movement necessary to organize this sort of thing, especially not now.”

“Aside from the violence,” Harry said, trying to shove aside any horrific images that tried to fight their way through his imagination, “Why do they think it was werewolves? Why do you? I doubt the Ministry has a short supply of enemies.”

Voldemort nodded his approval over the question, and explained.

“Over a quarter of the officials made up a part of the campaign to hunt down the supposed ‘Death Eater’ werewolves. In fact, aside from the Aurors who did the actual grunt work, all the primary organizers are dead.”

Harry fell silent, and closed his eyes. He would like say he didn’t believe it, that the werewolves were incapable of slaughtering entire

families, but deep down he knew better and even understood. They had been pushed and pushed and finally cornered, and when they finally retaliated it was deadly.

“I needed you to be aware of the situation,” Voldemort continued. “There are still werewolves coming into France from Germany, and there will more than likely be several who were involved in the attacks coming through seeking refuge. The Germans are going to make a royal stink of it, and try to earn sympathy from their neighbors by painting Britain as the nasty bully who smacked them and ran away. There will be questions about whether we can justify the sheltering of potential terrorists, and I will need you to be prepared to face them.”

Harry nodded. He didn't have a choice. Some werewolves had done something awful, but a majority of them didn't deserve to be punished for it. He didn't honestly know if all the werewolves who had attacked the officials deserved it either. In a way, it had been self-defense in a war the Ministry had started.

“Good. Voices for All will be sending a representative this evening to discuss the stance you want to take on these attacks. Professor Snape will supervise. We will likely meet again in the next few days.”

He nodded again and stood, recognizing the dismissal. The weight of the world was bearing down on him, but he squared his shoulders and went to face it. When he was gone, Voldemort turned to his other two servants.

“Seibligg's previously tenuous political hold has now been reaffirmed, his stance against the werewolves and myself vindicated. The opportunity for attack during a moment of political unrest has already passed. Seibligg will use the national outrage to launch an offensive attack against us and further entrench himself in military and political power. I am in a rather unfortunate position. If I attack before him, Germany will gain the sympathy of its neighbors and even Queen Ophelia will have reason to question my motivations. If I wait for us to be attacked first I lose face and the confidence of my people, as well as face potential losses.”

“My Lord,” Lestrangle said, “It would seem a wiser course to wait and be attacked. Yes, you may lose some public favor, but it will galvanize them in a fight against the Germans. You can easily regain public confidence during your retaliation and be justified in the eyes of Britians and Europeans alike.”

Voldemort nodded. He had been thinking the same thing as well. He turned to Snape who didn't look too pleased with the idea.

“Anything to add, Severus?”

The potions master hesitated, but nodded.

“If at all possible... I would use your military force to intercept any attack here or in France. It may not galvanize the public fervor like the burning of a fort, but we will still have enough justification to retaliate against Germany and likewise would demonstrate your military strength and foresight. Once the war is in full swing, there will be plenty of opportunities to demonize Seibligg and his army of Aurors.”

That was also a good idea, but dependent on his own admittedly limited spy network in Germany. It might be worth the effort though. It would be best if he didn't loose any of his new forts in France or one of the wards in Ireland that protected England and Scotland if it could be helped.

“I will take your words into account, but I did not summon you here simply to ask your advise. Like I said to Potter, I need you both to be prepared for what is to come.”

Snape and Lestrangle shared an uncertain look, but quickly re-focused on their master.

“Hogwarts has always been a symbol of the glorious youth of Britain, and with Harry's growing fame in the national arena more attention than ever is being directed here. When the time comes I intend to use this school as springboard for a few of my more ambitious projects, primarily the use of public schools to help supply my army and supplement national security.”

Lestrangle frowned, "My Lord, we are your servants and will do whatever you ask, but I'm not exactly sure what it is you are actually asking of us."

"I'm asking you to do exactly what you did last semester. Your use of the students to create and install those gargoyles not only increased the security of the school, but saved several hundred galleons in the school budget. I would like you to set up similar programs that will benefit the army. The creation of medicinal potions for the military hospitals and charming uniforms to remain clean for example. Simple things that will save tax payers billions in the long run and create an air of patriotism amongst the students. Establishing such programs here will inspire other schools to do the same."

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Benjamin and Bailey is a wizarding play, the plot premise being two wizards after the same witch. Benjamin is a wicked trickster, but appears good and kind because of his friendly and complimentary manner, and Bailey is good and honest, but comes off as cruel because of his sharp words and uncompromising disposition. They are both interested in the local judge's daughter, Agatha, and each pursues her in their own way. It's a story about character vs appearances, and it's something of a dark comedy.

A quick reminder. Raecellos is Bobby's patron god. It's why Bobby explores so much and knows all these secret routes, so that he can lead travelers to safely or help them find a place or take a short cut. Raecellos is a god in Madris' court, but sometimes it's safer to ask for one favor per god than two favors of one god. Also, three is a sacred number, and Harry's repeated use of threes adds power to the spell. Raecellos is not one of Harry's patron gods, merely a god he is making use of at the moment. This may or may not change in the future.

A herd of unicorns is apparently called a blessing. I honestly didn't know this until last week.

Also, Tom's attack on the house did not occur on the same night of Harry's ritual and Snape's date, but about a later. The clues are timing clues are subtle so I thought I'd clarify for those who missed them.

Also a reminder, Ginny's boyfriend is Gerald St. James, and she calls him Gerry.

Book V

Chapter 13: Bad Omens

“I’m really sorry, Ginny,” he said, for what had to have been the sixth time in the last hour. The little redhead glared at him from her hospital bed, white as a sheet and sweating from the discomfort of regrowing an entire bone. He sat next to her in a chair, ramrod straight and struggling to look at her.

“Will you shut up about it already? I assure you I’m quite bored with the subject right now,” she snapped. She had spent all day putting up with her boyfriend insistence that she tell McGonagall or the school paper that Harry intentionally hurt her, and her sympathy had gone the way of her patience. “Talk about something else. Where were you earlier? You said you would be by after Gerry left and that was hours ago. And stop looking guilty, I’m not accusing you of anything.”

“Voldemort’s in the castle.”

She waited for him to elaborate, but his silence dragged and told her clearly that something important had happened and was now bothering him. He looked tired and strained, worried in ways that reminded her of her mother when the season’s crop failed. Finally, he continued.

“There have been attacks in Germany, and the minister is blaming werewolves. He’s probably right this time.”

“Oh, Harry...”

“There’s more. I’ve been given the rather unenviable job of justifying Voldemort continued support of Proposal 4-66, even though it will lead to war. I spent nearly two hours with a Voices for All rep trying to figure out how.”

She blinked at him. That was... absurd. How could the Dark Lord make Harry take on that burden on top of everything else he did already? It was so unfair.

“I’m really scared, Ginny. It’s gotten ugly so fast, and it’s only going to get worse.”

“I’m sorry.”

He smiled weakly at her. “Will you shut up about it already? I assure you I’m quite bored of the subject right now. Let’s talk about something else. So how did you hook up with Gerry?”

Ginny rolled her eyes, but obliged him. They both needed a distraction, something lighter than the other person’s problems.

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Snape sat in the Great Hall, looking for all the world like a man not enjoying his company or his dinner. Harry was in London again to be interviewed. The Dark Lord was accompanying him personally this time to make it clear that both he and Harry were in moral and practical agreement of their continued support of France and the werewolves, even as they condemned the Berlin attacks. Voldemort’s attendance on Harry meant Snape was allowed to stay behind and gauge the castle residents’ reaction to the news that had just barely been outlined to them in the morning post. Their feelings varied.

The staff was naturally suspicious of Voldemort’s possible involvement in the attacks, but for the most part seemed to agree there was no point in punishing all the werewolves or their French allies by retracting their support to placate an already hostile country. McGonagall was in a bitter mood that afternoon, and displaying definite resentment towards Snape after Harry had been dragged off to deal with the Dark Lord’s political mess. Lockhart, being a living propaganda pamphlet, was the only one who believed whole heartedly in Voldemort’s innocence, and said as much to anyone who would listen (or pretend to listen). Toure didn’t think Voldemort was innocent, but his move was brilliant nonetheless.

The students, however, were a mixed bag. Those who had been against Proposal 4-66 were now shouting they had been right, waving their newspapers at their opposition like it was a bloody flag. Whitmore and Sabbat were the most vocal and obnoxious, and they were meeting very little resistance so far. Most of the students didn't know what to think. The news they had received was woefully incomplete and painted a frightening picture, and with Harry away and their teachers offering no guidance they were scrambling for reassurances. It was obvious what Harry's stance would be, but he had suffered a very recent fall from grace because of the quidditch debacle, exacerbated by Gerald St. James and other 'Harry-haters' and Ginny Weasley's inability to clarify while she continued to rest in the infirmary. The Weasley brothers' continued support softened the recrimination, but also left people more confused than ever.

Snape hoped things would improve the next day with Voldemort's solid stance and Harry's own idealistic moral compass made available in the morning post, helping to re-orient a deeply confused and frightened public. Ginny Weasley would be out of the infirmary and Harry would be back, allowing for students to witness their reconciliation and hopefully silence the rumors that propagated in his absence. From there it would be up to Harry to win over the student body, and Snape didn't envy him in the least.

Hermione could have been a great asset with her pull in the school paper, but her Gryffindor ideals crippled her from taking full advantage of it. Draco had great sway in Slytherin from first years to seventh, but he understood well enough that too much support of Harry from his own house would weaken his friend's relations with the other three, and had wisely kept his followers neutral in public. Gryffindor had no strong single leader, leaving it divided and shifting in its opinions and Ravenclaw was the same way. Diggory had been supportive of Harry, but his former classmates had all graduated and left and he was now too old to participate in either quidditch or Dueling Club (except as a supervisor which Snape was more grateful for than he would ever admit) where he could demonstrate his leadership skills, leaving him in an awkward position of a has-been.

Snape's assessment of the Hogwart's political climate (which he often found mirrored that of Britain as a whole), was interrupted by a

butterfly. It was black and yellow, and nearly the size of his hand. How exactly it had gotten inside, as all the windows and doors were closed against the cool autumn night, was a mystery but its source was not. It landed on the edge of cup and promptly transformed into a letter, yellow with thick black script. McGonagall, who had observed it, couldn't help but offer her professional assessment.

"Very elegant, but she needs to follow through with the spell. The final product is hardly subtle."

"How do you know it was a 'her'?" he asked.

"A man would never use a butterfly... not unless he didn't care about you questioning his masculinity."

Snape spared her a smirk, and turned to the letter.

Dear Professor

I apologize for my behavior last week. It was unspeakably rude and melodramatic, but I'm afraid you caught me off guard and I panicked. I am sorry. If you can forgive a lady a moment of silliness, I would like to see you again.

Sincerely,

Ira Beadle

Well, look at that. Snape smiled, inexplicably pleased. It seemed Ira had come to her senses and even sacrificed a bit of pride to apologize. This was the first good news he'd had all week. Except now he had to figure out where to take her next. Nothing immediately came to mind. He hadn't been on a date since... well, Larousse, but that didn't count since she usually picked the place.

"Why, Severus, I didn't know you had it in you!"

Snape mentally winced as Lockhart's congeniality stabbed his brain. Cautiously, he turned to see the man beaming down at him over his shoulder.

"Lockhart," he acknowledged coolly.

"Oh, no dear sir, call me Gilderoy. I couldn't help but notice you seem to have the affections of a lady friend."

Snape couldn't remember the last time he had blushed, but he'd be damned if he did so because this idiot had no sense of tact. He didn't have to struggle with it long, as Lockhart sat himself next to him, and his mortification was soon replaced by annoyance.

"Congratulations!" the blond man said, "Love is a many splendored thing. Is she lovely? Of course, she is. What am I saying? You're a man of taste. I heard about Vesper, poor dear. Magnificent woman though. Anyway, I just thought I'd offer up some advice. I have quite a bit of experience charming the ladies, if you get my meaning, and I thought you might like a few pointers. For instance, you hair..."

Snape tried several times over the next hour to interrupt or walk away, but every time he tried the man interrupted his interruption and when he got up to leave, Lockhart blindly started following him without taking the hint. If he didn't possess a strong self confidence, he would be suffering a supreme sense of self doubt after the man's less than flattering list of recommended improvements ranging from his hair, his teeth, and his potion-stained fingers to his choice of residence in the dungeon and preference for plain black clothes. Luckily, he did possess self confidence, but unfortunately for Lockhart, he also possessed a Slytehrin's enjoyment of revenge and once he had finally escaped to his rooms he went to his private library and pulled out his favorite book of poisons.

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Fleur polished her shoes by hand, and tried her best not to smudge her fingers. A musketeer's uniform was a symbol of their pride, and

she had been taught the importance of its upkeep from day one. Master Bodine, her teacher and mentor, was busy polishing his sword, also by hand.

This was one aspect of her service that she had not anticipated. A musketeer abstained from using their magic whenever possible, building up their reserves until it became necessary. It startled her how used to using spells she was, and how complacent she had been about it. She had never had to polish her own shoes or iron or wash or mend her clothes, having servants and then magic take care of those menial tasks, and if it weren't for potions she wouldn't even know how to boil water to make spaghetti. During school, she could have used a dozen spells before breakfast and another fifty before the day was through, and she hadn't realized how much magic she had been wasting in the process. Bodine had been quick to teach her by refusing to let her touch her wand for nearly a week. It had been an exceptionally humiliating week, learning how to do tasks a muggle child would probably have been able to do.

After a few months, however, she was proud of her progress and even proud of something other than her magic for once. She could sew a mean cross-stitch. Right now, however, she was not thinking of magic or cross-stitching.

“What is it, princess?” Bodine asked, tacking on the moniker she still loathed even now. “You have been very quiet. You didn't even complain when I burnt the toast this morning.”

“Of course, I didn't. I fed it to Chopin* when you weren't looking.”

“Now you're just being facetious. What's troubling you? Are you getting split ends?”

She glared at him. A musketeer's uniform was his pride, but the man seemed bound and determined to break her of any lingering vanity through mockery. She didn't appreciate his efforts in the slightest.

“I'm just thinking about the attacks in Berlin and what it means for us.”

“A whole lot of fun.”

“Now who’s being facetious?”

“I assure you I am perfectly serious. These are the sort of times musketeers dream of. Battles and intrigue and spying and clandestine affairs. It’s going to be glorious. We just have to be a little bit patient.”

“That’s awful!”

“That’s opportunity. You are a very lucky girl to come into the ranks when and how you have. You are friends with that young man, Harry, who’s turning into a regular prince charming and is growing in power with every passing day, you already have a reputation from the Triwizard Tournament, and now a war is coming where you will be able to prove yourself to Queen and country. Play your cards right and you’ll rise through the ranks in no time. Besides, it really is a lot of fun this whole war business. There’ll be a few scares, mind you, but over all it’s really exciting.”

She shook her head, but it was a token gesture. If she were honest with herself, she was looking forward to the fighting. She wanted a little payback against the German Ministry that had hurt Harry and all those innocent people. She did not know any werewolves herself, but being part-veela she had a personal interest in the treatment of those not entirely human. Madam Maxime had taught her the importance of standing up for others as well as ones’ self.

“You’re just worried about being too busy to see that boyfriend of yours,” Bodine laughed. “Don’t worry about it. When things get interesting you’ll be traveling a lot. Make a boyfriend in every town you stop at and you’ll never be lonely!” he guffawed.

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“Espiritus dolor!”

Harry ducked the spell, and flung out a Cooling Hex, but it was blocked and reflected back at him. He performed a blasting spell that propelled through it and into Ron's shield charm, but didn't penetrate. This was perhaps their most intense duel since his second year, and looking back he could see how much further he and the other boy had come. Angelina could hold her own against them more often than not, but even she wouldn't dare challenge them in their current mood.

Harry was frustrated, angry, and stressed with the way things had been going lately. London had been a nightmare, with rooms crowded with reporters and streets crowded with people, all screaming for answers or screaming accusations and there was nowhere to just stop and breath and think. Coming back to Hogwarts hadn't improved things. He had known people would question him about Ginny and the quidditch tryouts, but too many people had assumed him guilty and his admittedly short temper hadn't done anything to placate them, and he refused to speak another word about the werewolf attacks in Berlin. Ginny's casual presence may have relieved much of the suspicion, but none of the questions and still some refused to believe it to be an accident. Someone had but a hex on his tooth brush, and he very nearly swallowed three of his own teeth. He had resolved to truly hurt the person responsible.

Ron, who had appeared to be recovering from his severe case of assholitis, had suffered a relapse after learning Ginny had been hospitalized and getting in a particularly vicious row with Hermione about publishing an article on it and then about the other articles he had promised and not delivered over the last week.

They were both out for blood today and neither of them felt like obliging the other. Snape was standing off to the side, watching them like a vulture just waiting for one of them to fall.

"Sanguis acus!" he snarled, sweeping out his arm.

"Clipeus!" Ron shouted, throwing up a shield charm. The charm blocked the worst of the curse, but a few barbs still managed to penetrate, catching the redhead in the cheek, neck, and chest. He

shrieked in surprised pain, and hastily tore out the sewing needle sized pins. The other duelists gasped. Despite their sport, blood wasn't that common. Bruises and pain and weird spell affects, yes, but very rarely blood.

"The match goes to, Potter," Snape said quickly, before the other boy could think to retaliate with something truly nasty. "Well done, the both of you. Granger, take Mr. Wealsey to the infirmary to get patched up. Potter, help Mr. Diggory supervise for the rest of the practice."

Banished to their respective tasks, the two duelists spared each other one last glare and climbed down the platform. Natalie was waiting for Harry when he reached the bottom of the stairs. She didn't look happy, but he wasn't in the mood to be lectured and stalked passed her. Not liking to be ignored, she kicked him in the back of the knee and knocked him flat.

"What the hell was that for?" he snapped. She wasn't the least bit cowed.

"What is your issue?"

"I'm in a bad mood. Is that all right with you? Leave off." He stalked away, and this time she didn't go after him.

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Hermione managed to keep her mouth shut for an entire five minutes after they left the Dueling Hall, but eventually Ron knew she'd just have to say something.

"Is it because of your father?"

"Shut up, Granger. It's none of your damn business."

"It wouldn't be if you didn't keep making it my business and everyone else's with the way you've been acting. You've got two

options, Ron. You can either talk to me and get yourself sorted out or you can continue to make yourself and everyone else around you miserable. And I'll still keep bugging you about it."

"Merlin, you're annoying, Granger."

He remained stubbornly silent until they were just outside the infirmary, rubbing away at the blood beading up on his exposed neck and face, and then suddenly paused a few steps away from his destination. He thought for nearly a minute, and finally came to a decision.

"You tell anyone what I'm about to tell you, and I will find ways to make you suffer, do you understand?"

"I told you I wouldn't tell anyone, and I won't. No need to get nasty."

He glared at her, reminding her that nasty seemed to be natural state.

"My father is dying, some sort of wasting disease. I doubt he'll make it through the winter, but they won't let him go. Still has five years left on his sentence, so even if it kills him they won't let him go."

His eyes moistened as he spoke, but he fought back the tears even as he could see Hermione's growing wide and wet in sympathy. Silly girl, it wasn't her father who was dying. He took a deep shaky breath and continued.

"But it gets better. When I saw him this summer, he told me who had him sent to prison. We never knew you see. The court was all hush-hush about it, called it a division move, but it wasn't. Someone pushed for it. Someone wanted to make my father suffer and destroyed my family. And it's such a fucking mess. I know them. I've shaken their bloody hand once."

He had to stop talking, or he really would start sobbing, or throwing curses in anger and grief and frustration. Hermione stepped towards him, to offer him comfort no doubt, but he stepped away. He couldn't

let her do that, or he really would turn into a big sobbing mess and he didn't think he could stand that sort of humiliation right now.

"Who?" she asked.

He shook his head. "Some rich government bureaucrat. What does it matter? They're out there making the world a more miserable place and my father's rotting on some rock, and I'm supposed to be okay with that? I'm just supposed to act like it doesn't bloody matter to me? Well, I'm sorry but I can't pretend everything's fine. I don't bleeding want to."

Hermione said nothing, taking a moment to respect the weight of the burden he had just unloaded onto her. Finally, she added her own bit of empathy.

"My parents don't know I exist," she said. "I was four when I was taken from them, and their memories of me destroyed. I can't really remember them either, but I know they existed. I know I was happy. And I know my foster parents will never give me what I had with them. Lucius hates me, and Narcissa treats me like a pet. I'm not okay with that and I never will be, but I have learned to move past it, to keep the resentment from strangling out the good things I've found. You need to do the same thing. It doesn't do your father or your family or yourself any good to hold onto this anger. It's going to rot you, Ron. It's going to rot you from the inside out, and it's such a waste. I think you could do incredible things."

She moved forward and this time he didn't back away, letting her wrap him in her arms and as he predicted he cracked, tears and blood falling into her hair and shoulder. Relief was overwhelming the humiliation, eased by the fact that she was crying too. He knew he could trust her now, implicitly, the way he could never have trusted Draco or even his siblings. She had come to him, seeking a way to heal him where others had simply ignored. He didn't know if she would succeed, but she was trying. It counted for something.

"Dammit, Granger," he cursed shakily into her hair, "if anyone catches us like this, we were snogging, got that?"

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“I don’t know how you talked me into this,” Harry muttered, trying to keep from falling asleep in his soup. Hermione kicked him under the table, reminding him that they weren’t the only ones present at Slughorn’s dinner table. There were nine occupants total, several of them acquaintances of Harry. There was Blaise Zabini, Draco, and Natalie from Slytherin House, Hermione and himself from Gryffindor, and Andrea and Terry Borgen (cousins and competitors) from Ravenclaw, and Lawrence Hout who Harry had never heard of before today. Slughorn presided over them at the head of the table, the picture of amicable host.

“So tell me, Mr. Potter, how was London?” Slughorn asked, fighting the awkward lull of the conversation that had dogged it since the beginning. Harry may have enjoyed Draco, Natalie, and Hermione’s company under normal circumstances but this felt more than a little forced to him.

“I can’t honestly say. I can’t remember much aside from people screaming things at me and lots of camera flash. The hotel was nice though. The West Dalton, have you heard of it?” he asked, taking pity on the man.

“Oh yes, it’s famous. That’s where all the foreign dignitaries stay... or did stay before the Embargo. A magnificent place, hopefully we’ll see a return to its former glory now that our relations with some of our European neighbors is improving.”

“And hopefully the Germans won’t blow it up,” Zabini said blandly.

“Well, yes, that too,” Slughorn conceded, still smiling.

“What was Paris like?” Andrea asked Harry, from across the table. Out of everyone, she seemed the most enthusiastic with the dinner table conversation.

“I didn’t actually see Paris. I stayed inside the Palais Royal the entire time. Now that was magnificent. You could fit three Hogwarts into that place. The queen was... impressive.”

“I heard she’s fat,” Terry said bluntly. Harry glared at him.

“She’s not fat.”

The boy quickly busied himself with his soup. Hermione kicked him in the leg again, then Draco who was snickering into his napkin. The conversation turned to travel, which was a safe and neutral subject with few pitfalls and even a few interesting insights. At last, the dinner drew to a close, and they said their goodnights for the evening. Harry lingered behind, however. There were some things he wanted to ask Slughorn, privately.

“Oh! Goodness gracious, I didn’t see you there, Harry,” Slughorn gasped, turning from the door he thought he had escorted everyone out of. He smiled apologetically.

“Sorry, Professor. I just wanted to ask you a few things, and now seemed as good a time as ever.”

“Of course, my door is always open. What can I do for you?”

Somehow the man managed to position them in the sitting room, where a coffee set was already waiting for them, complete with biscotti. Harry blinked at it and wondered if Slughorn hadn’t somehow anticipated this discussion in advance. He supposed it didn’t matter. He didn’t think the man meant to poison his coffee.

“I was hoping you could tell me a little more about my parents...”

“Certainly. I’m afraid I don’t know much about your father, I dare say he didn’t like me very much. Thought I was some sort of elitist.”

Harry mentally cringed. Snape had called him an elitist once, and he didn’t like the idea of his father disapproving of him. Then again, there was a lot in his life that he didn’t think his parents would approve of. It

made him sad and angry to think about. Their disappointment would hurt, but they had abandoned him in death and didn't have the right to judge how he made his way through life any longer.

"Lily, however, was a good friend, like I said. She had a very kind and gentle spirit, but could be stubborn as a mule when a suitable challenge arose. She did well in potions, but her true strength was in charms and transfiguration. Potions is a rigid discipline, and she had more of an artists soul and she expressed it through the more intuitive arts."

Slughorn smiled, sadly. "If you don't mind my asking... was she happy? I often thought of her and wondered... I'm sorry, you probably don't remember. That was very insensitive-"

"No," he interrupted. "I remember her perfectly. WYRA... I figured out their tricks quickly enough to save most of my memories I think. I remember her as being happy. She could always find beauty in the everyday."

"Yes," Slughorn agreed, "That's just how I remember her too."

They fell into a silence, taking a moment to drink some of their coffee and think back on her. Too soon, Harry felt himself falling into depression.

"I don't think they would like the person I've become," he said, "I'm not... I'm nothing like the boy they were trying to raise. Hell, I work for the very man that drove them out of the country to begin with. I'm more his son than theirs now, and oh, Merlin that's a horrid thought..."

He buried his face in his hands, but jumped to his feet when Slughorn slammed down his coffee cup, shattering it. His amicable expression had disappeared, and without it the man looked far more imposing than Harry had thought possible.

"Now see here, young man, I have known your mother and I have known Voldemort, each in their youth and adulthood, and I know for a

fact you are more Lily's child than the Dark Lord's. You may not grow up as your parents envisioned, but that doesn't make your achievements any less worthy. I think your efforts with the werewolves is truly magnificent, and your ability to inspire through your actions and words is breathtaking. You have so much potential, Harry. So much more than I think even your parents could have imagined. The Dark Lord sees it and he has taken advantage of it, but that's no reason to be ashamed in and of itself. He's taken advantage of everyone he could, myself included. That doesn't make me his slave and it doesn't make you his son."

Harry could only blink stupidly at him. "O-okay."

Slughorn settled back in his chair and, cautiously, so did Harry. The man fixed the coffee cup with a wave of his wand and removed the mess with another. That done, he seemed to calm himself.

"I apologize; I didn't mean to snap at you. You've broached several sensitive subjects all at once, and caught me off guard. It is not you I am angry at, but perhaps it is time to draw this evening to a close."

"Er... yes, Professor."

"Come then, Harry, I'll see you out."

He was walked to the door, but by the time he reached it, Harry remembered his original purpose in wanting to speak with Slughorn. He best ask his question now, as he didn't know if he was still in the man's good graces despite what he'd said.

"Um, sir... one question, please," he asked, quickly jamming the foot in the door. The potions master stared at it confusedly, then up at his increasingly rude guest.

"It's getting late, Harry."

"I know, just a quick one, I promise."

"Very well, what is it?"

“I said I remembered my mum, and for the most part I do, but there’s one little detail I’ve forgotten and it’s really been bothering me for some reason. I thought you might know... what was my mother’s favorite flower?”

Slughorn looked even more confused for a moment, but then his face lit up like a 100 watt bulb and he let out a laugh.

“I had almost forgotten about that myself! It was a rather funny joke actually. Her ‘favorite flower’ is called the scarlet pimpernel. A common little weed, unremarkable in every way, magical and mundane alike. The joke is that it’s not the flower itself that she loved so much. The Scarlet Pimpernel is actually the name of her favorite play, and the moniker of the protagonist, Sir Percy Blakeney. She had an enormous crush on the character. I remember Severus used to tease her about it constantly.”

Harry’s eyes widened. He remembered that play! Or rather, he remembered the book version. Bound in red leather with flowing golden script on the front, it had been a part of his small book shelf for as long as he could remember. He couldn’t recall all the details, but he remembered it was a love and adventure story set during the French Revolution, and that the main character behaved very silly in public but was secretly helping aristocrats escape the guillotine. It was the first novel his mother gave him, he was only seven, and they practiced his reading with it for months.

“I see the memory is not so lost, after all,” Slughorn said, patting him on the shoulder. “I’m glad I could help. Goodnight, Harry.”

“Goodnight, Professor.”

He moved his foot and allowed the man to close his door. No sooner then it was shut he sprinted to his room. He was fortunate to encounter no teachers or prefects, but even if he had he wouldn’t have stopped for all the house points put together. Climbing through the portrait, he spared an acknowledging wave to his friends in the common room, but didn’t linger. Once in his own room, nearly empty

at eight in the evening, he opened his trunk and pulled out the mysterious box he had despaired of ever opening. He checked his bed for curses (a new and unfortunately necessary routine) and climbed inside, drawing the curtains and casting secrecy spells.

He licked his dry lips and swallowed thickly, then leaned forward to whisper, "Scarlet Pimpernel."

There was a small 'click', and Harry grinned like a Cheshire cat. The lid opened easily. Inside there was a strange shimmery cloth. He moved it around, expecting to find it protecting something harder and more fragile, but there was nothing else. Curiously, he drew out the cloth and draped it over his arm.

His arm promptly disappeared.

He dropped the cloth as if it burned and his arm reappeared, completely unharmed. He picked up the cloth again and started to experiment with, wrapping it around different parts of himself and finally over himself all together. Every time whatever was under the cloak disappeared from sight.

It was an invisibility cloak.

"Wicked."

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Dunnan Hill was as primeval a village as you would ever find in any corner of the Old World. A little over five hundred men, women, and children inhabited the area and their population had neither grown nor shrunk noticeable in seven-hundred years. Most wizarding folk would call the place a 'boonie' town, but the people there took pride in their simple ways and the peace it afforded them. They grew most of their own food, spun their own wool, brewed their own potions, and knew every one of their neighbors by name, family, house, and profession. A quarter of the population lived in cottages scattered in the fields and pastures surrounding the village, but the rest lived closely together in rooms above their shops or family houses or inns. It was

for safety's sake more than convenience. The land was thick with Otherfolk, and the massive black keystone around which their village had sprung protected them from their mischief, the closer the better.

"Don't like it," Brigham announced to his old friend, puffing on his pipe and wrapping his blanket tighter around his boney frame. As he had done almost everyday for the last hundred and seven years, he was enjoying his evening tobacco with his childhood friend, Norman, and discussing news about places that had nothing to do with them. "Ain't ever going to like it. Damn werewolves, too much like them fairies. You know the pointy-ears don't even bother them? Ain't human enough to bother with. Already got their demony taint, so there ain't not point in nabb'n 'em."

Norman, who was the village school teacher for nearly sixty years, took a more liberal view of the matter. "It isn't their fault they're like that. Just bad luck. If they want to live as normal a life as possible, I wouldn't begrudge them that. It's not as if anyone but the fairies are using the land up there anyway. It's a waste, and I'm glad for one that someone found a good use for it."

They fell silent for a bit, enjoying their pipes and surveying their home. From the center of the square, they looked up and down the two main streets and saw the entire village. Mid-October at eight in the evening and the sky was dark, but the windows were all bright and smell of baked goods and burning wood was still fragrant in the air. Along the streets, pumpkins had been piled in preparation for the upcoming Halloween festivities, paper skeletons and ghouls floated from the corners of houses where children had hung them a few days ago. There was some raucous laughter from the town's only tavern, but aside from that things were quiet and homey.

"Still don't like it," Brigham complained. "Ain't that far from here. What if one 'em decides to run off and just happens to wander a bit too close?"

"If it hasn't happened anywhere else in the last ten years, I doubt it's even an issue. Besides, it's not like they wouldn't know if someone tried to run off."

Brigham just snorted and took another puff from his pipe.

“Still don’t like it.”

A harsh, booming caw startled both men from their leisurely thoughts, causing Brigham to drop his pipe. A raven swooped down low over their heads, sending them both ducking. It cawed and swooped again, then flew off. They stared after it, stunned.

“What was that?”

Norman frowned, staring off into the night the bird had disappeared into. He felt uneasy. He took a closer look at the sky, found mars bright, and the faintest impression of a rainbow haloing the quarter moon.

“Bad omens,” he said, grimly. “I think we’d better go home, now.”

“Maybe you’re right.”

Brigham leaned down to pick up his fallen pipe. Another booming sound, but this time it was no crow. Something heavy and sharp smashed into the side of his head. When he opened his eyes again, he could see Norman staring down at him, one of his eyes burned shut and covered in blood. He couldn’t hear him, although he could see he was shouting at him, and then slowly he felt himself floating upward, above Norman and his own body, which now lay in a broken heap in Norman’s arms. Weightless, he hovered a few feet above the ground, and from there could see a nightmare play out before him.

The village was on fire.

There was screaming and people panicking in the streets and roar of flames, all a dull throbbing sound in his ears but no less horrific. Parents tossed their children through open windows, out of the flames and into waiting arms if they were lucky, while others tried to douse the magically induced fires with strongest spells they knew but

doing little good, and those who had freed themselves from the flames were looking frantically for escape.

Brigham watched helplessly as the school he had attended in his youth collapsed into cinders, his cobbler shop and home burn like so much dry hay, and the church he had been married it burn the brightest and most tragically of all. More horrifying was the fate of his family, his neighbors, his friends, and daily acquaintances struggling for their lives and lives of their loved ones all around him. There were bodies in the street, hanging out the windows, dead or too injured to move.

He didn't understand. What was happening? Had he died? Was this hell?

Slowly, he felt himself being drawn upwards, the horror and carnage below him growing more distant and vague until at last it seemed nothing more than a warm glow against the black earth. A light enveloped him, swallowing his grief and horror and replacing it with peace. His last unpleasant fault was-

“Why the hell did that have to be my last memory?”

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Harry bolted up in his bed, gasping in the wake of a nightmare that disappeared before he could grasp it. He sat there for a long moment, listening to the sleeping sounds of his dorm mates, and tried to remember. Nothing presented itself, and nothing in the room seemed sufficiently threatening to wake him. Elsbeth's lantern-like eyes turned towards him and she hooted softly. He smiled at her and settled back in his bed, preparing to fall asleep again when another eerie feeling came over him. He bolted upright again and grabbed his glasses and wand from the nightstand.

“Lumos,” he whispered, and the tip of his wand glowed dully, just enough to see by without waking up the other occupants of the room.

Bobby stood at the foot of his bed, his inky black feathers making him barely visible in the darkness of the room. Harry smiled at his friend, but it quickly died. There was something off.

“What is it? Are Sirius and Remus okay?” he whispered.

“They’re fine... others were not so lucky. It’s started.”

“What’s started?”

“The war.”

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1. Chopin is Bodine’s dog. If you’re wondering what’s happening right now with Fleur and Bodine, she is living with him in his house. It’s like military assigned housing, small but close to work and next to other musketeers’ homes.

Book V:

Chapter 14: The Land to the West

Snape was awake when the knock came. He had just gotten done recording the results of his latest experiments on the Body Tree whose fruit had matured to that of two year old. The fruit had loosened from its fetal position and now hung limply from a thick vine protruding from the top of its spine. It was an eerie and disturbing experience to be in the same room with it. However, he could now see that the thing did not resemble Harry after all, though there were some cursory similarities. The ears were different, so was the hair, the shape of the mouth, and the eyes were dark when he had finally ventured to open an eyelid. It didn't look like McGunny either.

It left him with more questions, hence the additional experiments, but he didn't want to try to analyze his results until after he had some sleep. Which was why he was particularly annoyed when the knock came at half past one in the morning. He quickly tucked his papers in the secret room with the Body Tree and closed the door, sealing it with magic then went to deal with his unexpected guest. If someone had attempted Dark Arts on another first year, he was going feed someone to the giant squid.

Harry stood at the door, pale as death, his clothes wrinkled and untidy in his hurry to dress. Snape's annoyance melted as he stared into his wide green eyes, begging without words not to be turned away. With a sigh, he moved aside to allow the boy into his chambers. Once he had closed the door, the Gryffindor didn't waste any time.

"There's been an attack in Ireland. A village called Dunnan Hill. They... they set it on fire."

Snape was stunned, but even stunned his mind raced with what he was being told. Should he believe him? How did he know this? Who had done the attack? When? Was it going on now? Should he contact Lucius or Voldemort first? Why did that name sound familiar?

“Tell me what you know and how,” he commanded, even as he turned from Harry to search one of his many bookshelves.

“I... A messenger came to me tonight. Maybe half an hour ago? He said the war had started, that Dunnan Hill had been attacked. It was quick. They blew up a few things and set everything else on fire. They didn't seem interested in the people specifically, but there are dead. Oh Merlin, why would Germany attack them? They had absolutely nothing to do with do anything.”

“Yes,” Snape agreed, “However, anyone who had anything to do with anything is safely ensconced in the wards over Britain. Ireland was never afforded the same protection. It would have started a war with the Fairy Courts if we had even attempted it. Here we are... just as I thought.”

Snape pulled a thin book from his shelf and opened it.

“What is it?”

“A manual. Several years ago I was assigned to set up the keystones that support the wards over Britain. Ireland doesn't have wards over itself, but the Eastern side of the country does hold several keystones that support the wards over Britain. Dunnan Hill houses one such keystone. It was probably attacked in an attempt to take down the wards over Britain.”

The boy shuddered. Good. It was important that Harry understand the seriousness of the situation.

“I'm going to find Lucius. He probably knows what is happening already, but just in case...”

Snape hurried to the closet and pulled out his outer dueling robes. He didn't have time for the entire uniform, but a little extra protection might be in order. There was a very good chance that once he located Lucius, he would be enlisted to follow him out into the field.

“I want to come too.”

“I can’t imagine why, yet I’m not surprised. You will go to bed and tell no one what is happening until I return and tell you otherwise.”

“But-“

“This is not a fieldtrip, Potter. You look ready to keel over just hearing about it, do you really want to have to see it for yourself?”

Harry flinched and looked down. Snape suspected he was more than a little relieved at being told to stay behind. Gryffindor bravery demanded he act on the knowledge of the injustice he had been given, but he was still child enough to accept adult authority when it was handed down. Only when it was convenient, of course. There was Slytherin in his blood, after all.

Nevertheless, Harry followed him to the castle portcullis, hoping for answers that Snape didn’t have. A pointed gesture sent the boy back towards Gryffindor Tower (hopefully), and Snape continued on to the stables.

Speed was essential tonight.

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“What on earth happened to you?” Hermione blurted out, staring at the rumpled and sleep deprived friend. It was not quite six in the morning, and she wasn’t expecting anyone to be up aside from herself, and certainly not Harry. He near jumped out of his skin at the sound of her voice, and she felt supremely lucky that he had apparently left his wand on his chair along with his charms textbook and several pieces of parchment. How long had he been up? Had he slept at all last night?

“Hermione,” he said, but then couldn’t seem to come up with anything to say after that.

“What’s happened?”

“Nothing,” he lied, feebly. She glared at him, he looked away. She softened a bit.

“Come on, Harry, what is it?”

He looked like he wanted to tell her, but simply shook his head. She decided to let it go for now. If he couldn't tell her, there was no point in making him feel bad about it. Instead, she took him down to the Great Hall for breakfast, the house elves already used to accommodating her unusually early hours.

She did her best to distract him from whatever was disturbing him, giving him several cups of coffee and discussing classes and the details in each others lives they had missed out on with their increasingly differing schedules. It had been a long time since it had been just the two of them, even longer since they had just talked and even with his obvious distraction she was surprised how much she missed it.

“So are you and Ron together now?” Harry asked cautiously, after she had asked him why Natalie was irked at him recently.

“W-what? Of course not! What are you talking about?”

“You've just been spending a lot of time with him is all.”

A blush was flooding her face. “Don't be ridiculous, Harry. I haven't spent any more time with him than usual. You're just imagining things.”

Sensing he had struck a nerve, he grinned at her.

“Oh, really? Then what about-“

“Potter. Hermione.”

Both Gryffindors jumped and turned to the nearest door as Snape strode into the room. He too looked tired, and Hermione couldn't help

but notice he was wearing his battle robes. He did not appear hurt luckily, but she thought this might be the reason Harry hadn't slept that night. Had he been worried about her godfather?

Snape came in but it didn't seem he was interested in actually talking to them. Instead, he stole Harry's coffee cup and refilled it with the carafe that had been sitting between them. He drank the whole thing in one swig and then poured himself another cupful.

"Professor," Harry started, "Is everything alright?"

The man snorted and took another sip of his coffee, more slowly this time.

"You know very well it is not, Potter. If you'll excuse me, I have to talk to the headmistress. There will be an announcement in your first period class. You both may seek me out after classes have concluded, but not before."

With that, he turned and left.

"What's happened, Harry?" This time it was a demand, her sympathy used up the moment her godfather proved to have been in some possible danger. Harry looked pained, but he did answer her.

"There's been an attack in Ireland last night. I don't know the details, but Snape went to find Lucius to find out."

Her eyes widen. "Oh, my." Then she frowned. "When did he tell you this? Why did he tell you in the first place?"

"Er... he didn't. I told him."

"Then who told you?"

"A little bird."

"Harry," she warned.

“Alright, a big bird. Seriously. Do you remember the raven from my protection spell? It was one of those. Birds are often messengers for gods, especially crows and ravens.”

Harry had no idea if this was true or not, but it seemed likely. He remembered ravens were the messengers of Odin, and auguries found special significance in them. In either event, he didn't want to betray Bobby by granting his presence significant in and of itself.

“Why would the gods bother telling you?”

Harry shrugged. “Professional courtesy?”

She rolled her eyes. She threw out another dozen questions or so, but it quickly became clear that Harry had no answers to the important ones and she quickly gave up. She did, however, make a list of questions in her journalism notebook to ask later. This was national news, but it wouldn't be the first time such stories had found their way into the school paper. Harry had been serving as a link between school and national politics for years.

They lingered in the Great Hall for several hours, waiting for their friends to make their way down to warn them of the upcoming announcement. Draco had been particularly interested, his position in Slytherin hierarchy bolstered by being the first to know and the most ready to react. He had another, more personal reason to be interested, as well.

“Father will be in the field,” he said softly. “He loves battles even more than politics. He used to talk to tell us stories about all the battles he fought. It's the only time I've ever seen him passionate about anything other than mother.”

Harry wasn't sure what to say to him about that. He did not particularly like Lucius, but then again he wasn't his father. If Draco felt anything like he did worrying about Snape, who he didn't like 75% of the time, he didn't envy the other boy in the slightest. The Malfoy heir didn't want their sympathy, however, and went off to think of ways to take advantage of his advanced knowledge.

Natalie hadn't had anything to say about it, but Harry could tell that it bothered her, perhaps more than she was willing to make known. She followed after Draco, and was soon followed by Ron who seemed to have sensed something was afoot. The Weasley twins took it in stride, but promised not to tell anyone. Ginny and Clyde were as upset as Harry, but also promised not to say anything. First period wasn't long to wait, and there was no point in panicking everyone else with Harry's lack of information.

Harry didn't have the opportunity to hear the first period announcement or the students reaction to it. Half an hour before the beginning of class, Lestrage came down to the Great Hall with a small squadron of Sentinels and pointed him out amidst the crowd.

"Mr. Potter," the leader of the group, a tall, middle aged man a scar running down the left side of his face, greeted. "Lord Voldemort has need of your presence. You are to accompany us at once."

Harry blinked, but nodded and got up to follow them. He kept expecting Snape to show up at any moment and follow him, but the potions master made no appearance, leaving his ward with more than a little separation anxiety.

"What do I call you, sir?" he asked, as they put him on a horse. The others rode broomsticks, but perhaps they were worried he would fly ahead of them?

"I'm Lieutenant Seitler. We will be your escorts to Edinburgh."

Harry nodded. He had very little experience with horses, aside from the one made dash to Hogwarts to stop Moody while he was still high on his magical connection to Voldemort. It made the ride awkward and even a little frightening, but he managed keep in his saddle. Luckily, he only had to ride to Hogsmeade, where a secure floo had been set up. It was a one way floo, and they merely had to step through it without saying a word and still end up where they needed to go.

In this case, the Court of Agriculture, Scottish Division. It was completely empty as they walked through the lobby, resplendent in bronzed trees with copper apples lining the walls and an enormous mural of Scotland beneath his feet, delineating the various farms and their crop type. This was not where they stayed, however. Seitler moved him through a back door, his Sentinels going ahead of them to make sure everything was safe, then surrounding him again as they moved the side alleys and back roads of the Court District until they finally reached Brass Cult headquarters.

Harry stared in wide-eyed fascination as they crossed the threshold of the Headquarters' gates, feeling the protection magic dance over his skin and saw a well organized chaos unfolding before him. Perfectly straight columns of Culties stood at attention as their commanders inspected them, while even higher ups started shouting their field assignments, and behind them all ensigns ran in and out of doorways carrying paperwork and equipment and horses, preparing to supply the hundreds of soldiers with every conceivable necessity and few extras just in case.

More than a few Culties turned to stare at him as he was herded towards the administration offices, but Harry wasn't given the time to linger. The moment the doors were closed, he was searched for any potentially harmful objects and relieved of his wand. He felt another wave of anxiety as Seitler pocketed the wand, and escorted him into Voldemort's newest office.

The Dark Lord looked up, pausing in his dictation to a young colonel. He pinned Harry with an assessing glare, then dismissed the subordinate.

"Tell me what you know."

"Dunnan Hill," Harry said immediately, knowing better than to try and play ignorant. He wasn't protecting anyone in doing so. "It was attacked last night. Snape suggested because of its keystone. The German Aurors burned the town, but it didn't stick around."

Voldemort stared at him, assessing his answers and testing their truth.

“How did you find out about it?”

“A raven told me. I think it was one of Raecellos’. I made an offering to him not long ago.”

Voldemort’s eyes narrowed.

“Does this raven have a name?”

Harry covered his nervousness with irritation. “I didn’t think to ask. I was more interested in the burning village.”

The Dark Lord conceded his point and gestured for him to sit. Harry sat, and waited to be told exactly why he had been dragged out here.

“Dunnan Hill wasn’t the only village attacked last night, only the first. We were unprepared for the first attack and too late to stop the second in Timir. After Timir, we managed to alert the other villages with keystones of possible attacks, and the villagers of Metlow managed to defend themselves long enough for Lucius’ men to arrive and drive them off. The German aurors in Down were completely destroyed before any real harm could be done. They gave up after that and retreated.”

Harry swallowed thickly. There had been more than one attack? One village was bad enough, but four?

“It’s only the beginning,” Voldemort said, “The Germans only managed to take out two keystones in Ireland, but that won’t stop them. We have other keystones along the English and Scottish coast that are much more vulnerable. The attack on the villages was only a piece of revenge, their true goal is to destroy the wards over Britain and I suspect they will accomplish it within a few days.”

Harry’s eyes widened. That meant all of Britain, as well as Ireland, would be vulnerable to attack. What happened last night could repeat itself a hundred times if they didn’t do something. Voldemort smiled grimly at him.

“I know what you’re thinking and let me assure you I will not allow it to come to pass. We are not so weak as to allow foreign invaders to rampage across our lands. The wards were not intended to withstand a long term assault, merely to limit international terrorism and provide some forewarning to more serious attacks. They have done their job and now my military will do theirs. Soon enough the Germans will be too busy trying to protect themselves to worry about harassing our citizens.”

Harry wasn’t entirely convinced. Hell, he wasn’t convinced at all. Voldemort would take his revenge against Germany, he had no doubt, but he didn’t think that would make them any safer. In fact, it would probably make things worse.

“What is it you want me to do now?” he asked, feeling an overwhelming sense of fatigue that had nothing to do with his sleepless night.

“Nothing.”

Harry gave a suspicious look. Voldemort smirked back, knowing his doubt was well warranted. “I just want you to be aware of the situation. You are a leader of sorts, among your peers. It is important that you have a more thorough understanding of events than them so that you can make informed decisions. It is also important that you understand the reasons behind the extra security I will be placing around you and the castle, and resign yourself to certain limitations for the time being.”

The boy frowned, assessing this newest tidbit. “Limitations?”

“You have met Lieutenant Seitler already. He is head of the security team in charge of guarding Hogsmeade and Hogwarts, and I have left him special instructions regarding you.”

“What? Why?”

Voldemort moved around from the desk and towards him, Harry instinctively backed up further into his chair. Their last few meetings had been friendly enough, if business-like, but he hadn't forgotten his betrayal he knew the other man hadn't either. He didn't know how much tolerance Voldemort still had with for his defiance.

The Dark Lord's cool hand touched his cheek, and Harry took a sharp intake of breath at the familiar magic that pulsated against his skin, hot and electric and almost oily. The older man stroked cheek and ran through his hair in some semblance of affection, and Harry felt himself practically melt into his chair. It was magic, but Harry couldn't figure out what kind. It was vaguely reminiscent of the first Solstice Ritual that had so irrevocably bound them together, and yet it was different. Harry blinked.

It was Voldemort's soul, now complete and stronger than ever, reaching out to touch his own but not quite able to connect without the assistance of a divine sort. He stared up at the other man, confused and humbled at once. He couldn't think of anything he had done to deserve this sort of reconnection.

Voldemort's eyes were not soft, they were as hard and intent and possessive as always, but they were mixed with a previously absent anxiety. Finally, he answered Harry's question.

"I don't think you realize what a target you've made yourself. Your rather impressive escape from the auror's and then Germany itself would have been enough to put you on Seibligg's bad side, but your public support of proposal 4-66 means your not only a traitor to Germany but also an ally to werewolves, their chosen enemy. We needn't even mentioned your continued association with myself, and your high public appeal. As far as Germany is concerned you are their most important civilian target. Your age and my possible manipulation of you won't be enough to protect you if Seibligg decides it's not, and I believe he has sufficient reason to hate you. You very nearly ended his career after all."

The hand withdrew and Harry felt its absence as a sudden coldness against face. He blinked and shook his head to clear it, refocusing on Voldemort as he made his way back around his desk.

“Our people need you to be safe, Harry. You are a symbol, and they will turn to you for strength during the war and in its aftermath. You will obey Severus and Seitler’s orders as you would my own. If you fail to do this, it is me who will hand out your punishment. Have I made myself clear?”

“Chrystal, my Lord,” he said, admitting defeat. He did not like the sound of these ‘limitations’, but at the same time he couldn’t argue with the man’s logic. He was in danger (when wasn’t he?), and if he chose to ignore that he might put his friends in danger. He would make an attempt towards obedience.

Within reason, of course.

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Harry was only gone from the castle for about two hours, but by the time he returned he may as well have been gone two months. The halls were filled with loud voices, angry remarks and frightened suggestion and mixed in amongst them the occasional sob as some grieved the dead and their own uncertain futures. Several people came to him, hoping for additional information from where ever he had disappeared to. He gave them all that he had, but he was no soothsayer and could offer them nothing about the future.

He spent the rest of the day unable to pay attention in class, and easily got away with it because the rest of the student body was just as bad. Voldemort had given Harry his initial report on the four attacks, which were lacking in a lot of information, but gave the gist of the situation. Dunnan Hill was utterly destroyed, the entire town burned to cinders. Fifteen hundred people lived within the town itself were now homeless, and an estimated two hundred dead and even more wounded. Timir had faired better, but only just. The town was split by a small river, and only one side had been attacked, but it took out the hospital and the three schools, and at least seventy dead. Metlow had faired well considering, loosing only a dozen or so businesses in the town proper and a dozen or so killed by the initial

attack. Five brass culties had been killed upon arrival, but the some twenty dead aurors had made them the victors in that particular skirmish. Lucius had been ready and waiting in Down when the final attack came. The general had led a counter attack the wiped the German forces out completely, suffering only a few injured soldiers, some superficial damage to the town, and no loss of civilian life. Harry felt a grim satisfaction in that, but it did little to smother the depression he felt for the innocent victims who had lost so much.

Less disturbing, but more personally annoying was Seitler's list of 'limitations'. He was officially off the Quidditch Team, the vulnerability of flying in a dangerous sport surrounded by hundreds, possibly thousands of observers was too great a risk. Likewise, Hogsmeade weekends were canceled, but that was true for the entire school. He mail was being monitored even more rigidly than before. The biggest and most annoying limitation, however, was that the was not permitted outside of the castle at all without an escort and that even inside the castle he had to abide by a strict curfew. It didn't help that he suspected Seitler's crew would be keeping an exceptionally close eye on him. Additional security precautions would arise as the situation dictated, but Harry didn't think it could get much worse short of chaining him to his bed.

He had a feeling his new invisibility cloak might come in handy this year.

A sheet of bright yellow paper inserted itself between his head and the book he had been staring blankly at for the last ten minutes. He snapped awake, looking up to see Natalie smirking down at him. He opened his mouth to say something, but she made a shushing gesture with her finger, reminding him that they were in a library, then pointed down at the flyer.

Dunnan Hill Victim Relief Drive

He blinked and read it over. It was simple enough. It was looking for volunteers to help make potions and transfigure supplies for the villagers in Dunnan Hill and Timir. As an added bonus Slughorn and McGonagall had agreed to let students skip class in order to help.

He looked up at Natalie and smiled, nodding. She smiled back and wrote his name on the tablet she was carrying then moved off to someone else. He looked over the flyer again. Perhaps this was what he needed, something productive that helped to address the problems that had left him so depressed. If he talked to Hermione, maybe there was a way that he could get additional help to Ireland. He was supposedly a big celebrity. It couldn't hurt to have a cause outside of helping werewolves.

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Tom couldn't help but chuckle as he read the paper, revealing Germany's first act of retaliation against Britain for attacks it had not committed. It was official. The war had started, and couldn't wait to see how his elder counterpart reacted. He looked up from his paper to Katarina, dark and resplendent in the sunset orange taffeta and topaz jewelry. She glowed like a flame, smiling at him with a warmth that defied the chill of her body.

For a while he had feared he would be unable to win her over, but the attacks on the German pigs had done wonders in his attempts to seduce her. Giving something they wanted, something they forgot they even wanted, was a tried and true method of persuasion he would not soon forget. She admitted it had been centuries since she had hunted humans, and then they had been weak muggles. Now she and her kindred had tasted fresh blood, they felt the thrill of the hunt and longed to do it again. They had been hiding and compromising with the wizarding community for so long, to finally cast off the weight of their conditional bondage was liberating and empowering. He promised her the opportunity to do it again. War had all sorts of opportunity.

"Everything is going according to plan," he told her, folding his paper and setting it aside.

Reclining in her chaise, she looked for all the world like a well contented cat. But like any cat, she had her pride and would never allow herself to be too agreeable.

“Yes, I’m quite impressed with how far you’ve managed to get us. Your grandfather must be very proud. But I can’t help but think things will only get harder from here on out. They’re going to figure out it was eventually, especially if we continue to make a habit out of this.”

“It doesn’t matter. We have no official connection to Voldemort, making Germany’s little temper tantrum in Ireland an unprovoked act of terrorism. They’ve gone too far to save themselves.”

“Are you so certain your master will be the victor? Germany seems to be ahead of Britain so far.”

Tom snorted.

“A bunch of aurors against village of sleepy peasants? Hardly an accurate judge of strength. Voldemort has his Sentinels as well as a formal army at his beck and call, an already organized army that will only swell when the public perceives the threat to their homeland. Germany only has the aurors, a highly exclusive group that takes years to properly train, and no formal army readily established. They will be overwhelmed and destroyed, and lucky you, you get to help.”

She couldn’t help but smile at that. “I admit, I am enjoying myself. It’s been a long time since me or my children have hunted like this. We’ve made so many compromises over the centuries, I hadn’t realized how much we had surrendered until it had been given back to us. It really is a shame, what we’ve been reduced to.”

Sensing her accommodating mood, he stood from his chair and approached her, dropping to his knee he her hand, and kissed her signet ring. “My lady, you may have been resigned, but you have never been reduced.”

He looked up at her again, judging her reaction. She looked intrigued, so he gently turned her hand and kissed her wrist. There was a definitely stillness, of surprise perhaps? But she didn’t pull away, so kissed her again on the inside of her arm, then slowly trailed kisses up her arm to her elbow then her shoulder. He did not hurry. He had seduced a few vampires in his lifetime and knew they didn’t share a

mortal's sense of urgency when it came to sex. To a vampire, foreplay was more important than climax.

As he traveled ever higher, he gently nipped her collar bone and felt her release a shuddery breath. She liked that, which meant she was going to love this. He rose up, throwing his leg over her, but not forcing his weight on her (if she sensed a power play he had no doubt she could send him flying across the room), and leaned over her to bury his face into her hair. She let out a gasp and arched underneath him. He inhaled deeply, taking in her scent. Coconut, lilies, and blood. A delightfully novel scent.

Stop it, Tom! Get off her!

He mentally snarled at Horace's protests, which radiated as a feral growl into Katarina's ear, and she answered with seductive purr.

This is my body! Go practice your perversions in your own damn body!

Tom decided to just ignore the other boy, but he wasn't so easily defeated. A sudden, pounding headache bloomed just behind his eyes. He flinched and drew back. That sneaky little bastard! When did he learn that trick?

Ho, ho, ho... you thought you were the only one who could do it? This is my body in case you've forgotten. I will be taking it back eventually.

To emphasize his point, Horace let another wave of pain radiate through his skull, causing him to grimace.

"What is it, Horace?" Katarina asked, looking confused and perhaps even a little worried. He managed a weak smile at her.

"Voldemort," he lied, "Just sending his regards. Says we did marvelous work and all. Hip hip hooray."

She blinked and then smiled. "So that's how you do communicate. Telepathically. I take it it's not natural otherwise it wouldn't hurt you. Poor dear."

He grimaced, this time from her endearment rather than his own pain which was now settling back. Horace hovered in the back of his mind, ready to raise another fit the moment he tried to continue where they had left off, and just this once Tom decided it was best to yield to defeat. He'd make Horace regret it later. Slowly, he climbed off Katarina, kissing her hand again in a gesture of regret.

"I'm sorry, my Lady, but I'm afraid we will have to continue at another time. I have to speak with him, and I'll be useless to you by the time we're done."

She signed in disappointment but let him go. "If you must. Another time, then."

He returned to his private bedroom, and glared at the mirror.

"Don't think you've won anything. I haven't even begun to play yet."

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"How, precisely, did you manage to convince the Dark Lord to let you go from veritable fortress to the middle of a war zone?" Natalie queried Harry as he sat across from her on the train. Hogwarts Express was packed with people, but those few actually from Hogwarts had been given their very own set of compartments towards the front. Harry had settled in one of them with Natalie, Cedric, Ron, and Snape (when he could be bothered to check on them). There about twenty other volunteers from Hogwarts and some three hundred volunteers from across Britain crowded into the train, which had been re-routed from London to a mile outside Dunnan Hill. Harry wasn't exactly sure how they were going to get across the North Sea, but that wasn't for him to figure out.

"Good publicity," Harry said, "And a lot of security."

In truth, it was a lot less honest than that. He's shamelessly manipulated his way onto the train to Dunnan Hill, citing to the press, who had been given access to the castle to report on the schools massive effort to help their neighbors across the country, that he wanted nothing more than to go to Ireland himself and let them know that they had support of the entire nation behind them. Voldemort had written him a scolding letter (literally, he had to go the nurses office to treat his blistered fingertips) for putting him in the very awkward position of sending Harry off to help the victims of the attack (which he had been encouraging people to do ever since the attack occurred) and protecting Harry (which was a lot harder to do traveling into completely unprotected territory than it was in Hogwarts) from his trouble magnet self. He had, however, been impressed with Harry's initiative, and ultimately let him go with Snape, Seitler, several other Sentinels, and a press black out that would not reveal his or anyone else's presence in Dunnan Hill until after they left.

Ron let out an irritated snort, but didn't comment further. The youngest Weasley son hadn't so much volunteered to go to Ireland as been paroled there in order to get out of a rather nasty detention scrubbing out all the castle toilets after slipping puking pills into a Angelina's tea cup (he had been aiming for Fred's, but had miscalculated). Hermione had summarily charged him with writing an article about the experience as soon as he came back, after Narcissa refused to sign the parental release form that would have let her or Draco go. They too were targets, just like Harry, being the children of the high commander of Voldemort's army.

Somewhere on the train, Seitler was running his own security check, stepping on the toes of the security detail in charge of the train and the volunteers, and completely unrepentant. Harry wasn't sure what to make of the man, who didn't exactly hover but was always there in some form or another.

"You know I've never been to Ireland," Natalie said offhandedly. "This wasn't exactly how I pictured my first visit."

Ron glowered at her. "I doubt anyone pictured you doing anything so altruistic. You lose a bet or something?"

Harry bit his tongue to keep from laughing. He had been wondering the same thing for a while. Natalie had practically run the entire charity drive on her own, exercising her rather dubious popularity and exploiting Harry and Hermione shamelessly for promotions purposes, all for a cause she only seemed vaguely interested in. She sniffed at Ron.

“No, I did not lose a bet. As if I would bother with something so plebian. LeStrange enlisted me. She said she allow me to skip classes and give me a hand written letter of recommendation. Do you know what letter of recommendation from the Headmistress of Hogwarts, is worth? Forget the NEWTs, I’ve practically got a free pass straight to Oxford.”

Cedric managed a rather weak smile at that. “Lucky you.”

They talked for a bit longer, but inevitably the conversation faded away. Ron was not really their friend and Cedric was the odd man out while Natalie was unwilling to share her thoughts with Harry while in the other’s company. Harry didn’t mind the silence. As the train slipped into a tunnel, cloaking the passenger cars in darkness, his thoughts drifted to Dunnan Hill and Timir, to Germany, to Seibligg, Voldemort, Dumbledore, and Viktor, to Bobby and Raecellos, Sirius and Remus, and dozen other things that all seemed interconnected.

When they finally cleared the tunnel, nearly an hour later, Harry realized they were Ireland. He felt a shiver run up his spine. The magic here was different, impressing up on the very air a sense of liveliness and danger generally reserved for the primeval forests and mountains. Out the window, a patchwork of green and gold fields and blackish earth rolled out into the distance, stitched together by ancient stone walls older than Hogwarts. Further out he could see mountains and forest, little more than hazy grey shades in the distance.

A knock made all of them jump, and Seitler pulled open the door and stuck his head in.

“We arrive in fifteen minutes. Get ready.”

A sudden wave of anxiety passed through the cabin. Voldemort had assured the public that villages that had been attacked were now safe, each guarded by a squadron of well trained soldiers, but the fact of the matter was it was still a war zone and no one knew if the Germans make a second pass. Even without the threat of another attack looming over their heads, none of them had ever been to a decimated village and had no idea what to expect. Had the dead all be removed or where they likely to stumble across someone's mangled corpse? Were the citizens dealing with their loss or were some turning violent in their grief and frustration? How much could a bunch of school children do to help?

Their own vulnerability was reminded to them as they put on their leather breastplates and gauntlets. It was a small bit of protection, but one Snape had demanded before letting anyone board he train, along with absolute obedience while in Dunnan Hill. Harry's own presence in the village required a bit of extra camouflage, including a notice-me-not charm and some additional charms on his hair to make him blond and on his glasses to make his eyes blue.

The train began to slow and finally rolled to a screeching halt. From their windows, Harry and his companions could make out the burnt out skeleton of the village and even further away rows upon rows of gray tents, people coming and going along clearly marked, glowing green pathways.

“I wonder why everyone is sticking to the glowing parts,” Harry remarked.

“Maybe the Germans left booby traps, and those are the only parts they know are safe,” Cedric speculated.

Somehow, Harry didn't think that was the case. The train was gradually unloaded, Sentinels and Culties first, followed by the adult volunteers and their heavier equipment and then finally the Hogwarts students. Snape led the way, taking them to the very back of the train and then finally out into an open field. Once they were all outside,

Snape lined them up in row so that he could take roll of all of them and make sure they were wearing their protective gear. While he was doing this, a Sentinel, young but stern with brilliant red hair approached him and said something no one could hear. Snape nodded at the man, who then turned to the students.

“I’m Sentinel Callahan, welcome to Dunnan Hill,” he greeted, his rich Irish accent strangely muted. “Firstly, the villagers are grateful to you for your assistance, which has been a comfort in a very difficult time. That being said, there are certain precautions you will need to take while here. The keystone, which used to support the wards that protect England and Scotland from trespassing wizards and witches, also support a second set of wards that protected the village from the native fairies. This keystone was destroyed, leaving the village and the surrounding homesteads vulnerable. Therefore, it is imperative that all of you remain together in groups of three or more and never stray from the designated walkways. As long as you can obey these simple rules, you are perfectly safe.”

With that being said, Callahan stepped aside to allow Snape to take over again. The potions master glared at the students in warning.

“If ignore Sentinel Callahan’s advice you better hope the fairies get to you before I do,” he warned, and then lead them to the nearest path towards the tent village. Despite the ominous threat and the less than pleasant circumstances of their visit, the atmosphere in the camp was surprisingly cheerful. Children played hide-in-seek between the rows of tents while adults grouped together to eat or work on some project or to talk, and the air smelled of campfire, roasting meats, and the sharp chemical scents of construction materials. It had been four days since the attack, the dead had been cremated, the injured had been healed or taken to hospitals, and people too busy rebuilding their lives to fall into despair. Their determination was further bolstered by the hundreds of volunteers who had not only brought helping hands, but supplies and expertise.

Most of the volunteers were specialists of some kind. Construction workers and engineers to help rebuild the buildings, craftsmen to replace furniture and finer details, seamstresses and tailors to refit

the villagers with their lost wardrobes, cooks to feed a small army, healers to tend the sick and wounded, and many, many more. All of them busy.

Callahan showed them their weekend homes, two large tents, one for the girls and one for the boys, where they quickly stuffed their gear and were then split into four groups of five. Predictably, Harry and his group were stuck with Snape, who were assigned to handle the massive vats of memoracrete, a sort of potion that to the untrained eye appeared to be able to recreate a building out of nothing. It was hot, smelly work keeping the vats hot and pliable, but it was also important and Harry never once felt the urge to complain.

“Do you think they’ll trying again,” Harry asked, following behind Snape as the man examined the large vats, each large enough to boil and entire horse inside of it, for consistency. After looking at each one, the potions master signaled held up a some of his fingers, indicating the cups of sand Harry needed to add before moving to the next one. “The Germans, I mean.”

Snape didn’t look up from his work, but he did answer. “Unlikely. There is nothing here to attract their attention any longer, and they are too well prepared to make the effort worth the risk. The engineers are working to add protection charms into the foundations of the building. This village will not so easily be destroyed again, and its people will not be so oblivious to danger. This one is ready for pouring. Stay here. I will go get one of the engineers. That goes for the rest of you too.”

There were mutters of acknowledgement from across the street, where the rest of Harry’s group was tucked into the shade of a partially collapsed wall, measuring out ingredients for the next vat of memoracrete. The man left, leaving him to guard against the roving hordes of children running around their ruined town turned playground.

“I’ll be. I never fancied Voldemort letting his pet loose out here,” a deep, feminine voice said, and Harry spun around in alarm. There stood an elderly witch, heavy set, the sleeves of her emerald robe

rolled up and large white apron designating her as a cook. Harry just stared at her, wondering what she was even doing this far from camp. She glowered at him, reminding him distinctly of Aunt Marge.

“Nothing to say?” she challenged.

“What would you have of me, ma’am?”

She continued to glower at him for a long moment, saying nothing, then she seemed to deflate and what ever semblance she had to the much detested Marge disappeared.

“Are you alright, ma’am?”

“No,” she snapped. “Here I am, a woman of my age, about ready to start a fight with a schoolboy. I’ve really sunk to a new low.”

“Er... well, technically you didn’t actually start a fight, so I think you’re alright, but is there a reason you’re angry with me?”

“You’re Harry Potter,” she stated plainly. He tensed. It seemed his disguise wasn’t as good as he had hoped.

“Well, yes, but doesn’t really explain why you’re mad at me.”

“No, I suppose it doesn’t,” she groused. “And I’m not mad at you. I’m mad at your boss.”

Harry tilted his head curiously. “Well, that makes a bit more sense. Snape should be back any minute though, and you can take it up with him personally.”

“Heaven’s sake, you’re thick as a brick. I was talking about Voldemort.”

For whatever reason, that made Harry smile a bit and her glower deepen even further. “Don’t look so smug. He’d have killed you just as quick as he did my grandson. If you’d been born a day sooner, you’d been sharing a grave somewhere.”

Dread settled in his stomach, a ball of ice freezing his insides. In her vague declaration, an ominous portent unfolded. What she mean by that? Who had Voldemort killed and why did the day of his birth determine his murder?

“Who-“

Before he could finish, a scream rang out, high and shrill and terrified. The witch spun around, her wand drawn and headed in the direction of the scream, but Harry was faster. He bolted past her and to the outskirts of the far edge of the village. It didn’ t take long to find the source of the screaming, which was now joined by the cries of several children.

Harry spotted three children, ranging in age from seven to ten calling for help and pointing out to the field. He followed their pointing fingers until he saw someone being dragged through the grass, their bright white and blue clothes flickering in and out of sight in the long grass. The other children remained behind the softly glowing green, not daring to go after their stolen friend.

Harry was not so cautious. Jumped the line without a second thought, quickly gaining on them. As he drew closer, he could see the victim was a girl, eight or nine years old, her bare arms streaked with mud and blood as she clawed frantically at the ground. Drawing closer still, he finally saw what had grabbed her, and very nearly bulked.

It was a giant salamander, and not the of the dragon variety. Slimy and lizard like, it’s enormous, shovel shaped head was clamped fiercely onto the girl’s ankle as it dragged her backwards to some as yet unseen lair. Harry didn’t dare send out a curse, at the speed they were going and poor angle of their bodies made the chances of him hitting the girl too likely. He needed to get closer-

A suddenly weight tackled him to the ground knocking the breath out of him, and for a second Harry thought he had been caught by a second giant salamander but soon enough he could feel all too

human hands pulling him back to his feet. The ground he had gained was quickly lost, and the girl's screams were starting to grow fainter.

"No!" he screamed, trying to break free. "Stop, she needs help! Help her!"

"We can't! It's too late for her," Seitler shouted, dragging him back towards the ruined village even as the monster dragged the girl to her certain death.

"Let go, let go! I can still- Expecto Patronum!"

The force of the spell knocked them both to ground, the silvery ghost of a stag leaping from Harry's wand. He tried to break free from Seitler to follow it, but the Sentinel's hold on him hadn't slackened, and all he could do was watch as his patronus chased after the girl, disappearing over a hill. Seitler cursed and pulled him to his feet, pulling him back towards the safety of the temporary wards as quickly as he could. Harry didn't really fight him, but he refused to look away from where the girl and his patronus had disappeared, listening and watching for any sign of either.

By the time they were safely behind the wards, half the village had arrived, to discover what had happened. Several of the village men and a dozen Culties formed two hunting parties, wands and weapons drawn as they raced past them to hunt the beast down. Harry watched helplessly, knowing if his spell had failed they would not be quick enough to save her.

"What the hell were you thinking?" Seitler snarled. "Chasing after a fairy beast like that into a hill*. And then setting off a spell of that power! It'll attract every sprite and hag for miles."

Harry wasn't listening to him. He was listening for the girl's screaming, for the men's shouting, for some sign that she was alive or dead or just gone forever. At some point, Seitler's ranting was replaced with by Snape's.

“Not even five minutes and you’ve managed to put yourself into a potentially life-threatening situation, Potter. That must be a new record,” he drawled coolly, though Harry could hear the underlying anger.

“Harry?! Are you alright, what happened?” He vaguely recognized Natalie’s voice, felt her slender hands on his hand and his cheek, trying to draw his attention, but he couldn’t look away from the distant hill.

“She’s just a little girl,” Harry said softly, “She was so frightened.”

“You’re in shock, Potter,” Snape said, and a moment later he felt something poured into his mouth. He coughed, his gaze finally torn away from the hill when he was forced to close his eyes as a burning sensation caused his eyes to water. “Ugh.”

A sudden cheer rose up from the crowd at the edge of the village, and though Harry couldn’t see clearly what was going on his heart swelled at the sound.

“Is she?”

“She’s pretty banged up, but she’s okay,” Natalie told him. “Now sit down before you fall over, you damned fool.”

Slowly, he did just that, dropping to his knees and then to his backside, weak with relief. She was okay. His patronus had gotten to her in time. Weaving between the crowd that was now moving past him, his patronus reappeared, sniffed him curiously for a moment, then disappeared back into his wand. There were several gasps from the crowd, and only now did they realize the source of the spirit animal. It was too spectacular a sight to be distracted by a simple notice-me-not charm, and all too soon Harry was crowded around by villagers and volunteers, shaking his hand, thumping his back, thanking, and even hugging him.

It was all a blur to Harry, who had barely processed the fact that he had done something heroic. Nearby Seitler looked like a museum

curator whose prized and extremely delicate manuscript was not being manhandled by an overly curious mob. Eventually, he could take no more of it, grabbed Harry, and made a run for it.

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“Hasta sangius!”

Lucius smiled in grim satisfaction at the scream the signified his aim had been true, and watched as the cloaked figure plummeted two hundred feet to the rocky shoals below. All around him, his soldiers herded the few remaining aurors into every tighter configurations, like dolphins herding fish until they were ready to tear them apart. To the north, a storm rolled, thunder and lightening making for a dramatic backdrop for his second battle in a week.

As predicted, the Germans had decided against a second attack in Ireland in favor of keystones on the less protected islands and islets along the eastern and southern coasts off of England and Scotland. Lucius had dementors released in the north, stirring up storms and fog the broom bound aurors would not dare to breach, forcing them to chose targets in the south where he and his men were waiting for them.

It was so easy it was almost disappointing.

A streak of fire shot towards him, but dodged it nimbly before sending out a curse of his own at the quickly darting form of a young Auror who had managed to slip out of the Culties net. The Auror dodged, and broke off the attack in order to flee the squadron of soldiers that now targeted her. Lucius contemplated joining them, but ultimately decided to let his men have their sport. The battle was already won, as far as he was concerned.

A warm tingle spread over his left arm, the Dark Mark squirming along his skin. Lucius let himself enjoy it for a moment. It had been a long time since its use. Peace time had made the necessity of the Dark Mark wane as he had been bound to his office more often than not and easily reached, but its familiar burn was a welcome reminder

of the more glorious days of his youth. He signaled to his second in command, who was at his side in an instant.

“I am being summoned by our Lord. Finish up here and report back to base. Allow the men some time to celebrate, but try to keep the whoring to a minimum. There are likely to be reporters about.”

“Yes, sir.”

He apparated to their base of operation, an abandoned lighthouse that allowed them a convenient and dry look out point, and a place to store the special floo that took him straight to headquarters in London. The soldiers all straightened and saluted, and he felt a his pride swell at the blind and complete obedience. The military was a truly marvelous thing, and he was fool for ever thinking otherwise.

Voldemort was observing the battle and its conclusion on an enormous map that covered the entire back wall of the general's office. The Dark Lord glanced over at his servant and offered him a rare, congratulatory smile.

“You've done very well for yourself, Lucius.”

“Thank you, my Lord.”

They shared a glass of brandy together, basking in their own supremacy as they watched the green dots swarming the red ones on the map, and sharing a toast as the last red dot disappeared altogether.

“I don't know why, but I thought this would be a lot harder,” Lucius lamented.

“I wouldn't worry yourself, my friend. It's only the beginning. When they start to become truly desperate, that's when things will start to get interesting. You remember what the last war was like.”

A bit of Lucius' amusement died. He did indeed remember. There was much to be said about that period in his life, and not all of it good.

Narcissa had nearly been killed while pregnant with Draco during a Ministry raid after the minister finally acknowledged the truth of Lucius' treachery, and Rudolphus, one of his best friends, was poisoned at a bar while celebrating a victory and Regulus Black had simply disappeared without a trace. He, himself, had nearly died several times, and not one of them particularly dignified.

Voldemort continued, pulling him out of his dark thoughts.

"Lucius, now that you've thoroughly trounced Seibligg's pathetic army, I want you to go back out and destroy the wards off Kent and Suffolk. It should be enough to take down the protection over the southern half of England."

Lucius blinked at him. "My Lord...I'm not sure I understand? You want me to intentionally weaken England's defenses?"

The Dark Lord nodded. "Yes. I have already gained sufficient revenge against the aurors that attacked Ireland. Now I need a justifiable excuse to attack Germany itself. Preventing them from attempting to invade our now vulnerable homeland is sufficient cause. We will simply tell the public that although we managed to defeat the German Aurors, we were not quite quick enough to save the wards."

"That's... dastardly clever of you," the Malfoy patriarch acknowledged, tipping an imaginary hat to him. He took a last sip of his drink and set it down. "I best do it now before the men return to headquarters. If you'll excuse me, my Lord."

Voldemort waved him off, turning his attention back to the map. In his mind, he could see countless future battles dancing across the paper in so many dots, green and red and eventually new colors as allies and enemies joined the fray. Many of them would happen over the next few years, others would not occur for decades even centuries. He had millennium to build his kingdom, and he intended for it last well beyond that. He lifted his glass to the map and all the imaginary and future battles therein.

"Cheers."

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Ceara Colm would not fall asleep until she saw the boy who had rescued her and, more importantly, the silvery stag he summoned from his wand. It took a lot of searching by the villagers and a bit of arguing with the vulture-like teacher from Hogwarts and even more arguing with the dour Sentinel, but eventually the village elder managed to bring him to the Healer's tent.

He looked different from the last time she had seen him, his hair was dark now and his eyes a brilliant green. Ceara could not for the life of her believe that she had been rescued by a prince. No one had even realized he was in the village until after the attack.

"Are you really, Harold Potter?"

He smiled down at her, and even with the glasses he looked handsome and strong to her. Beside him, the stag he called his 'patronus' stood at ease, casting a pale glow against him.

"I really am, but my friends call me Harry."

"Harry..." she said, smiling until her mouth opened in an enormous wand.

"You should sleep. You've had a hard day."

She shook her head. "I'm afraid. I close my eyes an' I keep think'n I hear it coming for me... Mum's in the hospital, and Da's gone to look after her. Gran ain't strong enough to fight off the hill monsters no more."

"Would it help if I stayed, at least until you fall asleep?"

She thought for a moment. "Maybe... maybe if it stays," she said, pointed to the stag who sniffed her finger, causing her to giggle.

“Then we’ll both stay, but you have to try to sleep, okay?”

She nodded and closed her eyes. Sleep did not come easy to her, even with the comforting presence of a prince and his magic hart. Her ankle still hurt despite the healing draughts, and the healing salves they’d put over her cuts had dried and now itched against her already sensitive skin. But she tried and as tired as she was she very nearly succeeded, but the soft murmur of voices drew her back from the brink of dreams.

“It’s time to go,” came a rich, masculine voice.

“Just a few more minutes. I want to make sure she doesn’t wake up again.”

“No, we’re leaving now. There’s been another attack on the wards over Britain, this time off Suffolk.”

“Was anyone hurt?”

“No, but the situation is serious enough that the Seitler wants all the students back at Hogwarts. Your little romp this afternoon likely didn’t help matters.”

“I’m not sorry.”

“Which is exactly why you cannot be trusted to remain here,” the man all but snarled. There was a moment of silence.

“Fine, I’ll come. I’ll leave my Patronus behind. It should be enough if she wakes up. She’s more impressed with it, then me anyway.”

“You can’t maintain a spell of that level for an entire night over hundreds of miles. You’ll be dead by morning.”

“You’re such a cheerful fellow, Professor.”

There was the sound of movement and the rustle of the tent flap, then silence. Fearfully, she opened her eyes, expecting nothing but darkness. Instead, the patronus still stood in the middle of the room, his ghostly form standing guard over her. Tears welled up in her eyes and she sniffed them back, a smile steeling across her face. It had been an awful week. Everything she had ever known had gone up in smoke, and her family was now scattered and she was alone. She'd never felt so much hatred for anyone in her life, as she did for the Germans who had attacked her home.

But other people had come. Good people. People with medicine and tents and food and kind words. Strong people who had helped others feel strong, kind people who reminded her they were not alone. Brave people, like Harry, who proved the darkness didn't always win. She closed her eyes tight and hugged her pillow, summoning up dreams of her parents wrapping her in their arms and of a future where the monsters stayed in their hills and village was more than just burnt up sticks and mortar.

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1. Hillsides are commonly the homes of fairies, particularly hollow hills or hills with unusual shape or characteristics.

Book V

Chapter 15: The Crusade

Harry had figured he was in for a canning when he got back to Hogwarts, and he was right. But, instead of the anticipated thirty (or was it forty now?) lashes, he had received only five.

“You have a knee-jerk reaction to save people,” Snape said, sitting him down at a table for this particular lecture. Harry cringed when the back of chair pressed his bruises, but considered himself lucky that it had been only five. “This can’t be beaten or lectured out of you, at least not after the deed is already done. You saved the girl, you won the day, and the punishment makes you the martyr, not the transgressor. So the next time someone cries out for a hero, you’ll run in again without thought. And it won’t take long for your enemies to realize this and use it to their advantage. I can almost guarantee the fae are now aware of your weakness, and once the press releases your latest stunt, the rest of the wizarding world will know as well.”

Harry swallowed thickly, and looked down. Snape was right. He didn’t regret going after the girl, not even knowing he’d exposed a vulnerability. But if it hadn’t been this, it would have been something else... his love for his godfathers, his sensitivity to storm summoning magic, his moon madness. There were so many points of attack, and Harry would have to wrap himself in a veritable bubble to protect himself on all fronts and it just wasn’t worth it.

“So what should I do? I don’t want to go through my life ignoring people in trouble. I’m not... I can’t be that cold. I don’t want to be.”

Snape regarded him blandly for a moment, but did consider his dilemma.

“If this is truly going to be a long standing issue...” the man conceded, “I will talk with Voldemort about teaching you to apparate early and with Seitler about getting you some defensive equipment. In the mean time, you are not to leave the castle at all for the next two

weeks. You will also be assisting me in Junior Dueling Club for the next month, as I am short of volunteers.”

“But I thought-“

“You thought because I was so understanding, that I’d let you off with a couple of smacks and a pat on the head?” Snape smirked. “Do not mistake my understanding for tolerance, Potter. I understand why thieves steal and why arsonists burn; it doesn’t mean I condone their actions. Go. You have homework to complete.”

Harry left, too tired to put up a fight he knew he couldn’t win. He did not go back to his dorm though. By now Ron would have told Hermione what had happened in Ireland and the other volunteers who had been there would have spread the tale to the rest of the school, and the typical flurry of inquiry and rumor-mongering would begin yet again, swallowing up the just abating accusations of assault against Ginny and stealing away any possibility of getting something productive done. By tomorrow the national press would be printing their stories, and despite what Snape had said he figured he’d be back in London to give the official interview he had dodged in Dunnan Hill.

Or maybe not.

Snape had said the wards over England had been torn down. Scotland’s still held, but it would be easy enough to cross through from England, and who knew when Scotland’s wards would fall completely as well. Harry didn’t quite know what this meant for Britain, except that it made them more vulnerable to additional attacks. He wanted to ask Snape and at the same time he didn’t. If Voldemort was truly worried about Harry being a target, he may keep him cloistered within Hogwarts’ defenses, and if he did perhaps Harry could bury his head in the sand long enough to sort himself out.

He headed up to the astronomy tower, taking the back ways and secret passages where ever possible until he reached the open air of the observational mezzanine. No one would think to look for him here,

and in the clear autumn day he could see for miles in every direction. This was as close to freedom as he was going to get for a long time.

“I heard about the girl.”

Harry didn't bother to turn around, a tired smile coming to his face. Bobby's voice was unmistakable in its cheekiness.

“You did good. Even the Seelie Court is impressed. No one likes Mud Dogs. Of course, now they want to meet you.”

“I just bet. Unfortunately, I won't be going anywhere for a while. Unless you're here to inform me of some other disaster?”

Bobby said nothing, and Harry turned to look at him. He was perched on the rail of the mezzanine, his ink black body silhouetted against the setting sun. He seemed oddly stiff.

“Are you alright?”

“I'm fine, it's just... I don't wish to bring you bad news, but I...”

“Has something else happened? Is this about the wards coming down?”

The raven shuffled from foot to foot, as if not entirely sure if he should fly or stand, his feathers ruffled as he tried to sort out some internal debate.

“No... I don't know. There's been... portents... omens.... Something is going to happen soon and it's going to be bad.”

“As bad as Dunnan Hill?”

“Worse... no one knows just how exactly... it may not have anything to do with wizards at all.”

Harry was close to laughing at his vagueness, but this was as serious as he'd ever seen Bobby and he didn't want insult the only connection he had to the world at large.

"If we don't know what will happen, we can't stop it," Harry said, "We can only deal with it when it comes."

Bobby tilted his head, and nodded. He didn't look any happier, but he did seem less anxious.

"I didn't come here to frighten you, but to warn you about the Seelie. They'll bother you through Samhain most likely, but rest during the winter, so just keep your head about you until then. Don't go following strangers or accepting gifts from people you don't know, and you'll probably be fine. Probably."

His last words held a touch of his old humor. The raven made a little hop and glided away with a cheerful 'wwweee!!!' Harry shook his head and watched as his friend disappeared into the Forbidden Forest.

Yet another things to worry about on top of everything else.

He wasn't prepared to face the other students or Snape or his school work (he was WAY behind) or Slughorn's latest dinner party or Hermione's lecture or Natalie's irritated scorn or the press or his godfather's next letter or Voldemort's latest scheme or another attack or...

He squeezed his eyes shut and tried to block out the mountain of concerns and stresses that were starting to crowd into his brain, shoving and kicking for space until he couldn't think anymore. His arms began to shake, and he felt himself weaken and slide to the floor. His breathing became rapid and erratic.

Not again, he begged himself. He hadn't had a panic attack since last year, and only that once. He thought it had been a freak occurrence. After all, nothing else had triggered it, not even the abductions or the attacks, but it was back and just as debilitating as he remembered.

This time there was no one there to talk him down, and tried to remember what McGunny had said, but all he could remember was to cup his hands over his nose and mouth to keep from hyperventilating.

When Harry came back to his senses, it was dark and cold. He was shivering, his damp skin having soaked through the protection of his school robes. It was not the cold, however, that woke him, but the familiar burn of his watch in his pocket. Quickly, he pulled it out with trembling hands to check the time.

Dinner had already started, and though the idea of food made his stomach roll, he knew his friends were likely worried about him by now. At the same time, he couldn't see them like this. He was a mess, and freaking out on them in the middle of the Great Hall wasn't going help his current situation. Moving slowly and secretively, he left the astronomy tower and headed for the infirmary. If he were lucky, he could filch some calming draught from Madam Pomfrey's cabinet (the Weasley twins had told him the technique for unlocking it without the medi-witch knowing) with her none the wiser, and if that weren't possible then complaining of sleeplessness wasn't going to get him locked in the infirmary. He might have to brew some of his own eventually, if he couldn't get his emotions under control. If he kept going back to her with the same request, she was going to figure out what was going on and probably tell McGonagall or Snape. The one thing he didn't need was people thinking he was going crazy.

Even if he might be.

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"For a historian, he didn't seem to know much before the Romans arrived," Snape said, letting his irritation show through. "I could have just as easily looked up the information he offered. I was hoping for something a little more austere."

"I don't know," Ira said, walking close beside him to avoid bumping into the small herds of university students milling about the campus after sunset. Bars and cafes, clubs and boutiques, lined either side

the street and the air was filled with the dull roar of a conversing crowd and the festive tune of a street band. The evening was cold, perhaps cold enough to snow even, but the people and the warm glow of the street lights made the atmosphere warm and intimate. Snape was glad he had thought to take her out to eat instead of taking her directly home. The lecture on Defensive Magic Through the Centuries had been interesting, but not particularly romantic and it was the walk and the dinner afterwards that he was counting on to make the evening worth while.

“In terms of practicality, I thought Professor Haubert’s lecture was very insightful. Pre-Roman materials are hard to study anyway. The Druids and Celts who practiced magic handed it down orally, and modern Druids are notoriously secretive to outsiders. Anyone wanting to practice their particular type of magic would probably have to be Druids themselves.”

“True enough. I have seen the textbooks for Celtic Studies at Hogwarts, and they are supremely vague in regards to magic, but highly explicit in regards to their culture and religious deities. I suspect much of the magic is taught informally. Potter seemed to have a strong grasp of it despite having only formally studied it for half a year. Perhaps that is Lord Voldemort’s influence though.”

Ira looked at him curiously. “Harry practices Druidism?”

The potions master made an odd expression, and she had to cover her mouth to keep from laughing. “I honestly don’t know. I don’t think he follows custom close enough to be called a Druid, but... I don’t know. It’s too bad though. If Professor Haubert had any ideas about ancient defense techniques I was hoping Potter might learn some that no one else would be able to counteract. He never seems to run out of trouble to find.”

Ira smiled. She had heard about the rescue of the little girl in Dunnan Hill in the paper. It was a fluff story, through and through, but the press was eating it up. With all the suppressed hysteria about the collapsed wards, a little fluff made a good counter point to the doom and gloom hanging over them.

And as if circumstance were reading her thoughts, a loud trumpet call cut through the air, drowning out the musicians and conversationalists and revelers. Snape's wand jumped into his hand, giving Ira a start. She quickly touched his hand and shook her head.

"It's just a campus announcement," she explained. "They do this every evening once an hour from sunset to midnight."

Sure enough, once the trumpet call had died a voice came over the speaker.

"Attention students and faculty. As announced earlier this week, all campus businesses, offices, and libraries will be closed at ten and all persons shall return to their domiciles by eleven. Anyone caught outside after curfew will be escorted off campus to the closest Sentinel Station. Thank you, and have a safe and pleasant evening."

After a second or two the conversation began to pick up and then the musicians started to play again, until it seemed as if the announcement had not occurred at all. Snape, however, was left feeling a bit disoriented. He could remember his own college years, and outside of classes, his most memorable experienced occurred well after midnight on and off the campus. Even back in the seventies he could recall the area being active till at least three in the morning.

"It really is a shame," Ira lamented beside him, releasing his hand and continuing to walk towards their intended restaurant. "The libraries all used to be open until one and you could work in a laboratory for as long as you liked if you had permission. The astronomy lab has been shut down completely for the semester and there's no telling when it will be allowed to open again. This curfew is messing with a lot of people's research, student and faculty alike, and we can't really do anything about it. It's for everyone's safety after all. The dormitories are the only buildings with any real protection spells on them."

"What? Are you telling me the campus has no protections on it?" he said, disbelieving. Yet the more he thought about it the more obvious

it was. The University of Magic in London was not Hogwarts, not a single building designed to hold out against Roman magicians and Vikings and the fae. The university had sprung up during the renaissance, long after the threat of Romans and Vikings had passed and the fairies had all been driven back into the countryside, as a series of buildings built to blend into Muggle London, and had not been fully separated until 1666, when the Great Fire of London made it necessary to cut off the campus from the rest of the city or let it burn to preserve its many secrets from muggles. There had been riots during the civil war, but aside from petty vandalism, there had been nothing to suggest the application of powerful protective wards was necessary. In fact, this was probably the case with most of the public places and non-ancestral homes in London.

“I wouldn’t say completely unprotected, but nothing like Hogwarts or even the Court Offices. Morgan proposed setting something up, but I doubt it will pass. Things will be expensive enough just maintaining current defenses and taking care of the army...”

He had to ask her something before she continued. “Ira.”

Her wide brown eyes turned to him, betraying more sadness than anxiety. She was naively unconcerned about her own vulnerability.

“How protected is your home?”

She smiled at him. “As sweet as your concern is, I assure you my home is very well protected. It does belong to Morgan after all.”

Snape didn’t look convinced. “And the rest of the neighborhood? Do you have many established families living there?”

Her smile slipped away. “I... no, not really. It’s relatively new housing district. Most of us work at the Court offices and moved there to be close by. I don’t really know about their defenses... why?”

“I’ve been by your house before,” Snape said. “Very lovely neighborhood, but there’s nothing more than anti-burglary charms anywhere. It’s as vulnerable as Dunnan Hill.”

She looked away, irritated. "Are you just saying this to frighten me?"

Before he could even think about it, he reached out and grabbed her, drawing her to a halt. She blinked down at his hands, thin hands stained from years of brewing and yet oddly elegant wrapped around her little wrist. Looking up at him, she could see his eyes, dark and fierce as ever but lacking that sardonic humor he always maintained.

"No, I don't want to frighten you. Not unless it makes you more cautious, more aware. I think you should leave London."

She blinked at him. "What? What are you talking about?"

"I want you to go to my house. It's completely undetectable except to those who have been invited, and is thick with protective spells. You would be quite safe there."

Judging from her baffled expression, she still didn't seem to understand what he was saying, so he simplified it yet again. "I want you to be safe."

She blushed. "I don't know what to say. I... I can't."

"Why not?" he asked. He was prepared for a refusal, at least initially, but was certain he could talk her into it. He knew she liked his house and the village nearby more than London, and her initial response would be out of surprise rather than true reluctance.

"I have a job for one," she reminded him. "And for another... I might not be very brave, but I'm not a coward. I'm not going to run away from shadows."

Well, those were good points, which was extremely annoying. Her expression softened as she read his disappointment.

"But," she conceded. "If something does happen, and I don't feel safe in London anymore, then I will consider going to your house... with my mother."

Snape winced at the mention of Mrs. Susan Morgan, a busy-body if ever he met one. Oh well, it wasn't as if they'd be in around her very often until the school year ended. If Ira even decided to go. He nodded. It was as good as he was going to get at the moment, and he didn't feel like ruining the mood over a fight. He could work on convincing her to leave later, spreading out his arguments so that he would come off as more concerned than pushy. He had a feeling she would run if he tried to be too forceful, but she was reasonable more often than not, and could eventually be swayed. The obnoxious security measures that were being implemented lately (and would likely get worse as other battles erupted within the UK's borders) might serve as a viable argument.

Suddenly, his thoughts drifted back to his lab, where the Body Tree was continuing to mature behind the secret door in his laboratory. He had not yet figured out a way to move it where it would be found, and its significance understood without betraying his own involvement and he was wondering if he would have to just destroy it and hope it didn't come back to bite him in the ass. An idea was starting to form, however. Little pieces of fact like McGunny's apartment being two blocks from the campus and the patrols by campus security after eleven and the abandoned astronomy laboratory were floating lucidly in his mind and waiting to be assembled into a coherent plan.

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Harry circled the astronomy tower; his fur cloak spread out around him, letting the icy cold air slip passed its defenses. His gaze never left the Southern window, which yielding no view but that of a starless sky, shrouded in clouds. He knew the Moon was there, full and powerful, but Her absence from his sight left him irritable and restless. The night was thick with anxiety, the usual reckless abandon the full moon brought stubbornly elusive.

How this night so resembled his days.

Halloween, a holiday he had always loved even before he had known about magic, was only a week away yet he felt none of the festive

merriment he remembered from years past. Instead, he was trying to make it day to day without anyone realizing he was starting to come apart at the seams, dosing himself daily with calming draughts and spending as much time alone as possible, focusing his mind on nothing more complicated than arithmancy homework.

He had hoped this night the moon would wrap him in her affections. Instead, he felt abandoned and rejected. Why had she forsaken him? Now of all times? Should he have made an offering to her?

From the center of the room, Seitler followed his movements around the room, so still and silent Harry could easily forget that he was there. Snape had wanted to sleep through the full moon for once, and had handed him off to the Sentinel for the night, giving him a rather flimsy explanation of what he should expect. Seitler wasn't a baby-sitter, but even he was intrigued by this peculiarity from Voldemort's golden boy. There had been rumors for a long time that Potter had lycanthrosis, but even Seitler, who was by no means a werewolf expert, could tell that wasn't the case with Potter. There was nothing animalistic about his behavior, but something was definitely happening.

Harry suddenly paused, squinting into the darkness beyond the tower that his lone flickering candle couldn't touch. He moved out onto the mezzanine, and held out his hand. There was a touch of cold against his skin.

"It's snowing," Harry observed, frowning. It was too early for snow. It shouldn't have started until late November, but perhaps it was to be expected. Voldemort's dementors were still patrolling the Northeastern coast of Britain, drawing in storms and throwing off the local weather patterns. There had been talk in the Great Hall just that morning about the likelihood of having a truly abysmal winter this year.

Maybe that was why he was feeling so out of sorts. If this snow had been brought in by the influence of dementors, he would be more sensitive to the corruption than most. He wiped the wetness from his hand quickly at the thought.

“I’m going back to the Common Room,” he said, drawing away from the window.

“Do you think you can sleep now?” The Sentinel’s voice was even, but Harry could hear the skepticism anyway. He didn’t blame the man. He had been pacing for nearly three hours and hadn’t shown any sign of winding down.

“Maybe not, but the Moon will not show tonight. I may as well attempt to get some homework done.”

Seitler didn’t argue the point, but he did follow Harry all the way to his Common Room, then perched himself outside the portrait in a very obvious fashion. Harry ignored the expression of distrust, and went inside. It was just after midnight, and being Tuesday, everyone else was asleep. The lone Gryffindor entertained himself with building a fire for a few minutes, but once that was done he found himself pacing again.

What was wrong with him? Why could he settle or find some suitable distraction?

He wanted his godfathers. He wasn’t sure where the thought came from, but now that it had sprung up it didn’t want to dissipate. He wanted to see them, in their wolf forms, run his hands through their thick wiry fur and feel their hearts pounding beneath his hand. He wanted to hear their songs, howled to their goddess in a single mournful note, and smell their earthy scent mixed with the cold air.

He wanted his pack.

On the far end of the room, the grandfather clock struck one and chimed softly, startling Harry from his thoughts. Only five or so more hours to go, he tried to assure himself.

The sound of shattering glass, startled him, as well as the rest of tower most likely, but he didn’t have long to question it. From the staircase to the boy’s dormitory, Bobby came swooping down, darting around Harry’s head.

“Hurry,” the raven said, his voice high with a panic Harry had never seen in him before. With that, he flew straight for the portrait with such speed he would have surely broken his neck against it, if he hadn’t called out a spell causing it to fly open. Harry bolted after him, jumping through the open doorway and nearly tripping over Seitler, who had been thrown across the hall by the swinging portrait. The Fat Lady gave a terrible shriek at the abuse she was suffering, alerting half the castle that something was happening. Bobby was nearly out of sight, and he didn’t have time to wait around and explain anything. He ran as fast as he could, feeling at last the touch of his goddess and she poured her strength into his legs.

His feet barely touched the stairs as he leaped down them, taking them three or four steps at a time and jumping the banister more than once as he fought to keep sight of dark feathered guide and he thought he had lost him more than once when made a sudden turn, but already Harry knew about where he was going.

The main entrance to the castle was sealed shut, but it had been designed to keep people out not in, and Bobby managed to force this door open as easily as he had the Fat Lady’s portrait, shattering the locks in the process and raining down a shower of splinters. Harry didn’t even slow, and dashed forward until he reached the castle portcullis, and finally drew to a sudden stop.

In the light of the burning fires that lit the entry into Hogwarts through the night and through a heavy veil of snow, Harry could see a shape at the end of the castle drawbridge. It was about Harry’s size, but hunched over, supported on three legs, the fourth he assumed tucked into its body. It only took a moment to realize what he was looking at. Cautiously, remembering Snape’s warning about traps and fairy tricks, he stepped out onto the bridge. On either side of him, the massive stone gargoyles growled, their stone eyes bright as hell fire at the sight of the potential threat to the castle, but not yet attacking while the creature didn’t attempt to come any closer. Harry drew closer, details gradually beginning to form as the veil of snow grew thinner.

The first thing he noticed was that the werewolf was wounded, its left arm soaked in blood and dripping heavily onto the snow coated

ground. Yellow eyes regarded him tiredly, the faintest hint of recognition, and a lack of aggression. The coat was lighter than the typical werewolf, more light grey than black or brown, and it was too small to be fully grown. It didn't snap into place who exactly he was staring at until he realized the werewolf was female.

"Luna?"

A pitiful, heart wrenching whine escaped her and finally giving into her injuries, she collapsed in the snow. He rushed to her side, bending down next to her. His hands searched her for injuries in the semi-dark, and it didn't take him long to find what he was looking for. Her left arm was badly torn as he had already seen, but further investigation revealed that almost all of her left side was shredded as well, and snatched his hand back when he felt his fingers brush the smooth hardness of bone.

"Oh, god, Luna!" His wand was still blessedly up his sleeve, and he spouted off the few healing spells he had gleaned from Dueling Club practices. They weren't enough, not nearly enough, but they helped to slow the blood loss at least. He draped his body lightly over hers, making sure his cloak covered her as much as possible, before turning back to entry way. "HELP! Someone help me! It's alright, Luna, I've got you now. I'll get you fixed up. Help! Someone get the nurse!"

Luna whined weakly beneath him, but didn't try move. She was so weak, and he was so warm and safe. Her eyes began to drift shut.

"NO! Stay awake, Luna! You can't fall asleep!" Harry shouted, drawing her back from the precipice of sleep. She tried to focus again, and soon realized they were no longer alone. Her vision was blurry, but her sense of smell hadn't yet failed her, bringing her the scent of human prey (predators?) by the dozens. They spoke, angry, frightened voices, but Harry's was the only one that made sense to her.

"No! She's been hurt and needs help! Just get me the right potions and I'll give them to her! She won't harm me."

“Good god, boy, that isn’t a bloody puppy!” Seitler was screaming, the closest he had ever been to a heart attack as stared down at a fifteen year old boy snuggling with a werewolf, and injured werewolf no less and refuse to let go until some sort of aid was provided. Seitler couldn’t even begin to guess where he would find help for a fully transformed werewolf. Did he get the school’s medi-witch or call the veterinarian? Did healing potions for humans work on werewolves? If Potter tried to force them down the beast’s throat would it bite him? Did it even matter?

“Great Scot!”

“What the devil?!”

Others were starting to arrive now, bringing with them new layers of tension. Teachers and students, still in their bedclothes where following the shouts to the castle entry way, and once there were no more prepared for what they saw than Seitler was. The image was so completely surreal. Boy and beast crouched in the deepening snow, neither moving but staring back at them with unnervingly bright eyes. McGonagal made a move to approach them, but Seitler fixed her with a sharp look.

“Don’t, Professor. It hasn’t shown any interest in attacking Potter, but there’s no telling what will happen if it feels threatened. Keep the rest of your students back until we can think up a decent plan.”

McGonagal frowned, but nodded, turning back to the students. Most of them were Gryffindors, their tower being the origins of the trouble, and amidst the crowd was Hermione, looking pale as death as she stared out at her best friend. Harry had told her once that the full moon affected his judgment, but this was pure insanity she was looking at. Even more insane was the fact that he had not yet been ripped to pieces. McGonagal quickly herded her and rest of the students away from the door, telling them to go back to the common room. No one wanted to leave, but her insistence that their combined presence might provoke the werewolf into attacking. By the time the

transfiguration teacher returned to the drawbridge, Snape had arrived and was arguing with his ward.

“Potter, don’t be daft. There’s no way you’re taking a fully transformed werewolf into the school,” the dark man hissed.

“But she needs help! She’s dying!”

“Which doesn’t justify risking the lives of the other students and staff. Think, Potter! How do you expect anyone to help it without risking themselves? Werewolves are notoriously resilient against spells. There’s no telling when a sleeping or restraining spell might fail.”

“Her name is Luna. She’s fourteen years old. She likes strawberry pancakes and dancing, and is going to be a medicine woman when she grows up. And I’m not going to let her die.”

“Er...” Lockhart, who regarding the entire situation with his usual befuddlement and pretending he wasn’t, interrupted. “Perhaps I might-”

“No!” Harry and Snape snapped in unison, then turned their stubborn wills on each other. They glared at each other for a long moment.

“Fine!” the young Gryffindor finally bit out, “We’ll wait until she turns back and then treat her!”

Snape seemed momentarily taken back, but quickly recovered. “Dawn is almost five hours away.”

“Then I’ll wait five hours!” he snarled, and the werewolf beneath him let out a snarl of her own at the perceived threat, but he quickly turned to her and crooned softly, burying his face into her furry neck. Snape glowered at the pair, but knew he had been bested for the time being and turned his attention to Seitler.

“That thing didn’t just wonder off the nearest colony. Something has happened. Get to the headmistress’ office and contact your people to

find out what's going on. The rest of the teachers and I will guard the castle and make sure Potter doesn't get his fool head bitten off in the mean time."

Seitler wasn't used to taking orders from civilians, but Snape had a reputation and in this case his reasoning was sound. He abandoned the current drama to search out the headmistress and gain access to her office, the only place in all of Hogwarts anyone could apparate out of (but not into). A werewolf at Hogwarts could mean any number of things, but none of them good.

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By dawn, Harry could no longer feel his fingers, his toes, or most of his face. The warming spells he cast were on Luna alone, along with the healing spells he didn't think were working any longer. The moon had been unable to fight through the clouds, and the absence of her light dampened the strength he would normally wean from her. He didn't dare waste magic on himself, fearing at any moment Luna's heart would suddenly stop and he would need all the magic inside him to revive her.

None of the teachers had dared try sending spells at them, as their first attempt had sent the injured werewolf into snarling fit. Only Harry clinging to her, and kept her from limping to her feet and rushing for them. When he had finally settled her again, she was exhausted, and blood was now visibly leaking through her nose and mouth. Harry was terrified that blood was starting to fill her lungs.

All through the night, he petted and soothed and encouraged her, sharing his heat and his strength. All through the night, she leaned against him and whined and licked his bare numb fingers, taking in his warmth and his love. She was so tired, and more than anything she wanted to sleep and forget what she had seen and experienced this night, but Diana had told her to live. She told her to live so that the truth would live, and those who had fallen would not be forgotten.

Dawn came in the dark, the sun as obscured as the moon, but both boy and she-wolf felt it in the very fiber of their being. Harry noticed it

first as the gradual weakening of his eyes sight and a bone-deep weariness that settled over him. Luna's experience was considerably more dramatic.

Beneath his hands, Harry felt Luna transform, muscle sliding fluidly over bone that bent and popped and shortened and extended. A strange, almost sickly sweet smell permeated around her as her light gray fur retracted to smooth, sweat dampened skin. Within half a minute, he was holding a very naked, very injured girl.

"Luna!"

Quickly, he pulled off his fur cloak and wrapped her in it, wishing for something that wasn't already soaked with her blood. Her skin, normally so pale, was purple and black from bruises and blood, and he wept at the sight of them. Pale grey eyes stared at him, barely open, barely even alive, with such haunted expression, he feared to know its source.

"Haaa....," she breath roughly what could have been his name, blood tricking out of her mouth and nose.

"Ssshhh... don't speak. I have you. I have you."

She continued to stare at him, and he held her gaze as long as he could, until the other came with their blankets and their spells and their good intentions, pulling them from each other's arms. With the last of her strength, he grabbed his wrist and held fast, forcing out what needed to be said.

"They're all dead..."

Then she let her eyes finally slide shut, her consciousness and her pain slide away until all there was a dark and painless void.

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This is an EXTREMELY sad and emotional chapter. If you've ever cried for one of my characters before, you'll probably cry again and should be prepared.

Book V:

Chapter 16: The Prince's Lament

The moment Luna was pulled from his arms, Harry was dragged away to the nearest available room by Snape and stripped of his bloody clothes as well as the blood itself with several very unpleasant cleaning charms. The blanket he was given was warm, but not enough for someone already nearing hypothermia and with no shoes to fight the icy chill of the floor, but the potions master refused to get him anything else until he checked underneath his fingernails and his hair and every possible place Luna's infected blood might be hiding.

"Nothing got in your eyes, nose, or mouth?"

Harry just stood there, shaking like a leaf, and unable to speak. Who all was dead? What had happened at the werewolf colony that sent Luna to his front door and in such a state? Could another werewolf have done this to Luna? Was it wizards? He had to know.

"T-t-too-too c-cold."

Snape glowered at him, but dragged him out of the room and towards the infirmary. Several teachers watched them as they passed, but they said nothing as Harry stumbled half blind down the halls and up the stairs. He nearly fell twice, his legs just collapsing beneath him, but Snape caught him both times and finally put his arm around him to support his weight.

In the infirmary, Pomfrey was busy treating Luna, hidden behind a privacy screen. The medi-witches normally immaculate white apron was splattered in blood and she was wearing surgeon's mask, gloves, and goggles for protection. The potions master didn't disturb her from her work, but set Harry on the farthest bed, handing him hospital

pajamas to change into and sorting through the potions cabinet himself for something to warm the boy up.

When he turned back around, Harry was gone.

“Typical,” he muttered.

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Tricking Snape into thinking he was too weak to move on his own had been simple enough, but escaping the hospital wing and reaching Gryffindor Tower and getting everything he needed was another matter altogether. He might not be about ready to collapse but he was tired and the halls were crowded with teachers who would question why he was running around in nothing but a blanket. Secret passage ways and short cuts only went so far, and then he had to rely on magic and his wits, neither of which was reliable with his abysmal eyesight, shaking hands, and sleep deprived brain.

He did make it though. He suspected Raecellos would be expecting an offering of thanks pretty soon.

Stumbling into the Common Room, it was the usual chaos that greeted him after a misadventure. Friends and gawkers alike, trying to crowd around him and demand answers.

“Harry, are you alright?!” Hermione said, throwing her arms around him, while the nearly forty or so other students hurled questions at him.

“How did you tame the werewolf?! That was a werewolf, wasn’t it?”

“How did you know it was out there?”

“Where are your clothes?”

“Why aren’t you in the infirmary? Weren’t you bitten?”

“SHUT UP!”

The crowd leaped back, including Hermione, and he pushed passed them and towards the stairs, running as fast as he could manage, his hold on his blanket and his wand tenuous at best. Once in his dorm room, he dropped the blanket altogether, and threw open his trunk, pulling on the first things his hand touched and then some warm outer wear after extra consideration. From a hidden compartment built into the side of his trunk, he pulled his invisibility cloak.

“Harry, what are you doing?!” Hermione cried in alarm, storming into the room, and followed shortly after by Clyde, the Weasley twins, and half a dozen others. He ignored her question, and reached under his pillow, pulling out his keystone. It did not have a lot of magic stored in it after the protection ritual, but it would have to be enough to get him where he needed to be.

“Mate, calm down! What’s this all about? Shouldn’t you be in the infirmary? You’re practically blue!” Fred said, grinning like usual, but it was strained, placating. Like he was talking to a crazy person. Harry ignored him, and slammed his trunk shut.

“POTTER!”

Everyone jumped and turned to the open door at the sound of Snape’s voice carrying through the tower. Not half a second later, the man himself stalked in, his face twisted in anger.

“Where is the little gnome?” he demanded.

They all turned to indicate Harry’s presence by his bed, but he had disappeared without a trace.

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That was too close, Harry thought as he slipped through the open portrait. Everyone was so busy staring up that stairs at the rampaging professor they didn’t even notice when it opened and shut on its own.

He ran down to the main floor of the castle. He tried the first window he could find, but a shock ran down his arm when he tried to force it open, so he continued for the main entrance.

It was too late.

The door had once again been sealed, and now McGonagal stood as a sentry before it, staring up and down the corridor with piercing eyes. Snape had worked fast. The castle was sealed. There was no way out.

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“Well?” Lestrangle hissed at her long time competitor, feeling a mixture of frustration and joy at Potter’s latest stunt. It would likely cost Snape his job, possibly his life, but it might end up having some unpleasant consequences for herself as well. The over grown bat looked far less concerned for himself than she would have liked. She wondered if he had found a way of blaming her.

Snape sneered, but his voice was as smooth and silky as ever. “If you have done your job and sealed all possible exits, then he will not have had time to slip out. It is only a matter of tracking him down. He may turn himself in when he realized he won’t be rushing to anyone else’s rescue today. The infirmary will be his first stop, most likely.”

She sneered herself, but it wasn’t at Snape. The idea of a werewolf in her castle set her nerves on end, but there was nothing she could at the moment. Voldemort would want to interrogate it. As soon as it was stable, she would have the Court take it off their hands.

“I’ve done my part. The doors, windows, and all the towers with open access are sealed. No one is getting in or out until he’s found, which I recommend you doing very quickly.”

Snape nodded, then stopped.

“Doors, windows, and towers...” he murmured, his frown slowly deepening. “Headmistress... did you remember to seal the dungeons as well?”

“Why would I seal the dungeons? There no way to get out...”

Her eyes widened. Snape let out a groan.

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Harry followed the basilisk through the dank, narrow tunnels, shivering in the chill and cringing every time a sopping wet root hanging from the ceiling brushed his forehead or neck. The newest basilisk was only a few years old, and just a little larger than Inana. It was considerably more talkative, however.

I’ve never had a visitor before. Except for the rats, which are very yummy, but aren’t very funny. Well, it’s knid of funny when they get frozen in weird positions, but that makes them hard to swallow which isn’t funny at all. I wish I had someone to talk to though. It got very boring down here after I got done exploring all the tunnels. Not that is isn’t nice, because it is. Lots of room and food and swimming pools, but awfully quiet.

Harry didn’t say anything, concentrating on not tripping over the debris in the tunnel which was nearly invisible. Thermal imaging glasses may have protected him from the young basilisk’s deadly gaze, but it did make spelunking a hazardous affair.

He really couldn’t afford to fall into a puddle of water, or he would loose whatever strength he had left. At least his boots were both warm and waterproof.

...and maybe you could awaken one of my sisters? I’d settle for a brother, but boys can be so...eh... well, not all boys. You seem nice enough, listening to me jabber on and on, but most boys just can’t do that, you know?

Harry let the basilisk's voice flow over him, distracting him from Luna's broken declaration repeating itself over and over again in his head. They're all dead. Who all was dead? Her family? The entire colony? All the werewolves in the country? Were his godfathers among them? Had they even been with Luna's colony or had they already left for France? Were they safe even there?

The tunnel came to an abrupt end, a large stone carved with thousands of intertwined snakes coiled around each other blocked the way.

This is where I stop, the basilisk hissed, and turned around. It's cold out there.

Thank you for your help.

You're welcome. And she disappeared back down the tunnel.

It took him nearly twenty minutes to figure out how to open the passage way. Sticking ones hand into a moving mass of coils to search for an equally mobile knob was not an easy task, and talking to statues had earned him nothing but being laughed at.

It was still snowing when he stepped out into the Forbidden Forest.

All around him the trees hung heavy with snow, those trees that had not lost their leaves soon enough were near bent in half and some had already snapped. The air was cold and quiet, but even in his exhaustion he knew better than to be complacent. He kept his wand in his hand.

Now what? How was he going to get there?

He had no broom or horse and couldn't apparate. He might be able to get to Hogmeade, but they would have been warned about him and even he didn't think he could sneak through a floo without people noticing. His options were in fact extremely limited.

But he did have one left...

The Knight Bus driver kept giving him odd looks, but didn't ask questions. He was too over worked and under paid to question why a fifteen year old needed to be picked up in the middle of the Forbidden Forest and taken to a werewolf colony, especially someone who looked extremely familiar for some reason.

At least, the shivering had finally stopped. The running and the warmth of the bus had finally restored his body temperature to normal, but now he was left with the reminder of how hungry he was, even as the thought of eating was nauseating.

Was she okay now? Pomfrey had taken her, but she had been so weak already. He could feel her strength just drain out of her when she let go of his arm, her eyes sliding shut. Had she been dead in that moment and he not even realizing it? No, he could remember the medi-witch was still working on her when Snape brought him to the infirmary. He had to believe she would recover.

“Shut up,” he whispered.

“You say something?” the bus driver asked, turning around. This seemed a very bad idea since they were still driving through a forest with no road.

“Er... nothing.”

“Well, we’re almost there. You sure you want out here? It’s a nearly twenty miles to the nearest town. Heh, unless you’re a werewolf,” he laughed, then sobered. “You aren’t a werewolf are you?”

Harry gave him one of his nastier smiles, and the man paled and stepped on the gas. At last the bus broke out of the trees and onto a wide dirt road, and stopped. Harry stepped off the bus. He didn’t pay the fare, and the bus driver didn’t ask for one, shutting the door on him and speeding away as fast as he could. This was all well and good because Harry hadn’t thought to grab any money when he fled the castle.

The ground was blanketed in nearly four inches of snow and a few light flakes continued to fall from the silvery-gray sky above. He tightened his robe around him and pulled up the hood to conserve heat. He kept his invisibility cloak off. He couldn’t see properly with it on, and in the tracks he left in the snow would make its power meaningless. He would just have to be cautious and hope the danger had already passed.

He spotted the first body just outside the borderline of the werewolf territory. It was a woman, naked, and completely unmarked. She was partially curled, her eyes half lidded and cloudy, and her black hair pillowing her head. He didn’t need to touch her to know her skin was icy cold. Shakily, Harry tried to closer her eyes, but they merely opened again.

He took a shaky breath and continued up the road. He was terrified of what he would find, but he had to know. He encountered three more bodies on the road. One of them Harry recognized as Jackal, and the other two were brothers, still at each other’s side even in death. The brothers were also completely unmarked, but Jackal appeared to have been gutted, his entrails blessedly obscured by the snowfall.

The colony itself was gone, nothing more than smoldering ashes and scattered cookery. He saw another woman, but didn't look too closely. He could smell her partially charred flesh and didn't think he could stand seeing it for himself. It wasn't until he reached the clearing just beyond the commune that the sheer horror of what happened became truly apparent.

There were bodies everywhere.

Dozens upon dozens of them. Some of them were completely untouched, while others were torn, burned, crushed, or killed in some other completely sadistic manner. Some of them were huddle together and other alone as they tried to flee. There had to have been at least forty in the clearing alone. He stared, completely frozen at them. Men and women he had known for years, so alive and powerful and filled with laughter and that brazen werewolf attitude, lying so still and quiet.

Trembling, he began searching for his godfathers, but in doing so found so many other familiar faces. Here the woman who had shown him how hides were cleaned and tanned. There the man who beat him in a game of cards once. Then he found Greyback and his family.

The Head Alpha hadn't fallen easily. Harry could follow the blood and visceral trail nearly twenty feet, and by then the man was only so much meaty pulp. Just beyond the alphas reach was one of his sons, curled tightly in a lifeless ball. He couldn't have been more than eight. Then another son, spread out on his back as if asleep, his eldest at fourteen. It was Athena that set it off though. She was nearly unmarked but for the deep diagonal slash across her back, but she must have been trying to protect her youngest boy, just barely two, and when she had fallen he was beneath her and...

The long keening wail that escaped him echoed through the forest, piercing the haunting silencing with an even more haunting noise.

He shouldn't have come! He didn't want to know this! HE DIDN'T WANT TO KNOW THIS!

He sobbed, loud and messy, like he hadn't since he was eight. Even more than when he was eight. This was too horrible. Why? Why? Why? He collapsed to knees and covered his eyes, trying to block it out, but it was already burned in to his mind into his very soul and he would never be rid of it again. This would never leave him. Rhiannon, why didn't you save them?

He wasn't certain how long he sat in the snow and wept, it could have been hours or minutes but the pain would not ease. It just went on and on until he felt a hand touch his hair. He pulled away his hands and looked up, expecting to see Snape but it was Voldemort who stood over him, his expression the closest to sympathetic Harry had ever seen.

"What are you doing here, Harry? You shouldn't be here."

"I-I had to know," he choked out, and still he couldn't stop. The Dark Lord helped him to his feet, and lead him away from the clearing, not to the commune but deeper into the woods.

"Your godfathers are safe," Voldemort said, "They left for France a week ago, and I have verification from the Queen herself that none of their own werewolves were attacked. Of course, they're still being secured inside their fortresses and under heavy guard. A much less convenient target than an isolated colony in the middle of nowhere."

The relief he felt at his godfather's survival warred with his grief over the death of the Goddess Clan, and ultimately the grief won out. When he finally saw Sirius and Remus again he might feel differently, but right now it was a mild balm against a gapping wound.

"What happened?" he asked. He knew too much already, what was this little bit more?

They stepped between two trees, and Harry jerked in surprise as nearly a hundred witches and wizards appeared before him, Brass Culties and Sentinels mixed together, appearing and disappearing into the half dozen black tents that had been erected. The overbearing silence of the forest was smashed by the dull roar of

activity. The roar dimmed a bit as curious faces turned in puzzlement and sympathy as Harry was escorted to one of the tents. The tent was black on the outside, but inside it was a near glaring white and uncomfortably warm. Six beds lined either side of the wall, and Harry's heart gave a little sigh at the handful of survivors he saw resting there, all of them unconscious and wrapped in blankets. One of them was Fenrir's sons, Fierro the second oldest, but the others Harry didn't immediately recognize.

"The boy escaped into a fox hole and waited out the fighting, nearly catatonic when we finally pulled him out. The others men were knocked unconscious and left for dead. They cannot remember a great deal of what happened, their human minds do not hold animal thoughts well, but what we managed to piece together is that maybe two dozen wizards on broomsticks came during their transformation, before they had scattered for the night and killed them. My men have investigated the wards. They were... inefficient at keeping out such a large group of attackers. Several ward posts are all but melted."

"Are there any other survivors?"

"No. None except Luna, and her condition is questionable."

Two Medi-Cults approached to check Harry for injuries, but the Dark Lord waved them off. He grabbed a bowl of water and a towel from a nearby table and set it beside Harry. "Wash your face. You look awful."

"Was it the Germans?" Harry guessed. He took off his gloves and his glasses, scooped up a handful of water and splashed his face, scrubbing with his hands. He was starting to feel calmer. Voldemort was here, the danger had passed, and now they would deal with what had happened in the cool collected manner he handled everything else. Now was a time for decisions and action. Grief could come later... hopefully much, much later.

"Yes. When Seitler came to Lucius with news of the werewolf's appearance at Hogwarts, he had squadrons sent out to investigate all the werewolf colonies. This colony was already abandoned, but we

managed to intercept their next attack point. Most got away, but a few were killed... one was captured alive.”

Harry stiffened, and pulled the towel away from his face.

“You caught one?”

“Yes. He’s in one of our tents now. Morgan is prepping him for interrogation.”

“... I would like to see him.”

Voldemort stared at him thoughtfully. “Why?”

Harry didn’t really know the answer to that himself, but he wanted to see for himself who was capable of what he had seen.

“Harry, what are you even doing here? How did you get here?”

“... I took the bus.”

Voldemort blinked. “The bus?”

“Well... that and... that place... in the dungeons,” he could not describe Slytherin’s chamber any more clearly while the medi-cults were in the room. “Snape locked down the rest of the castle. I’m surprised he missed that part actually.”

“You...escaped the castle? You escaped Snape?”

“...Sort of... yes... you could say that.”

The Dark Lord closed his eyes. “I don’t know whether I am extremely impressed with your resourcefulness or extremely angry with you for defying your guardian and forcing him to lock down the entire school.”

Before Harry could voice his preference for the first option, Chief Sentinel Morgan stepped into the tent. He gave a disapproving glare to Harry but spoke directly to Voldemort.

“The prisoner is ready for you.”

“Thank you, Morgan. Harry here will speak with him first, then one of your men will escort him back to Hogwarts.”

Morgan turned an assessing look towards the boy, clearly an emotional mess, but didn't question his ruler. If he wanted his protégé to go stark raving mad that was his prerogative. He escorted them to the farthest tent, and held it open for them.

Harry stepped inside first, a feeling of dread seeping into him as he surveyed the room. This tent was also white and sterile. Slick white tile that sloped down slightly into the center where a drain had been placed lined the floor. Harry tried not to think of the reason behind that practical feature, but the tray of strange instruments set off to the side made it easy enough to guess. Three men stood off to the side, dressed in the same sterile white of the room, discussing something. They stopped when he entered the tent.

The room was disturbing, but perhaps more so was the prisoner who was secured to a chair in the very center. He was younger than Harry would have imagine, mid-twenties, maybe younger, with curly blond hair, and wide, terrified blue eyes. Harry could only stare back at him, confused. Surely this wasn't a murderer? No hardened, apathetic mercenary or sadistic megalomaniac.

Then the young man seemed to recognize him and his wide blue eyes hardened into a hateful glare.

“Oh, der Verräter persönlich! Ich fühle mich geehrt!”

Harry just stared at him, sensing rather than seeing as Morgan and Voldemort moved around the room. The prisoner didn't even look away from him, and Harry wondered if he even realized he had the ruler of wizarding Britain standing there with him or if he thought it was just another anonymous soldier or military specialist.

“Was is los? Hast du nichts zu sagen, du Verräter? Bist du nicht wütend? Wir haben alle deine räudigen Schoßhunde umgebracht, und alles was du tust, ist rumzustehen und wie ein Idiot zu glotzen.”

That spurred Harry to speak.

“ Du bist sehr überheblich für einen schlappschwänzigen Kindermörder!”

The prisoner blinked, then hissed like an angry cat.

“ Don’t try your little sob story about them being human and deserving the same treatment and that crap. They weren’t human. They aren’t human. They’re just dumb mon-”

Harry’s fist smashing into the prisoner’s face knocked the chair over and sent him falling backwards. The young soldier choked on the blood pouring from his nose, and turned his head to spit it out into the pristine white tiles. It flowed obediently to the little drain at the center of the floor. Harry wasn’t done yet.

“Nihil valeo,” he said, casting a feather-light charm on man and chair, then grabbed him by the collar of his sturdy black Auror’s uniform and dragged him outside. Everyone froze when they saw him making off with the prisoner, Voldemort, Morgan, and three rather distraught interrogators following behind. Several people made a move to stop him, but the Dark Lord gestured for them to leave the boy alone.

He was curious about what his young friend was going to do, and a part of him wanted Harry to be the one who exacted vengeance on this no doubt worthy perpetrator. Greyback had been Voldemort’s friend, in so far as that goes, but Harry had loved the werewolves and had been an honorary member of their pack. With the four survivors too traumatized or injured to exact justice, it seemed appropriate that it should be Harry who acted in their stead.

Another part of him felt strangely drawn to what he was feeling radiating off of Harry, the pain and anger and horror permeating

outwards like an electric field, sizzling along his nerve-endings to his very core where he felt something stir. He had seen his fair share of suffering and inflicted a great deal of it himself, but what he felt now was not the familiar sadistic pleasure of dominance. This wasn't pleasant at all. It was... it was...

Inspiring?

Too feeble a description, but it was far too alien for him to call it anything else. He didn't try, merely let it wash over him as Harry continued to drag the prisoner into the clearing where the werewolves still remained scattered like so many broken dolls. The prisoner was starting to panic now, and that did bring about a bit of sadistic pleasure for him.

"What are you doing? Where are we going?"

Harry stopped exactly where Voldemort had first found him, and threw back to the ground. The prisoner grunted in pain, but it quickly turned to panicked screaming when he found himself inches from the glassy dead eyes of Athena. Harry jerked him back a little but the view couldn't have been any better because now he could see not only Athena but Fenrir and their children too. The prisoner tried to close his eyes, but Harry knelt down, forcing his head back and his eyes open.

"Look! Look at them! Look how he reaches for them. Look how she tried to cover her baby from harm and her children hung close even in their panic! Look! Look and see that these were NOT dumb monsters. You didn't kill terrorists or soldiers or beasts, and I will not let you go to your grave thinking you're some sort of hero. You're just a murderer! A women and child-killing murderer!"

"No, no, no! I didn't know! I didn't know! He said this was where the terrorists were! The ones who killed all those people in Berlin! I didn't know, I swear I didn't know!"

His words did nothing to placate Harry, and if anything they only enraged him further. Harry's hands which had been gripping the man's head slipped to his throat and tightened.

"Liar! How could you not have known? How could you not have seen the pups? You saw them well enough when you killed them! Did you not see them when they turned human? You knew all along what you were doing! You're the monster here!"

The prisoner was starting to turn purple, Harry's small hands an inescapable vice and Voldemort could feel his heart racing as he watched it all play out. He had never seen Harry like this before. It was breathtaking.

"My Lord," Morgan said softly, but urgently. "Perhaps we should stop him. The man's no good to us dead."

"Mmm... maybe in a minute..." he said offhandedly.

"Sir, I really don't think he has a minute."

"Then I'll revive him again. They're always much more cooperative as zombies.*"

Morgan said nothing more, merely stood there and watched with a deepening sense of horror as a child suffocated a man with his bare hands right before his very eyes. The prisoner was starting to turn blue now and his eyes were rolling back in their sockets and Potter's arms trembled with exhaustion and rage. Beside him, Voldemort watched it all, enraptured, and proud beyond measure.

"POTTER!"

Harry, lost in his anger and hatred, burning with such a destructive need it could have been the will of Rhiannon herself, he could hear and see nothing but the prisoner and his choking and the echoing screams of the dead lying around them. And then everything was black, and was being pulled away, his fingernails tearing away bits of flesh as he lost his grip. He screamed and kicked and thrashed,

clawing for his victim and at the interloper who had interrupted him, but the person didn't let go and the darkness over his eyes remained, blocking the source of his rage and his grief all at once. He struggled and strained, but without the prisoner directly before him the rage began to fade back into grief until sobbing once again replaced his screams, and his struggles weakened until he merely hung limply in his captor's arm.

"Ssshhhh... Harry, it's alright. Calm down. Breath deep. It's over now."

"Pro-professor? When d-did you get here?"

"Just now. I had to get Lestrage to unlock the entire castle again before I could come after you... and we're going to have a serious discussion about that later."

Harry said nothing, just hung there, too exhausted and too shocked by his own actions to move. The darkness over his eyes, which had to be Snape's hand, was a barrier he didn't want to cross. Not now. Maybe not ever.

"My Lord, I think it's best if I take Mr. Potter back to the castle," Snape said, turning to his master. There was an underlying edge to his voice, a tightly controlled anger that Voldemort might have found amusing if he weren't so angry himself. It had been very close. A half minute more and he would have seen for himself what happened when a pure soul murders. He could have made a horcux for Harry.

But Snape had to go and ruin it with his misguided concern for the boy's sanity. There was absolutely nothing wrong with his protégé's sanity as far as he was concerned. It was perfectly natural and probably therapeutic to destroy something that had caused you such great pain, and despite the social stigma at killing while still in adolescence it seemed a petty thing to stand in his way. He still remembered killing his father and grandparents with great fondness.

He very seriously considered killing Snape in that moment, and that's when he realized he was behaving irrationally himself. He had nearly

allowed the death of a prisoner before their interrogation had even started and allowing Harry to become a killer so young went against his original plans for him. He had been so caught up in an emotional maelstrom he had let it dictate his actions, and that was not acceptable.

He would forestall Snape's punishment until he could discern whether it was truly warranted or not.

"Go then. I suspect we will see each other soon enough."

The potions master bowed as much as his position would allow, and dragged Harry away, his hand remaining steadfastly over his eyes until they were far enough from the remains of the colony to apparate.

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Harry said nothing to Snape as they made their way back to the castle, nor when they were inside. He said nothing to McGonagall who looked ready to throttle him and then hug him at the same time. He said nothing to Hermione who cried at the sight of him, knowing somehow that he had been through something too horrible to say aloud. He said nothing to Lestrage who did yell at him in words he could hear but not understand. He said nothing to Pomfrey as she helped him change into a pair of hospital pajamas and slipped him a sleeping draught then tucked him in.

He said nothing, but the moment she turned her back he slipped out of the bed again and made his way over to Luna, pulling aside the privacy screen. She was pale, but no longer deathly so, and her breathing was slow and deep. Bandages peeked through the left side of her pajamas, meaning she was not completely healed even though she now stable.

He climbed onto the right side of her bed, and gently rested his chin atop her head and his arm over her stomach, then finally let the sleeping draught drag him under. A moment later, Luna stirred, not waking, but seeking out the familiar, comforting smell of a pack mate, and turning her nose into the crook of his neck.

Snape sat in the uncomfortable infirmary chair in the corner, watched it all, and said nothing.

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Prisoner: "Ah, the traitor in person. I feel so honored."

Prisoner: "What's the matter? Nothing to say, traitor? Aren't you angry? We killed all your mangy mutts, and all you can do is stand there like a bug-eyed idiot?"

Harry: "You're awfully proud for a limp-dicked child-killer."

2. Voldemort is a necromancer. This is stated in canon, but I just thought I'd remind everyone since I don't think I mention it in my own story.

Book V:

Chapter 17: Battle Fatigue

Harry woke twenty-six hours later, staring half blind up at Luna's blurred form hovering above him and the warmth of her arms on either side of him. For a surreal moment he felt as if he were dreaming, of what exactly he didn't know. Of the future? Of the past?

And then the present caught up with him, and the warmth of her arms and her presence could not fight off their cold, stark reality. Fenrir Greyback and the Goddess Clan were dead, murdered on their sacred night when they were at their strongest and most vulnerable, and they were two of a handful of survivors.

"Did you see?" she asked, her voice breathy as a whisper and clear as bell all at once.

"I did."

"I'm sorry." She touched his cheek and pushed back his hair. "I knew you would go if I said it, but... I..."

"You didn't want to be alone in this," he finished for her.

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be. I don't want you to be alone either."

He could feel her begin to tremble, and he reached up and gently guided her back down, curling her up underneath his chin just as they had been sleeping previously. Her weeping was silent, but he could feel her every sob and tremor against his chest and felt it echo in the emptiness he felt inside. He could so easily resent her now. She had sought him out, for safety, for comfort, for who knows what or why and in doing so drawn him into her pain. He could resent her, but then they would both not only be hurt but also alone in their suffering.

"I'm sorry... I'm sorry..."

“Ssshhh... I know. It’s okay. It’s done now.”

The soft tap of footsteps drew his attention, and he instinctively sought out his wand on the bedside table, moving in a defensive position over Luna, who stilled beneath him. He waited tensely, until the privacy screen around their bed was pulled back just enough to allow a woman to enter.

“Good Heavens, Mr. Potter, you’re lucky I’m not a reporter! You have no idea what an inappropriate picture you two are making right now!” Madam Pomfrey chided, and Harry jumped off the bed as soon as he realized what she was talking about. Redness bloomed across his face. He had been grief-stricken, exhausted, and too shocked to question his initial instinct to seek Luna out before falling asleep, but if anyone had actually seen him he would have a hard time offering explanations. The fact that Pomfrey wasn’t demanding any was vaguely disturbing.

“I’m glad you’re up,” the medi-witch continued. “I need to give your friend...?”

“Luna,” he clarified.

“...your friend Luna an examination. One I don’t think you should be present for if you catch my meaning?”

“Er...not really, but I’ll take your word for it.”

“I think she wants me to get naked,” Luna suggested. “Though why that matters I don’t know. It’s not like you haven’t seen me naked before.”

Harry couldn’t see it, but he could imagine several different expressions crossing Pomfrey’s face, ranging from indignation to embarrassment, and busied himself looking for his glasses to hide his disconcertion. He would have to talk to Luna about what she said, but later, when he could speak without stuttering like a fool.

“Uh..er... yes, well, that’s a bit different. Um.... Where can I...er...?”

“Your friends brought you a change of clothes. They’re on the chair by the medicine cabinet. Change and then go take a walk for an hour or so,” Pomfrey said pointedly.

Knowing he had been dismissed, at least for an hour, he just about turned to go but looked back to Luna first.

“Are you going to be alright for an hour?”

“You’ll be back,” she stated, as if it were a certainty, but she held her arms in self-comfort and he felt his heart break at the sight. He went to his clothes, and after ruffling through them, found his watch and brought it back to her.

“Here. It’s the second most valuable thing I own, after my wand, so be careful with it. I’ll be back in an hour. I’ll get you something nice from the kitchen.”

She clutched his watch in her hands, feeling and hearing it beat like a little heart in her palm. His smile was reassurance and heartbreak all rolled into one, and hers was its mirror image. He slipped passed the privacy curtain, the sound of him moving around and changing his clothes persisted for a few minutes more, and then he was gone. At least... she checked the watch... for another fifty-two minutes anyway.

She turned to the woman who had sent her pack away. She wasn’t sure what to make of her. She was a healer, and as a healer’s apprentice Luna felt a sort of respect and sisterhood towards her, but she was also bizarrely alien. The crispness of her clothes, her lack of scent, and the congenial demeanor were not something she associated with women of their craft. If she were in the proper frame of mind, she would be enjoying the experience, but right now she wanted the comfort of the familiar.

“No worries, dearie,” the elder woman said, “The worst of it is over now. It can only get better from here.”

Harry had no intention of returning to class that day if he didn't have to, but that didn't prevent class from coming to him. He had the bad luck to leave the hospital wing between classes and found himself wading through the usual mêlée with an unusual amount of attention being paid to him. He cut through crowd like skiff through calm waters, the students parting before him and only their wide-eyed stares dragged him down. He wondered what they knew, about Luna and that night, about his flight from Hogwarts, the massacre that he had found, the murder he had nearly...

He turned to see Natalie, her expression tight, pained. Guilt clawed at him. Once again he had rushed ahead without thinking about those he left behind, just like Snape said, and hurt those who cared about him. What had he put Natalie through? Hermione? All of his friends and teachers?

She opened her mouth to say something, but never got the chance as Snape stepped out of his classroom and entered the hallway, immediately spotting the wandering Gryffindor.

The inertia that followed in Harry' wake broke, and dozens of bodies hurried on their way. Natalie lingered, but a particularly sharp look from Snape sent her on her way with only a few backward glances. Snape turned his malevolence back to his original target.

“Well?”

“General nuisance, I suppose,” Harry said, looking pointedly at the floor. He wasn’t sure how he was supposed to act around the man who had prevented him killing another. Should he be grateful? Angry? Dismiss it altogether as a moment of temporary insanity? “Pomfrey kicked me out of the infirmary for an hour. I was going to the kitchen.”

“Yes, I suppose that is one of the few options left to you at the moment,” Snape said, almost off-handedly, and stepped back into his classroom. Harry made a move to follow, but before he could step through the door he felt himself repelled backwards. He stumbled and fell to his back. Snape was back at the door a moment later, glaring down at him.

“What part of your suspension don’t you understand, Potter? The ‘you shall not enter any classroom or library’ or the ‘compliance will be strictly enforced’?”

Harry glared up him. “How about the part where someone actually tells me I’ve been suspended?”

He climbed to his feet, angry and humiliated, and walked away. Suspension. On top of everything else he was bloody fucking suspended! Well, screw them! What did he care?

“Where are you going?”

He jumped, and turned around to see Snape had followed him.

“The kitchen, like I said.”

“You’re not going to ask about your suspension?”

You’d bloody well like that, wouldn’t you? Wait for me to come running to you for answers, and all I have to do is sit through your mockery to get them, he thought bitterly. Not this time.

“Ignorance is bliss. Behold my blissening state.”

He turned to leave. Snape touched his shoulder and he surprised even himself when he recoiled violently. They both stood there for a moment, staring at one another in shock. Awkwardness and uncertainty came over Harry, and he quickly moved to leave.

“Potter-“

“I don’t care!” he said, not looking back. “I don’t care one damn bit!”

By now most of the students had reached their next classes and the hallway was empty, making his escape route clear. It also meant he couldn’t hide from Snape’s eyes burning into the back of his head as he ran away.

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“There you are.”

Harry looked up from the pumpkin juice he had been brooding over to find Hermione and Draco standing in the doorway of the kitchen. The house elves were scurrying about making him something to eat, as well as ‘something nice’ for Luna, and aside from their usual wide-eyed adoration they were otherwise unobtrusive. He wasn’t sure if he was glad for his friends distracting presence or anxious about what they would ask him. So much had happened and he hadn’t had time to digest any of it.

“Hey... aren’t you supposed to be in class?”

Draco rolled his eyes. “Faked a migraine. My dear sister here was just escorting me to the infirmary, but wouldn’t you know it? She got us lost.”

Harry gave him a look. “McGonagall actually buy that?”

“Not a chance,” Hermione said, and drew close to him. He shied away when he felt her reach out to hug him, and immediately felt like a right bastard at the hurt expression that crossed her face. He looked away. “Harry...”

He desperately grabbed for the first distracting topic he could think of.

“Snape said I was suspended. I don’t suppose you know the details?”

Hermione wasn’t fooled, but Draco spoke before she could prod him further.

“‘Two week suspension for leaving the school without appropriate supervision or permission and reckless endangerment of students, staff, and self’. You got off light. Lestrage wanted to expel you for the rest of the semester, but Snape nearly bit her head off.”

“He wasn’t the only one! McGonagall and Flitwick argued for him too.”

And didn’t that just make Harry feel like an utter asshole after how he’d walked away from Snape? The guy goes around pulling him out of the fires he’s started, and all Harry can think about is how much the man makes him feel like an idiot sometimes.

“Anyway,” Draco continued, “Two weeks or really thirteen days since it started yesterday. Not that it makes much difference, since you’ve been subpoenaed to appear before the military tribunal and who knows what else and would have been gone anyway.”

Harry blinked at him. What? He was suspended and subpoenaed?

“It does too make a difference! This is going to go on his permanent record!” Hermione protested, but even she seemed to think that was a minor affair, especially given the circumstances.

“Military tribunal?”

Draco and Hermione both turned away, and she remained focused on the elves busying themselves around the oven. "They need your official statement before they can take action against the Germans for what happened. They've been collecting evidence since yesterday. The papers have been flooded with the story. They know about the werewolf coming to Hogwarts, and that you saved her and then went to the colony. They... the papers have these... pictures..."

Harry closed his eyes, trying not to imagine what those pictures had recorded and calculated the possibility of him being able to avoid them for the rest of this natural life. About as likely as he was to forget what had happened, he thought. He checked the time with a tempus spell.

"I have to go here soon. Luna's expecting me."

"Harry..." Hermione said.

"I said I'd only be gone an hour."

"Harry..."

"Filly, how's it coming?"

"We's is wrapping it up now, Master Harry Sir!"

"HARRY!"

"What?!" he snapped back, startling both Hermione and Draco. He quickly reeled back in his anger. It was getting the better of him too quickly today. "Sorry. I'm just... tired, and she really does need me. I'm the only one she has right now."

Hermione gave him a said look. "I know, but she's not the only one hurting. You have people you can turn to also. Remember?"

He nodded, but didn't meet her eyes. He knew she meant well, and he loved her for it, but this wasn't something he wanted to burden her

with. It wasn't something she could truly understand, and he didn't want her to. It was bad enough that he had to live with it.

"I know... but I've just been awake for an hour. I need some time to think... and I really do need to go. Filly?"

"Is ready sir!" She grinned up at him happily as she handed him a basket.

"Thank you," he said, and turned to his friends. "We'll talk again later." For the second time that day, he fled, feeling eyes burning into the back of his head. How much longer could he keep running? Where would he find himself when he stopped? The world had changed in just one night or was the world the same and only he that was different? Different how? Angrier if the last hour were any indication, but what else?

All he had were questions he didn't know if he wanted the answers to and decisions that needed to be made.

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She managed to get all the way to the dungeons before the tears came. She had felt the tell-tale signs of it while at dinner. Harry was not there, still hiding away in the infirmary, but his absence did nothing to hinder the talk about him. Much of it was idle speculation, curiosity, and the usual jealous malignment and if that had been all there was she was confident she could have lasted the entire dinner without the slightest reaction. It was concern for Harry that did it.

The Gryffidnor's appearance, however brief, had driven home the tragedy that had occurred to a people they had never met. His grief radiated out from him like a dementor's aura, sucking out the happiness of the air itself. He had smiled, or tried to, and his words had not been particular melancholic, but his eyes and his body language had betrayed him. He was suffering.

And it was so obvious that even the nimrods that inhabited Hogwarts had taken notice, and in their usual lack of propriety had gushed on and on about it to each other in hushed voices, awkward pauses, and trite expressions of sympathy. She had only made it a quarter way through her quiche, when a tightening around her sinuses warned her of impending embarrassment. She feigned lack of appetite and headed back to the Slytherin common room, hoping against hope she would be able to hide herself away before anyone noticed. She only just made it to the dungeons when suddenly her cheek was damp. Horrified, she ducked into an empty classroom before anyone could see her. She wiped away the first few tears, but the more she did it the more that came. Before she knew what happened she was sniffing and choking on sobs and nothing she did would make them stop.

“Natalie?”

She spun around, her eyes widening as she saw Draco standing in the doorway, looking as surprised as she was. It was too late already, but she turned away tried to wipe away the evidence of her crying.

“What do you want, Draco?” she said sharply.

“Are you crying?” he asked, stepping into the empty room and closing the door behind him.

“What do you think, stupid? I got hit with a Crying Hex. *sniff*.”

He didn’t say anything, and she was hoping against hope that he bought her ruse. If he had she had probably ruined it by looking when he moved to stand in front of her. He handed her his handkerchief.

“Here, use this. And don’t rub your eyes, it just makes them red and puffy.”

Reluctantly, she accepted it and patted her tear stained face and blew her nose.

“You can keep it,” he offered, smiling at her. She glowered back at him.

“This isn’t funny.”

“No, no, of course not. It must be deadly serious if you’re crying. Did something happen?”

She looked away. “No.”

“Does this have something to do with Harry?”

Her head snapped up. “No.”

He gave her a knowing look.

“Yes,” she admitted, and looked down. “Don’t laugh.”

“My self-preservation instinct is too well developed for that. What happened? Did he say something to you?”

She shook her head.

“No... he didn’t do anything wrong... *sniff* which I think is the problem.”

He gestured for her to elaborate, and she grit her teeth at his presumption.

“He looked so... frail this morning. I’ve never seen him look like that except when he’s sick or hurt. It wasn’t even this bad after Larousse died. He doesn’t deserve this. He doesn’t deserve to have these things happen to him... it just isn’t fair. It’s such a stupid thing to say, but it just isn’t fair.”

And the tears were back with a vengeance and the handkerchief was already soaked, and Draco was smiling in that annoyingly indulgent way. But instead of mocking her like she expected him to, like she would have in his position, he simply reached out and pulled her into

a hug. She immediately stiffened, although he his hold was easy and firm, as if he done this a thousand times with her before.

“This is the first time you’ve ever cried for someone other than yourself, isn’t it?” Draco asked softly. “It’s okay. I promise I won’t tell.”

And like that she felt herself melting into his hold. She believed him. Even knowing he was the chief manipulating in Slytherin and a selfish brat, she still believed him. In certain ways, Draco was like her. Neither of them formed attachments to people easily, but when they did they guarded them fiercely and treated them like something precious. Had she somehow fallen into his circle of precious people without her even knowing it? The warmth and strength she felt in his arms, certainly made her feel that way.

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Snape did not run but over the years he had perfected a sort of brisk walk that moved him at a speed most other people would have to jog to meet. This was particularly useful when leading miscreant students to their punishment, but today it served to maintain his dignity while still reaching his appointment on time. He had believed himself well prepared to complete his ‘chores’ in London before meeting Ira for dinner, but he hadn’t counted on the pedestrian traffic being quite so high or that he himself was quite so publically recognizable. He had been stopped more than once by complete strangers inquiring into Harry’s well-being, something he didn’t divulge because frankly it was none of their damn business.

Truthfully, he wasn’t sure he could have answered the questions even if he were so inclined. The boy had cloistered himself in the infirmary, spending most of his time with Luna. He didn’t fault Harry’s selection in companions, though their physical closeness left him uneasy. They were two orphans who had both been witness to something horrific that no one else around them could hope to understand. For the time being, they offered the comfort and companionship they both needed. It was when they parted ways, that Snape would really start to worry about Harry. Gryffindors where passionate to a fault, and Harry was no exception. His rage had been

so profound he had nearly killed a man with his bare hands, and Snape had a hard time trying to imagine Harry suppressing those feelings for long. Already he had seen glimpses of it directed at himself. Would the boy end up expressing his anger on others or direct them internally? What other feelings lingered? Sorrow, indignation, depression, guilt, fear? It was hard to tell with Harry. As emotional as a person he was, it was hard to tell what was going on with him until some over the top gesture revealed his feelings.

If he were lucky, Harry would have purged a majority of his feelings before he returned to the castle. He had left that day with Luna for Edinburgh and the military tribunal, and wouldn't return until his suspension was over. Snape hoped for the best, but as usual, mentally prepared himself for yet another disaster to descend on him.

At least he had finally gotten rid of the Body Tree, although its ultimate purpose still baffled him. He had kept it too long already, and with the war in full swing he couldn't afford to have that particular threat ignored just to sate his curiosity.

"Name, sir?" the maitre 'd asked as he stepped in the restaurant. Lorraine's was not the fanciest restaurant in London, but it did have a respectable serving staff and a cozy atmosphere. Lucius had liked coming here during his collegiate years, when he was still too much of a prig to eat at a pub and too prideful to ask for more money from his parents than the allowance they already allotted him. The booths were charmed so that unless you were sitting there or standing right next to it, the voices you heard would only sound like garbled nonsense, allowing for privacy without the awkward deafness of silencing charms.

"Snape."

"Right this way, please."

He was lead to a corner booth, where Ira was already waiting for him, skimming through an article, a set of glasses perched at the tip of her nose. She smiled as he sat down.

“I didn’t know you wore glasses.”

“What? Oh! These.” Embarrassed, she removed them and tucked them away in her purse. “Only for reading. Bookworm tendencies are hard on the eyes.”

“And what are you reading?”

“’ The Ethics of Creating Unnatural Life’ by Holt.”

Snape made a face. “I’ve read it.”

“You didn’t agree with him?” she asked, looking a bit disturbed. Holt’s work was canon in academic circle, particularly in classes on professional ethics. He was the scientific Jesus of his age.

“He made some very good points, but he also dealt in the realm of absolutes. Creating an animal only to serve oneself is absolutely wrong. Creating a human being at all for any reason is absolutely wrong. Creating life without a specific purpose is absolutely wrong. I can name several examples, particularly in medicine, where these principles are violated routinely and no one questions the moral reasoning behind it. A man with no flexibility in reasoning is a man without imagination or a zealot or both.”

“I see what you mean, but I think he saw the exploitations of those ‘flexibilities’ when he wrote his paper and believed that the atrocities one could cause made the benefits insufficient to justify such an undefinitive stance could create.”

They argued congenially for nearly an hour over Holt, which was a novel experience for Snape. Whenever he got into academic debates, in his youth and in adulthood, it typically was with men and usually resulted in a lot of shouting and insults. However, Ira was a generous debater, listening to his arguments without interrupting before presenting him with her own ideas, and though they didn’t agree by the end of the debate, he did respect her rhetoric ability.

“ You look tired, Professor,” Ira said, once their conversation switched gears from academic to personal.

“It’s been a very trying week.”

“How is Harry?”

It was a fair question and one he had hoped to avoid.

“I don’t know. He’s been avoiding me... and everyone else. The only company he seeks is the werewolf girl, Luna.”

Ira’s eyes softened in sympathy. “And how are you?”

Now that question caught him off guard. “Well enough. I can’t say I had any particular attachment to the werewolves.”

Wasn’t that an understatement? If it weren’t for the fact that Harry would have gone stark raving mad, Snape wouldn’t have been sorry to see Sirius Black listed among the dead. Logically, he knew what happened was a tragedy, but emotionally he felt it only by proxy.

“That’s not what I meant. It can’t be easy for you, being responsible for Harry and for the safety of all of your students with war knocking at your backdoor.”

“ Technically, the Headmistress is responsible for the students’ safety, but... I can’t say I trust her with the task. She’s been practical with the defense of the castle, but her spirit just isn’t in it,” Snape acknowledged. “I am less worried, however, about Hogwarts as I am about your own university. Has there been any added security procedures?”

She looked away, skillfully distracted.

“Oh, well...sort... kind... no, not really.”

He smirked. “So have you given thought to my offer?”

She stiffened, and he had a feeling he should have just stuck his foot in his mouth. Trouble came in threes. Harry had brought it twice already, first with the werewolf cuddlefest, then the romp through the site of a massacre. Ira finishing it off seemed strangely appropriate. She was awfully troublesome for such an unremarkable woman.

“You’re going to say something unpleasant, aren’t you?” he said, urging her to get it over with now. She bit her lip, and he was reminded that she had to be almost ten years younger than him, still in her twenties.

“I... You know when I tried to break it off the first time... I did it because I didn’t want to lead you on...”

“You’re married?” he surmised, feeling something icy settle around his heart.

She looked up at him, her eyes wide. “No! No, of course not! Well, not anymore. I’m divorced. Have been for four years now.”

The iciness thawed a bit, but he was still a little shocked to learn about the divorce. Divorce wasn’t a common practice in the wizarding world, even before Voldemort’s rule, and there were only a few instances in which it could be done. Endangerment of the spouse and or children of their union, murder of another family member, polygamy, violation of the marital contract, or transformatism of a partner (i.e. turned into a werewolf, vampire, fairy, etc) were about the only situations in which it might apply. He wondered which category her husband fell under.

“...But I can’t marry you.”

He was taken back by her forthrightness, and then a bit offended by her presumption. Yes, he was looking for a potential wife, but that didn’t necessarily mean he would choose her. A sarcastic remark was at the tip of his tongue, but she beat him to it.

“I can’t have children.”

And that sarcastic remark died.

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Harry and Luna stayed at one of Voldemort's estates somewhere between Edinburgh and Perth. It was large and roomy and surrounded on all sides by wilderness, and they liked it that way. They spent most of their days outside, walking the swampy meadow and exploring the pine forest surrounding their shelter. They took their meals outside when possible, and in the study by the fire when it wasn't. At night, after the staff had gone to sleep, he would get up and climb into Luna's bed. Victoria must have suspected something, but said nothing. In fact, no one said much of anything, including themselves.

The only times they spoke of what happened was when they were debriefed in Edinburgh, and that was a mind-numbing and painful experience, one that fueled Harry's own simmering anger and resentment. To General Malfoy and his minions it was all just another move on a chessboard, and perhaps Harry could have lived with that, but not with Voldemort's indifference. He knew Voldemort was an apathetic bastard, but he had expected something from the man who had lost an ally and perhaps even a friend only a few days ago.

Yet, there was no change of expression, no tension, no demands of respect as he oversaw Malfoy's ruthless questioning of Harry and Luna. The only time Voldemort had said anything through the entire proceeding was when his general had made the mistake of questioning Harry's sanity and then it had been directed at Harry.

"If my sanity is faulty it failed long before I met the werewolves," Harry sneered, "Voluntarily working so closely with our Lord does suggest some sort of neuroses."

It wasn't an original though. The wording was an adaptation of something Sirius had jokingly said to him once before. The absolutely stunned silence that followed his utterance made it well worth remembering. Even Lucius looked like he had been slapped with a fish. He glanced over at the Dark Lord, who looked less than amused.

“No offense.”

“None taken, but perhaps it would be best to save the witty remarks until later?”

Except there hadn't been a later. After his testimony, he's shied away from further contact with Voldemort and finally just left the court offices in a flurry of camera flashes and shouted questions. That was three days ago and he hadn't seen the man since.

“I wonder what they are now,” Luna pondered, staring out across the moor, her feet half sunken into mud and her eyes far away. Harry, who had been watching a flock of sparrow dancing in the distance, turned to her.

“Who?”

“Father and mother and Diana and Jackal and all the others. Did they find new bodies yet? Have they forgotten us and started their new lives? Or do still cling to their spirit forms and watch over us now? Father... I bet father is still around. I can't imagine father wanting to be anything other than a wolf.”

Oh. Harry had forgotten about that. Pagans like themselves went to neither heaven nor hell, merely reincarnated or transcended into godhood. He had simply thought of them as... gone. Now... now there were so many other possibilities, and if thinking about it didn't dredge up the awful memory of them lying dead in the snow he might have seriously pondered it.

“I don't know, I think he might have made a pretty good goat. A mean, angry goat.”

They turned to see Sirius and Remus coming towards them, dressed in their in their finest leathers and furs (which were still perfectly appropriate for wading through swamp muck) and silent as ghosts. They looked tired, but strong and serious at the same time, and Harry felt the first stirrings of relief and happiness since the full moon.

Sirius and Remus lived. The Goddess Clan still had a Head Alpha, and they would rebuild. It would never be the same, but it could still be good. When Sirius pulled him into his arms and held him tight, Harry relaxed, and when Luna and Remus joined their huddle he all but melted. They were together. They were pack, and they were strong. Everything would be okay.

He almost laughed at the ticklish sensation of Sirius and Remus sniffing at him, puffs of air brushing against his neck and ears. Luna was doing the same, even going so far as to touch her nose to the tip of Remus'. Finally, they pulled away from each other.

"You are hurt, Luna?" Sirius asked first, frowning at the heavy scent of potions that lingered on her breath.

"Not anymore," she said, wistfully, then added a bit more curiously. "You smell of men."

"Being cramped in a boat with wizards for two days will do that. The queen insisted I have an escort," he said, irritated at the memory. He turned to Harry.

"And how are you, pup? I heard you got yourself mixed up in this mess."

Harry smiled ruefully and shrugged.

"I got suspended for two weeks."

"I'll make sure you can't sit for two weeks if you ever run after trouble like that again." His threat might have carried a bit more weight if Harry couldn't have read the pride and affection in his eyes. Remus on the other hand looked more than ready to carry out the threat if it came to that. He accepted both their reactions as signs of their concern and let them warm him.

"How long are you staying?"

Sirius' expression fell somewhat, and Remus spoke for him. "We only came to check on you both. We have to meet with Voldemort in Edinburgh and return to the Goddess colony. We will be performing the ascension rites for Fenrir and funeral rites for the others tomorrow."

A tense silence passed between them for a moment, before Luna spoke.

"I'll bring a ptarmigan. He liked ptarmigan. You'll help me?" she asked, turning to Harry.

"Er... yeah, of course."

She smiled and moved away, deeper into the moor to hunt her decided pray. Harry looked to them both questioningly.

"Why is she bringing a bird?"

Remus and Sirius shared an amused look, before answering.

"Fenrir was Head Alpha, and perhaps the most important werewolves in centuries. The chances of him ascending into godhood are high. He'll be buried with all the respect and offerings we can afford him, so he will be comfortable in his realm. Food, clothing, weapons, all of it. Without it, he'll end up like the demi-goddess, forced to anchor himself to one of the living or dissolve into nothingness."

Harry had not known any of this, and felt a flush of guilt over his own ignorance. He had been seriously remiss in his studies since Brennan's death, and had been relying far too heavily on improvisation and guesswork. Tomorrow would be a rather painful tutorial, he suspected.

"Oh... is there anything you want me to do?"

Sirius shook his head. Remus said, “Just what you’ve been doing. Watch after Luna. She is strong, but doesn’t connect with others easily. Right now, you’re her only friend.”

He nodded, and let them ruffle his hair and say their goodbyes, before he turned back to the moor and followed after Luna.

[illegible]

Whatever gentility and patience Sirius had, he left with his godson and Luna, and by the time he reached the meeting hall he had kicked down two doors and thrown a Sentinel out the window (they were only the second floor so he would probably live). Remus might have been able to reel in his temper, but the security had refused to let the beta entry, which only served to irritate him further. At some point, Chief Sentinel Morgan has planted himself just behind him, his presence assuring his own people that they had intentionally let an irate werewolf storm through the building. Voldemort's expression when he burst into the meeting hall was decidedly unimpressed.

“Welcome, Lord Blackbone,” he greeted blandly. “As rambunctious as ever, I see.”

Sirius's growl rumbled through the room like encroaching thunder. The dozen men and women in the room reached for their wands instinctively, but only Voldemort had been allowed to keep one in the room.

“I’m bored of your nonsense already. What do you want?”

“A cure for stupidity would be delightful, but I’ll settle for a modicum of civility. Come now, there’s no reason to be irate. Your former Head Alpha and I had a mutually productive relationship, there’s no reason we can’t have the same.”

Sirius' eyes narrowed.

“I can think of a few,” he said, but settled himself into a chair (after emptying it of its former occupant with a glare). “What do you want?”

Voldemort smiled, and with a gesture everyone in the room left, leaving only the Dark Lord and the alpha. Once privacy was assured, the Dark Lord spoke.

“I want us to help each other, Blackbone. Help each other fulfill our obligations to our people. The murder of your Head Alpha, his family, and his clan is an insult that can not be allowed to go unanswered, anymore than I can ignore the destruction of the wards and the attack on the villages. The weaknesses that they have exposed cannot be allowed to remain unprotected. You need my help, and I want yours.”

Sirius barked out a laugh, sharp and ugly.

“I don’t need your help, and you don’t want mine. You need me to cooperate with you. The Snake and Wolf Treaty and my own blood-bound oath to you means I can never act as your enemy, but the same treaty and all your werewolf sympathy campaigns means you’re in the same position. I may not have free movement outside my territory in Britain, but I have more than enough in France to execute my vengeance. I’ve got a bloody legion of angry men and women dying to fight back.”

Voldemort’s amusement vanished. He should have realized that Blackbone would make things difficult. Fenrir had never been a savvy politician, and never really had a need to be, but he did appreciate the power that being Voldemort’s ally brought to the table. His successor wasn’t so open-minded.

“Don’t over simplify the matter,” he warned. “Your territories and the packs exist only because I let them exist, just as the French werewolf territories exist only because Queen Ophelia is letting them exist. If you make a nuisance of yourself, I won’t hesitate to make your packs suffer for it.”

The depth of hatred in Sirius eyes burns like dragonfire, and Voldemort takes a moment to appreciate the shiver that runs up his

spine at the sight of it. It is beautiful and enigmatic, and he wonders if Fenrir, in his ephemeral godhood, has already lain his blessing down on his successor. As magnificent as it was, however, it was also counterproductive. He needed to calm the man down again. He lets out a sigh.

“I am not asking for much, and I am paying for what I ask. Fifty men and women with good health and a bad disposition. In return, I’ll make sure your territories have proper protection during the full moon. I’ll even throw in military pay for the troops. I get the extra man-power and you get the support you need. It’s a win-win situation.”

The burning hate radiating from Sirius cooled to an icy regard, and for a moment Voldemort thought he had won and was somewhat disappointed.

“I want final approval on any mission involving my people.”

Oh goody, round two.

“Absolutely not.”

“Then you don’t get your troops. Did you really think I’d let you use my people as expendable pawns? I won’t be sending them on any suicide missions, dying for your cause of the week or setting them to do your dirty assassin work. If I’m going to give you any of my warriors I want to be damn certain I get at least most of them back and with their sanity intact. We’ve lost enough to your games as it is.”

Touché.

“Fine,” he concedes, because all things considered it’s a cheap price to pay. Blackbone wasn’t the gabby sort, and even if he was he had no one to tell plans to. No one who could use the information against him anyway. “I’ll have a treaty written up. You can review it after your coronation.”

“Fine. Are we done?”

“Yes. Always a pleasure, Blackbone.”

The alpha stalked out without a word, and Voldemort starts to gather up his papers. It had been a long week, but he felt energized, pulled along the momentum of history unfolding. There was waiting and planning and positioning to be done (when wasn't there?), but now there was also action and reaction. Life and death were on the line now, not just for individuals, but for entire populations and every choice he made may well determine his country's future. Or lack there of.

He felt like a god.

“My Lord.”

Morgan came into the room, his usual non-expression tight. Something had happened. Voldemort wondered how many casualties were involved.

“What is it?”

The Chief Sentinel closed the doors, raising his suspicions of some sort of disaster. “I have just received word of some sort of plot being uncovered in London. I believe it worth bringing to your attention.”

Mentally, the Dark Lord sighed. Conspiracies and murder plots directed at his person were weekly occurrences, and he had long been bored of hearing about them. There were very few original ideas nowadays, and most were dealt with before they ever came to his attention. The only interesting parts were when he got to interrogate the perpetrators and frankly, he didn't have time for that particular hobby. Morgan, however, wasn't the sort to waste his time with trivial matters, so when the man handed him a report Voldemort actually skimmed through it.

Then went back and read it again, his brow furrowing. He stared at the picture paper clipped to the document.

He stood up and turned to Morgan. “Take me there immediately.”

He looked ready to protest, but then thought better of it. Half an hour later, they both stepped through the University of London's floo in the campus student center, stalking passed several dozen occupants before they even realized who he was. Dressed in his usual robes and without the conspicuous flock of Sentinels (Morgan had dressed in his civilian clothes for this particular outing) and reporters following after him, he could easily be mistaken for a professor or even a graduate student and no one gave him or his servant a second glance as they walked towards the astronomy building.

The investigating Sentinels had done well in keeping a low profile. Only one woman guarded the front, disguised as a student simply reading on the steps, and once he slipped inside the building Voldemort he located half a dozen more.

"Where is it?" he asked the closest investigator. The man swallowed thickly and led him down some stairs and into a boiler room. A group of half a dozen Sentinels lingered here, gathering boxfuls of evidence and photographic documentation. As the Dark Lord approached, they moved out of his way, revealing one last door. The door itself was unmarked and unremarkable, easily overlooked. He turned the knob and stepped inside.

A child was hanging in the middle of the room, hanging from a tree no less, his pale naked limbs dangling limply at his sides. He moved closer to examine him, prodding the little arms (they were oddly warm) and checking the noose, which he quickly discovered wasn't a noose at all but a vine growing out the child's neck. Lastly, he checked the face, and confirmed what precisely he was looking at.

Tom.

At least, a seven year old facsimile of him. Of himself. But why would anyone want to..?

"Collect a sample of its tissue for testing and then destroy it," he said, not tearing his eyes away.

“Yes, my Lord,” Morgan acknowledged.

“Do you have those responsible for this travesty in custody?”

From the boiler room, an investigator stepped in, her insignia designating her the head of the team. “Not yet, my Lord, but we do have a suspect. A student here at the university. He’s been missing for over a month now. Judging by the recent care that’s been given this...thing... he never left the campus.”

“His name?”

“Horace McGunny.”

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Book V

Chapter 18: Heaven and Earth

The days returned to their usual autumnal chill, leaving only a bright, silver sky to remind them of the storm that had come and gone. The werewolves, from every colony in Britain down to the last man, woman, and child, had gathered in the remains of the old colony the day after Voldemort's men had finished their investigation, and in those five days leading to the Goddess Clan's funeral rites, tore down the burnt timbers and cleared the scattered debris, until it was as if no one had ever lived there at all. Then they dug out the graves, thirty in total, one large grave at the center and the rest laid in a ring, like the minute markers of giant clock. Then three more holes were dug, larger than the others, equally spaced around the ring, and there they built altars and made their offering to the dead.

Luna brought a ptarmigan. Harry brought a hare. They laid them with the other pack's animal offerings, piled atop the still warm bodies; furred, feathered, and scaled, and wiped the blood from each other's hands. In the second altar, others placed offering of clothing, weapons, tools, furniture, books, flowers, cookery, and crockery filled with foodstuff. There was a third pit, but only one was permitted to place offerings there.

Harry watched Jane Canis as she appeared and disappeared with mysterious bundles in and out of the third altar pit, her once curious brown eyes now distant under the weight of the goddess' possession*. A short distance away, her father, Stephen, watched on with all the grief and frustration of a man who has lost his child to death, and for now that might as well be the case. He could no longer touch his own daughter, not laugh with her, or reprimand her, or comfort her. It would be two three years until Jane became an unsuitable host and the possession ended, and by then she wouldn't be the same. The man had lost something irretrievable.

Luna tightened her hand in Harry's.

"It's not your fault," she said.

“I brought them here,” he countered softly.

“They belong here.”

“He lost his daughter.”

“You couldn’t have known.”

“I brought this down on them, Luna. I brought this down on your family. If I hadn’t pushed Proposal 4-66-“

“And if father hadn’t accepted it, and if those werewolves in Berlin hadn’t killed those people, and if Stephen hadn’t rescued you... A whole lot of ‘if’s, Harry. All the joys and sorrows of the world do not revolve around your decisions alone.”

Harry closed his eyes. He knew that. He did, but it was so hard. In his naïveté, he hadn’t considered the retribution the Germans might exact. It had just seemed like the right thing to do at the time. More frustrating was the fact that a part of him knew he hadn’t been wrong.

A horn sounded, low and mournful, drawing him from his thoughts. The others had finished making their offerings, and were now forming a semi-circle around the ring of graves or carrying wooden pallets up the path towards the clearing. He turned to Luna, who was looking towards the line of men and women heading away from them.

“I have to go. I should help carry some of my brothers.”

“Do you want me to..?”

She shook her head. “You’re not ready yet.”

Slowly, she pulled her hand from his and made her way towards the clearing, where the bodies of the slain had been prepared for burial. He didn’t understand how she could face them so soon, when he himself shied away from the mere memory of what he had seen. She was so much stronger than she looked.

And then he was alone for the first time since it had happened. He felt the autumn chill starting to seep into his awareness, and began to search for familiar faces. Sirius and Remus were not there, performing ritual cleansing for their part in the funeral rites somewhere else, and he doubted Stephen wanted his company at the moment and his wife and children were nowhere in sight. Everyone else he knew happened to be dead. The cold was starting to seep in deeper now, and he tightened his cloak around him. His hands were shaking. His thoughts were becoming disjointed

“Not now,” he muttered, “You can’t do this now.”

A strange, familiar magic brushed against him, and he spun around to find Jane staring up at him. He stiffened, and looked around for her father. Stephen was watching them alright, and judging by his expression he wasn’t as nonchalant about Harry’s role in recent affairs as Luna was. Harry swallowed thickly and turned back to Jane who seemed to want his attention.

“We have a little time,” she said. “Follow me.”

She led him a ways from the others, within sight but out of hearing, and then turned back to him. She stared at him for a long time, before pulling some herbal leaves from a pouch in her pocket and handed them to him.

“Chew these, but don’t swallow. They will help calm you.”

Hesitantly, he did as she instructed and grimaced at the bitter flavor that coated his tongue. They left his mouth feeling dry, but after a minute his hands stopped shaking and his thoughts cleared.

“Thank you,” he said softly.

“You’re still sad,” she said. “Why?”

His expression darkened, feelings of bitterness rising up to swamp his guilt. “I know you’re not really human, but I thought even you would realize people dying makes us sad.”

She tilted her head curiously.

“But they are not dying. They died days ago. Today, they are reborn. Are you not happy for them?”

His fists clenched and he glared at her. “Is that how you see it? That just because they go on as something else, that everything’s fine? That what is lost is completely irrelevant? Is that why the Moon did nothing that night? It’s just like putting on a new pair of clothes, isn’t it? That’s why you let them kill Fenrir and Athena and Diana, because what’s another-“

Being slapped is never a pleasant experience, but being slapped by a demi-goddess is nothing short of brutal. Even in an eight-year-old’s body, the blow was enough to knock Harry to the ground and wash the bitter flavor of potions away with the coppery taste of his own blood. Stunned, he rolled weakly to his hands and knees, and stared wide-eyed at the pint-sized deity.

“Do not presume to know our thoughts or feelings. They are beyond your realm of understanding, mortal,” she state coolly, her expression completely unchanged.

He spat out a mouthful of blood, and idly noted that he’d accidentally swallowed the leaves she’d given him.

“Why did you let it happen?”

She looked at him blankly, and for a moment he was afraid she was going to hit him again, but she did eventually speak.

“My mother and I are forces of nature and spirit, but we are not the only ones. Even we can be overcome.” She moved towards him, and he flinched away but she continued passed him towards the funeral grounds. He watched her go and grit his teeth. There was no way that he could accept that there was nothing they could have done to prevent this. The Moon had the power to move oceans and induce insanity. What was a couple of bullies on broomsticks in comparison

to that? If nothing else, they could have at least warned Fenrir. Now was not the time to call her on her feeble excuses, though.

Especially not when his head was still spinning from the smack.

So he climbed to his feet, spat out another mouthful of blood, and returned to the others.

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The cottage was just how he left it and so was Pettigrew, when Voldemort stormed through the front door. The ratty little man scurried into the foyer with his wand out as the wards shrieked at the unexpected visitor, but froze and paled at the sight of the Dark Lord glaring at him. Instantly, he was reminded why he despised Pettigrew so much, and how happy he would have been to let him die out here in exile. If it weren't for the discovery of the body with his own youthful countenance at the University of London's, and the abundance of evidence surrounding it, he might have succeeded but he suspected Tom was once again trying to make his life difficult.

"Ah..ah..m-my lord, w-what an unexpected p-pleasure. Er..ah.. w-what c-can I do for-"

"Silence the wards," he snapped, and headed towards the stairs. By the time the blaring sirens fell quiet, he had already entered his private collection. The familiar display cases, filled with a variety of dark artifacts he had collected throughout his travels, were coated with dust and he could already sense the protective wards on several of them were starting to degrade.

Pettigrew had been neglectful of his responsibilities and he would make sure the rat suffered for it, but first he needed to check the item he necessary to verify his suspicions. He pulled out his wand, and with a violent swish, shattered one of the display cases into a fine shower of glass and dark magic. He toed through the remains until he found what he was looking for and picked it up.

Merlin's death coin lay in his palm without so much as a flicker of magic, dark or otherwise. Tom had was gone. For who knows how long. Anger, frustration, and something akin to fear came over him, and it took his iron self-control to keep his face neutral when he turned to Pettigrew, hovering nervously in the doorway.

"Pettigrew... have you touched this at all since I placed it here?" he asks calmly, but already the rat animagus looks ready to piss himself.

"No, no, no! I never did! I never could even if I wanted to! I don't like coming up here at all if I can help it," the man rambled, and by the neglect of the room Voldemort wouldn't be surprised if he were telling the truth, but he couldn't take the risk. Besides, hadn't he already determined Pettigrew would suffer for the neglect of his duty?

"Legilimens!"

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Bagpipes preceded the funeral procession, a loud, echoing bray that drowned out the deathly silence, but not the heavy despair of death as a seemingly endless line snaked its way towards the burial ground. The dead were dressed in their winter clothes and their faces and hair lovingly groomed, and tied to narrow pallets carried by two strong men or women to their respective graves where they were lowered. Those among the dead that were mates were placed in a single grave together, and likewise the younger children were laid beside them. Luna carried her youngest brother swaddled in a blanket to Athena's grave at the center of the ring, and with the utmost tenderness placed him back into his mother's arms.

Harry stood perfectly still, his eyes wide and unblinking, as every man, woman, and child was laid to rest. On either side of him, the werewolves wept silently or watched stoically, drawing closer together for physical comfort and Harry felt their magic slide against him, their grief prickling against his skin.

Fenrir was brought in last, carried by Sirius and Remus, the future Head Alpha and his beta being the only ones deemed worthy to carry him. Fenrir had always been impressive to Harry, but not exactly someone pleasant to look at. He was scarred and weathered, and shaving had never been art he seemed to care about mastering. Like all the others, the former Head Alpha had been meticulously groomed, but even smooth shaven and dressed in the finest clothes they could find, his face looked harsh and grave without the hard, wicked, laughing personality that sparkled in his eyes or hid in the curve of his mouth. Harry found himself missing it. Then the old king was lowered into the grave at the center of the ring beside his wife and sons, and disappeared.

There were words spoken, by Sirius, by Jane, by Luna, by a dozen other nameless faces that blurred together, but Harry could only remember a few things said here and there. The bitter taste of herbs was back in his mouth, and his stomach twisted unpleasantly where the herbs had settled. He wondered idly if he had been poisoned, then dismissed the thought as unimportant. If he died, there were plenty of open graves available.

At some point, Luna returned to his side. Her magic didn't prickle, but soothed and warmed. Or maybe that wasn't her magic so much as her cheek resting against his shoulder. It was getting harder to concentrate, harder to even keep his eyes open, but he knew he had to. Had to watch it all from beginning to end even if he couldn't make out the words.

“, it's funny, ya know,” a familiar voice growled beside him. “Most of them would'a been more than happy to kill me themselves, and now look at'm. Crying like they'd just lost their mother.”

“You're not the only one dead. Maybe some of them are burying their mothers,” Harry pointed out, glaring at Greyback or at least in Greyback's general direction. He was having a hard time focusing. The old alpha threw him a feral grin and chuckled darkly.

“That's no way to be talk'n to a god, brat.”

“You’re not a god...you’re just dead,” he mumbled...slurred... did he even actually say anything?

“Luckily for me, the two aren’t mutually exclusive.”

“You’re not a god, Greyback,” Harry repeated, except now that he looked closer at Fenrir it didn’t seem to be an impossibility. He was wearing the clothes he had seen on his corpse, soft black wool and thick grey furs, but his face was as rugged and badly shaven as he remembered, well suited to the lively and at times abrasive personality he had known in life. The one true peculiarity was his eyes, one bright yellow and the other milky blue. He wondered at the significance. “Alright,” Harry conceded, “What are you a god of?”

The grin he received was chilling.

“War.”

Harry opened his eyes (when had he closed them?) and stared up at halo of faces hovering above him. He was laying on someone’s cloak, he could feel the fur beneath his fingers and the sticks and underneath that against his back. Had he fainted? He hadn’t eaten since yesterday and then the herbs...

“Harry? Pup?” Sirius started, his expression tight with concern.

“I’m sorry,” Harry managed, although it was weak and slurred. “I didn’t mean to fall asleep.”

His godfather’s mouth twitched into the beginning of a smile.

“You didn’t fall asleep, Harry. You fell into a trance. Do you remember anything? Anything you saw or said?”

He thought about it, snatching at his dreaming, trying to recall when it had started was a lot harder than finding where it had ended.

“I saw Greyback.”

Remus, who was on the other side of him, nodded. "Yes, we gathered that much. We were afraid he was trying to take over your body. You started rambling about Greyback not being a god and then you got this look...the kind he used to have some times when he intended to something particularly nasty."

Harry blinked. He couldn't remember rambling, but then he couldn't remember much of anything. "That sounds....really embarrassing..."

"More like really scary. Don't ever do that again."

"Oookaaayyy..."

Sirius and Remus shared a look. "What's wrong with him? Why's he acting all... loopy?" Sirius asked.

"Maybe he's sick?" Remus offered, then touched his head. "He doesn't have a fever."

"Maybe he can hear you even when you don't talk directly at him?" Harry suggested, then scanned the crowd of curious faces until he found one completely indifferent one. He pointed an accusing finger at Jane. "You drugged me."

"It was completely unintentional," she said evenly.

"Clutz."

Luna giggled. Jane ignored her.

"Tell them what you saw."

"Don't you know?"

"Yes, but it will mean more coming from you."

He told them. There was a great deal of talking and shouting and laughing that followed. Apparently, having a war god in the pack was

a good thing for some reason, but exactly why Harry was too tired to figure out. Luckily, his little walk through la-la land hadn't really started until the after the major funeral rites had been completed, and Sirius was happy to hand Harry off to a group of healers at the temporary lodges that had been erected to house everyone while the rest of the pack finished. The healers, all women, peppered him with questions, about his vision, about his relation to Sirius, about his relationship to Luna, even as they practically shoved hot food and tea down his throat so he couldn't answer even if he wanted to. Luna hovered behind them, making funny faces that had Harry nearly choking on his food. Then they left him alone with Luna, who cuddled up next to him and wrapped them both in a blanket.

"Are you alright?" she asked.

"I'm okay. It was just weird. I didn't even know I was dreaming until I woke up. Are you okay? I didn't scare you, did I?"

She shook her head and smiled.

"I was worried when you didn't respond to any of my questions, but then you started talking and I knew what was happening. You touched my cheek and kissed my forehead. Do you remember doing that?"

He shook his head.

"Father used to do that all the time. I knew you would be okay then. He wouldn't have hurt you. He liked you."

Harry couldn't say he shared her point of view, as those few instances where they had actually talked directly to one another had been at least partially hostile, and even in his dream or vision or whatever it was he hadn't been particularly amicable. Of course, to Greyback, liking someone and being nice to them probably weren't related. He liked Sirius after all, and he'd gutted him.

“Well, I’m glad I have daddy’s approval. I don’t reckon on getting on the bad side of a war god for canoodling with his little girl,” he said lightly.

She giggled into his arm. “Is that what we’ve been doing? I have to say canoodling is a lot more fun than it sounds.”

“It does sound a bit like we’ve been knitting socks or something, doesn’t it?”

“Yes, just a bit. Harry, can I ask you a favor?” She pulled back a little so that he could see her wide, beautiful gray eyes. He was suddenly reminded, not for the first time, that Luna wasn’t a little girl. Her eyes were dilated, lips slightly parted, and her body pressed against his arm was soft curves and sweet smells.

“Y-yeah, sure.”

“Kiss me?”

And it was only a matter leaning down, ever so slightly and tilting his head just so, and suddenly they were.

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Tom set down the newspaper (the sixth one he’s read today, this particular one was from Britain’s Wizarding Weekly headlining Harry’s suspension from Hogwarts with rumors of him being under mental duress), and rubbed his temple. The pain was becoming more persistent, and negotiating with Horace had done nothing to stymie the migraines. The latest news about the attack on the werewolf colony and Harry’s own involvement had fueled the boy’s righteous indignation, which he was using to continuously harass and annoy him.

It didn’t matter to Horace that Tom hadn’t intended to hurt Harry, that he was in fact sorry to involve his young friend at all and would have taken different actions if he had know it would threaten him. No, all

Horace could see was that it was some how Tom's fault that Seibligg was a selfish, opportunistic bully. Brat.

"Halloween is only a few days away."

Tom looked up to see Katarina gliding into the living room with a graceful rolling slink. The sway of her hips was like the swing of a pendulum, drawing his eyes and his mind to her hypnotic grace. The throbbing behind his eyes, however, reminded him that any attempt at (or a yielding to) seduction would bring more pain than pleasure.

"And?"

"We should do something... special," she suggested, a bloodlusty gleam in her eyes. Tom mentally groaned. He enjoyed murder and mayhem as much as the next psychopath, but he wasn't here to play games. Katarina had gotten a taste for the hunt, for the power it gave her and the rush, and it had become increasingly difficult to rein her in. He had feeling that soon she would do something stupid, and he would have to decide if keeping her around was worth the risk.

"I am all for it, my beautiful death," he said sweetly, because he was willing to indulge her if he could use the situation to his advantage, "But we will have to do it outside of Berlin. The Dark Lord's orders. With this latest attack in Britain... Berlin is the only suitable target for retribution. We must leave if we do not wish to be caught in the cross-fire."

She frowned. "Leave? Now? The election is only a few days after Halloween!"

"Precisely," Tom said, his impatience starting to show through. "The Dark Lord has been reluctant to give me any details in advance, but he wouldn't have suggested abandoning such a valuable post unless it was absolutely necessary. Besides, he has important work for us in Frankfurt."

"Goblintown? Ugh," she sneered in disgust. "Absolutely not. That place reeks of money."

“Making it a very good place to start weakening the national banking structure. Seibligg can’t fight a war he can’t finance.”

“If he is even re-elected. A lot of people are angry about the attacks in Ireland and Britain. They see him as twisting their arms into re-electing him rather than hiring someone without experience dealing with Britain. They’re right of course, but that doesn’t mean it won’t work. Doesn’t mean it will either.”

“And we can learn all about it from Frankfurt*.”

“And miss all the rioting? There are always excellent riots in Berlin after a controversial election.”

“You are free to start one in Frankfurt if it means so much to you,” he snapped, his patience finally worn out. Katarina stiffened then glared.

“Mind who you are speaking to, boy. I am your ally, not your toy, and I am quite through with your mind games. We’re staying until after the elections and then we’re going somewhere that isn’t Frankfurt.”

“Katarina-“

“And that’s final!” she snapped. She spun on her heels and walked out, slamming the door behind her. Tom snatched up the closest item he could find, in this case tea pot, and hurled it into the fire place. It shattered beautifully, but the tea doused the flames, leaving him frustrated. Perhaps he should have thrown the blood-sucking trollop in the fire instead, he thought.

“I hope you’re happy. Now we have a PMSing vambitch to deal with.”

Horace’s dark chuckle in the back of his mind was not what he wanted to hear. If it were possible, he’d like nothing more than to put the little bastard under cruciatus for an hour or two.

It's all that bad, Karma, Tom. Perhaps you should take up a new hobby. Like exorcism. You can start with yourself.

“Shut up.”

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Harry woke late that night to the sound of laughter and music. The lodge house was empty and cold, and he reluctantly climbed out of the pile of furs to see what was going on. It appeared the funeral was over, and now it was time for the reception, which was considerably more jovial after what appeared to be a lot beer and ale than was strictly healthy. Harry looked for Luna in the crowd, but there were nearly a dozen bonfires built around several lodges and in the dark and flickering light he couldn't find her.

He did find his godfathers though, and thankfully neither of them was drunk. They were sitting around a small fire with a handful of men, alphas by the looks of them, away from the others and deep in discussion. He wondered if he would be welcome there, or if he should find company elsewhere until they finished their business. Before he had a chance to decide, someone came up behind him, grabbed his arm, and started dragging him away. Harry instantly dug his heels and started to struggle, ready to shout for help if necessary, but he hesitated when he realized it was Stephen.

“We have to talk,” the man growled, “In private.”

And that seemed like a very bad idea for a variety of reasons, not the least of which was the look in the man's eyes as he pulled him behind one of the lodge houses. If he called out though... if Sirius thought Stephen had intended to hurt him, Harry didn't know what his godfather would do to him. He didn't want the man to get hurt just because he was upset about Jane, and he didn't want to put the rest of the family through anymore grief. So he held his tongue and clutched his wand, and hoped it he wasn't making a huge mistake.

When they were out of sight of the others, Stephen let him go and Harry took a few cautious steps away from him and lit his wand. In the electric blue glow of the lumus spell, the werewolf's was all stark white planes and deep shadows, his eyes so deeply shadowed as to nearly be invisible. Harry kept a close watch on his legs and hands, both already tense.

"What did you want to talk about?"

For a seemingly endless moment, the man said nothing, and as the seconds ticked by Harry was increasingly convinced that this was a bad decision.

"Jane," he said at last, "You can fix her, can't you?"

Harry blinked, confused.

"Fix her? I don't know what you mean by... oh...no. No, I can't."

Stephen's hands clenched.

"Yes, you can! You're a wizard! You're a bloody shaman! You can get that...thing... out of her!"

"I'm not a shaman, and I've never done an exorcism. And even if I were, she isn't possessed by a simple spirit. She's possessed by a god. If I tried to force it out of her, she could die. And afterwards? You'd have an angry goddess running after you! I can't do anything for Jane. You'll have to wait-

He was so distracted trying to make the man understand, he forgot to keep watching his body language, and was unprepared when he was thrown to the ground. He scurried back, bringing up his wand to defend himself, but Stephen climbed on top of him, pinning him with his legs and his wand arm with one arm. Harry kicked and thrashed and punched and clawed his free hand, but Stephen was larger, faster, and a more experienced fighter and all his efforts did nothing.

"Stephen, stop! You're not helping-

The punch had him seeing stars, sent his mind flying for a moment in painless, dizzying somersaults. The first sensation to return wasn't pain, so much as the unpleasant panic of being unable to breathe. Stephen's legs were constricting the sides of his chest, and blood was clogging his nose. The second sense to return was hearing.

"-ought us here. You said it would be safe! It's a fucking mad house! These people are all crazy, and now they've ruined my daughter!" Stephen was shouting, his voice cracking under the strain of anger and stress. "So you fix her, god dammit! You got us into this mess, so you bloody well fix it!"

"I'm..." Harry wheezed, "...sorry."

There was a choked and bitter laugh, and Harry closed his eyes and braced himself for another blow. A blow that didn't come. Instead he felt the man being tackled, and torn away from him. There was shouting and snarling and the sound of fighting. And it wasn't just two people either. He could hear several voices, male and angry and cursing up a storm. Harry rolled onto his side and coughed up blood, his lungs heaving for air.

"Harry!" Remus called, drawing away from the fight to attend his godson his hands efficiently examining him for injuries. "Are you alright? Are you hurt anywhere?"

He could have given his godfather quite the list, but that wasn't important. What was important was that he could still hear vicious fighting, even though he couldn't see it (where was his wand?). Even without being able to see it, he knew it wasn't Stephen who was winning.

"St-Stop!" he gasped...then gathered his strength to shout, "STOP! SIRIUS STOP IT!"

He jumped to his feet and immediately collapsed again, Remus barely catching him before he hit the ground.

“Sirius, I need your help!” Remus shouted.

“Hold him till I get back!” Sirius snarled to the others.

The fighting sounds stopped, and to Harry’s relief he felt Sirius move next to him, reaching for him but too afraid to touch where he couldn’t see any injuries.

“Harry, oh god, are you alright?”

“I’m okay. It was just a little smack. I don’t think he really wanted to hurt me,” he lied, praying that they believed him.

“Fuck, Harry, he could have killed you! He could have crushed your chest or bashed your head in.”

“I’m okay,” he continued to insist, “Please, don’t hurt him.”

Sirius made an exasperated sound.

“Someone get some light over here!” he ordered. “Are you going to tell me what this is all about?”

“He’s Stephen Canis,” Harry said, and by the long silence that followed he knew that both his godfathers understood the significance of that statement. “He thought I could... help Jane. I couldn’t. He got upset. More upset. Please, don’t hurt him.”

“The hell I’m letting him get away with this-“

“Sirius,” Remus cut in sharply. “Don’t be a hypocrite. You’re Head Alpha. You have to be the bigger man.”

“He’s not in his right mind. He lost his daughter to things he doesn’t understand. How would you feel if Greyback had taken possession of me?” Harry reasoned.

“I...”

“You’d want to ‘fix’ me too, wouldn’t you? He wasn’t right, but his family doesn’t deserve to go through anymore pain than they are already. Please, promise you won’t hurt him?”

Sirius let out an irritated growl. “Fine. I won’t hurt him anymore. But I’m not forgetting this.”

Harry let out a breath. “Thank you.”

“Come on, pup, let’s get you fixed up,” Remus said, helping Harry to his feet, which were steadier now than before. After a few shaky steps, he was able to walk without leaning on them, and let himself be led away. One of the other werewolves arrived, carrying the requested torch. Sirius took it, and turned back to where his men were still holding Stephen.

“Take him to the healers. I’ll be along in a minute,” Sirius promised. Harry wanted to say something, but he had already asked so much of his godfather already, he wasn’t about ready to question his word.

For his part, Sirius was boiling with rage, and well past the point where killing a man seemed unreasonable. He had seen his godson, the closest thing he had to a child of his own, being beaten practically under his nose and despite what Harry had said, he didn’t doubt that Stephen could have killed the boy, however unintentionally. That afternoon when Harry had fallen into a trance, he had been shaken; terrified that he would lose him to forces beyond his control and now he had been threatened yet again.

This time, however, he did have some control.

The three men holding Canis had been with him when the young beta* had run up to them and warned him of what was happening, and obediently fallen behind their leader as he hunted down his godson. They still obediently followed his orders, pinning Canis to the ground with more force than was strictly necessary, but without actually hitting him. The lone wolf himself, didn’t look as if he could take much more abuse. His face was covered in blood and Sirius was

almost certain he'd cracked a couple of ribs and broken some fingers, and he didn't pity him in the least. He glared down at him.

"If you ever come near Harry again, I'll kill you, Canis, and then I'll whore your wife out to the mangiest, stupidest, most pathetic omega that I can find. Do you understand me?"

Stephen nodded, or maybe his head was just lolling, but it didn't matter. He would pass his message on to his pack's alpha and he would insure it was understood.

"Good. Let him go."

The other alphas pulled away, leaving their prey abandoned on the ground, and followed Sirius as he walked away.

"Should we take him to a healer?" one of them asked.

"I promised my godson I wouldn't hurt him, but I never said anything about helping."

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Just to be absolutely clear, when Diana was killed, the demi-goddess possessing her jumped from Diana's body to Jane's. The Canis family was with another pack at the time and were safe.

Frankfurt is the banking capitol of wizarding Germany, and home to the German main branch of Gringotts. Gringotts is an international chain, but its British Branch is completely cut off from its other branches due to complex spells and laws initiated by Voldemort, so funds can't be transferred to or from the bank, meaning those who left assets in the London Branch after they fled the country, can't pick up those funds anywhere else in Europe. The Gringotts Goblins do, however, have means of communicating with one another.

In case you're thinking, 'well, that's damn convenient', it isn't. That 'young beta' was Bobby looking after his 'familiar'. Why and how, I'll get into later.

Author's Note:

Firstly, I'd just like to thank you all for your patience and understanding, and reassure you that I have no intention of abandoning this story. My hope is that with my semester coming to an end soon, I'll be able to get in some extra writing time and finish book V before the next semester starts. Once the semester starts again... well, I'm taking one less class, so that should help. Fingers crossed.

Secondly, another thanks to all my reviewers. You guys have been wonderful, and I wouldn't have gotten this far in my story if it weren't for your support. That being said, there are few matters of politeness I'd like to address for a few of you. If you're a reviewer and you don't like something about my story, that's fine, you're free to point out flaws or perceived weaknesses in the story or characters. I actually encourage you to do so, BUT if you are going to do that, please sign in so that I can reply. Leaving me a criticism without giving me the opportunity to explain my choices (or acknowledge certain fallacies and thanking you for pointing them out), is rather like shouting 'you suck' over the phone and then hanging up.

Book V

Chapter 19: The Black Wolf King

"Reckless, bumbling fool."

Harry sat up abruptly. A dim light radiated from the candle on his night stand, casting the tent walls in a dim orange glow and deep shadows. The healers had left him to rest, insisting he should be alone for a while after losing his fight with Stephen. He hadn't thought of his smack down in terms of winning or losing, so much as an unfortunate happenstance. A miscalculated step.

Bobby, as dark as the deep shadows, was nothing more than the sound of flutter wings and an aggravated voice.

“You don’t call, you don’t write. And when you do get back, it’s all sweetheart this and darling that,” Harry lamented mockingly, and settled back into his bed. His jaw ached from Stephen’s punch, and the painkillers he had been given were making him lightheaded.

“How you survived this long I have no idea. You have the survival instinct of a kamikaze pilot. Following a clearly deranged man into the woods... If it weren’t for me you’d be...” the shadows snapped, shifting into shapes that could not have been a crow before snapping back into a singular shape perched at the foot of his bed. Harry tilted his head curiously.

“What do you mean ‘if it weren’t for you’? What did you do? What are you even doing here, Bobby?”

There was no immediate reply, and a well of unease began to grow inside him. Harry would be the first to admit that he had a tendency to take people for granted, that they were generally what they appeared to be, good or bad, until proven otherwise. He wasn’t so sure he could afford to be so blithe in his assumptions anymore.

“What did you do, Bobby? And perhaps more importantly, why did you do it?”

Silence.

“Why have you been helping me at all? And don’t give me that ‘you’re fun’ crap. You’re... a fairy. Or of the fairy or part of their realm. Your natural instinct is to kill or convert humans into another fairy, not save their lives. I can only assume you have a reason for not doing so. I’d be very interested in knowing what that reason was.”

Harry gathered his candle from the side of the bed, intent to speak with the raven himself and not just the shadows. He turned to Bobby.

A pale face loomed at the foot of his bed..

He dropped the candle, the flame instantly extinguished, and made a lunge for his wand, ducking and rolling off the bed to the other side of the tent.

“Now your survival instinct kicks in.”

“Lumos.” The tent was filled with a soft blue light. The man was gone, and only Bobby’s avian form remained, glaring imperiously at him. Harry’s eyes widened. “You’re a changeling.”

Even uttering the word sent a shiver of fear up Harry’s spine. It only seemed to ruffle the other’s feathers.

“No. I’m an illusionist. A dream weaver. A magician. All these things, but I am no fae.”

Harry just stared at him for a long moment, before it clicked.

“You’re a wizard.”

“I was a wizard,” he corrected, “I peeved off a few ‘higher ups’ in my day, and poof I get rebirthed as a raven. If it weren’t for Raecellos, I wouldn’t even remember being a wizard, and I would be spared a great deal of this aggravation.”

Wow. Just... wow. That had never even occurred to Harry. It was bizarre and yet... fascinating. Bobby looked rather indignant at his gawking.

“Are you quite done, now?”

He blinked, and then smiled sheepishly.

“Sorry, it’s just... What’s it like? Being reborn?”

“Crowded. There isn’t a lot of room in an egg, although I suppose I was lucky to be spared the joys of mammalian birth,” the raven said, not sounding particularly nostalgic over the event. His dismissive attitude reminded Harry of his earlier concerns.

“So... why are you helping me again?”

The raven preened his wings, the avian equivalent of picking lint, and replied blandly. “I have my reasons.”

“Which are?”

“Which are none of your damn business.”

In a flicker of light and shadow, he disappeared. Harry waved his arm about, casting the blue light around the room, but the raven was already gone, leaving Harry with more questions and concerns than he had started with. What now? Bobby had always been helpful to him, had saved him even, but his evasive attitude was worrisome. Was he truly independent of the fae? He had plenty of opportunities to betray Harry to the fairy folk and never had, but what were his motivations? Was he under orders from Raecellos or even Madris? But then why hide it? Why ask Harry to keep his presence a secret from everyone else?

Most important of all, what was Harry going to do about it?

Lestrane stared across the desk at the man, if mere man he truly was, that she had devoted her life to and was reassured to find that her admiration for him had not dimmed in the slightest. He was as beautiful, charming, and terrifying as she remembered from the height of the war, the years of relative peace merely refining the handle instead of dulling the blade. It had been a long time since she had been granted the privilege of his private company, a fact she blamed on Potter. That boy, that foolish, naïve little Gryffindor, had pulled at the Dark Lord's attention until he was blind to nearly everyone else, and she didn't understand it. Not in the slightest.

Well, no, that wasn't entirely true. She hadn't understood it. Not in the beginning, not until recently in fact. Potter was as foolish and unrefined as ever, but now... now he had power, magical and political on a scale she never could have fathomed. The Dark Lord had seen the potential she had not. Unfortunately, so had Snape, and that left

her feeling all sorts the fool. It also made her wonder why her master was meeting her in private rather than her and Snape, or even just Snape.

“Bella, it’s been a while.”

“My lord.”

This was her castle. She was the headmistress after all, but even here she felt her inferiority. Sitting in his high-backed chair, behind his massive desk, in the office he had carved out of her domain, he was every inch the conquering warlord. His fingers were steeped, his eyes shadowed to the point even his crimson eyes appeared black. He was not here for pleasantries. Their recent estrangement had not so dulled her memory that she couldn’t tell when her lord was angry. She hoped it wasn’t directed at her.

“Your progress with the school’s security is quite remarkable,” he said, “Your talents for combat and military preparedness has not failed you.”

He sounded sincere, but Lestrangle couldn’t shake the feeling she was being mocked. Over the last couple of years, the castle’s security had been breeched repeatedly, in ways she should never have allowed to happen. Even the werewolf girl’s appearance, a mere few weeks ago, should never have occurred. Potter’s actual escape from the castle when it was on full security alert was an embarrassment she was certain she would lose her job over, and possibly her life.

“It’s wasted here.”

Lestrangle stiffened. Perhaps he was going to end it now. At least he had granted her enough respect to do it private, without Snape or one of his other cronies sneering at her. Voldemort moved one of his hands, reaching to flip a photograph on top of his desk. She looked, and immediately felt the spark of recognition.

“You have served me well over these many years, Bella, in some ways better than others. I think its time for you to become my blade once again.”

She stared at the photograph for a long moment, and then up at him.

“I am yours, my Lord, in whatever capacity you desire, but I do not understand precisely what you want.”

The smile that cut its way across his face did nothing to make him look any less angry.

“This is the traitor who helped the Germans escape. I need you to hunt him down and capture him, preferably alive for interrogation. You always had a talent for hunting.”

She took the photograph, staring at Horace McGunny’s cool expression, completely still even as the staff of the Hogwarts’ Herald scurried about in the background. She had not anticipated this. McGunny was one smooth character. He was a smart, no nonsense, slave driver to those under his command, and if his ambitions had been more political than academic she was certain he would have been placed in Slytherin. She couldn’t imagine his motivation for betraying his school and his country.

“You’ll retain the official title of Headmistress for the school year,” Voldemort continued, “but I want you to leave a majority of those responsibilities to Severus while you pursue this. This operation is covert. No one can know what it is about, not Severus and not Lucius. Only you, Morgan, and I know about this and it will remain that way. Morgan is under instruction to provide you with any resources you deem necessary, but I expect you to be subtle.”

It was starting to sink in what was happening, but Lestrangle wasn’t sure if she should be ecstatic or humiliated. Was she being promoted or demoted? She honestly couldn’t tell.

“I... It will be done, my Lord.”

The look he gave her told her explicitly what would happen to her if it did not.

November sunlight, draped in a silver cloak, pressed against the stain glass windows, casting the tea room in an ambiguous light, somewhere between brightness and gloom. It matched Severus's state of mind, and that just irritated him. McGonagall had wisely avoided the usual small talk this afternoon, sensing something in her colleague's demeanor that was even less pleasant than usual. She waited until the tea was ready and served before she attempted to break the silence.

"Has Lockhart been giving you dating advice again?"

Severus rolled his eyes, his annoyance shaking him from his sulk.

"No. I have successfully managed to pawn him off on Slughorn for at least a week. They're made for each other."

Her lips twitched, but she quickly smothered the smile. She didn't think he'd appreciate her taking whatever was bothering him as a joke.

"Then may I ask what's wrong? Something is obviously bothering you."

He ignored her, but she simply waited, taking an appreciative sip of her tea. Eventually, Snape broke the silence.

"I think I might be cursed."

She blinked. "Really? Have you talked to Pomphrey?"

He shook his head. "No. Not that kind of curse. I think...someone... I don't know who... might have cursed me so that I'll never have a family."

She gave him an odd look, trying to sort out what he was saying. He didn't fault her confusion. He did sound like a bit of an idiot at the moment.

"What happened?"

He debated telling McGonagall. It was, in fact, a very private matter, one he didn't think Ira would appreciate him sharing with anyone. But... he needed to tell someone, someone practical who could look at his situation and offer a valid solution or state clearly and unsympathetically that there wasn't one.

"Ira... I believe we've broken up for good."

"Oh, Severus, what happened? You seemed to be getting along so well."

He sighed, and took a sip of his tea, not even tasting it.

"We are...were. It's... she told me something about herself that I don't know if I can accept if we were to continue having a relationship."

"What?" Now she was starting to look concerned. There were a lot of possible aspects of a person she didn't think Severus could accept, and a number of them could get poor Ira in a heap of trouble if he so chose.

"She's divorced."

She nearly rolled her eyes. If that was it, she just lost all sympathy for him.

"... because she can't have children."

"Ah." Well, that was a different story. One she had more sympathy for than he could ever know. "I didn't know you were thinking about starting a family with her so soon."

“I wasn’t either until she said it... I... I hadn’t realized until that moment that I had no intention of looking for anyone else. She just... fit. Into everything.”

She nodded, as if she understood, but he didn’t really think she did.

“I mean to say, no matter what I was doing... or what I wanted to do... she could be there, beside me or in the background, and it was just a little bit better than it was while I was alone. Like when she stayed with me this summer, while I was in the lab I could hear in the kitchen or in the sitting room, and normally that would be extremely annoying, but with her... it was soothing. I felt at ease with her in my home. I hadn’t realized that she had become a part of it already, and now... now I think we were both deluding ourselves.”

McGonagall felt a strong maternal urge to get up and hug him, but she doubted that was what he wanted or needed. So she remained silent for a moment, and thought over what he had said, and what she should advise. It didn’t take her long to think of something, but it wasn’t something she could bring herself to say easily. They had both nearly drained their tea before she found the courage to speak.

“Did she tell you exactly why she couldn’t have children?”

He glared at her.

“No, and I wasn’t so morbidly curious as to ask.”

“You should have,” she said, with a sharpness that had him sitting up straight and paying attention. “There are different types of infertility, many of which can be treated and cured or worked around. It’s not a well known field among wizarding kind, but there are still a few medi-witches and wizards who practice in reproductive medicine. It’s expensive and often risky, but not something to be overlooked.”

He stared at her blankly for a moment, the hint of a blush coloring his cheeks. It was obvious the topic had turned awkward to him. Talking about wanting children was a lot different than talking about the mechanics of making children. She wasn’t going to let him clam up

though. Certain things needed to be said so that he understood that the situation was not hopeless, before he gave up on yet another possibility at happiness.

Because, oddly enough, she did want him to be happy. She wanted him to be happy, and to share that happiness with Harry and Hermione and even Draco, little jerk though he was. And if that meant she had to embarrass them both, she would do it.

“I’m going to tell you something, Severus. Something I haven’t told anyone since... well, since Dumbledore left,” she said, sending him a warning look that he better pay attention because she wasn’t going to repeat it. “I have a sister, a year younger than me. When we were both just little girls, we got sick. Very, very sick. We recovered, but... we were both told we would likely never be able to have children.”

He stared at her, unbelieving that she would reveal something so personal to him. It wasn’t in her personnel records. No doubt Lestranger would have mocked her for it mercilessly if she had known. Why was she telling him this?

“I accepted what I was told, and planned my life around the assumption that I’d never have a family. My parents were traditionalists you see. They couldn’t arrange a marriage with damaged goods, and they never would have accepted an adopted child into the family. So I figured the only way to make them proud of me is if I did something with my life that didn’t require a family. The result is what you see today, and I can’t say I regret the course my life has taken. It’s been filled with many joys and sorrows, pride and disappointment, but always my own choices. My sister, however...”

Here McGonagall couldn’t help smiling a bit regretfully.

“My sister didn’t accept it. She absolutely refused to. We got into huge fights about it. I thought she was ‘deluding’ herself, as you so aptly put it. She thought I was settling for less. She ended up marrying some nobody with romantic notions as deluded as hers. My parents were furious. They disowned her, but she didn’t care. She had her dream of a little shop in the city, an endless love affair with

her own husband, two kids, and a cat. And you know what? Her dream came true almost as she envisioned it. She has a little grocery store in Edinburgh, is still head over heels in love with her husband, has four children, and three cats last I counted. So as much as I love my life, am proud of it, I can't help but wonder what would have happened if I hadn't been more like my sister. If I hadn't accepted what others told me were my limits.'

'I know it may sound too Gryffindor for your tastes, but I don't think you should give up on Ira. You're a fighter, Severus, you always have been. If you truly know what you want, then do what you have to to get it. Experiment, question, argue, curse someone if you have to, but don't give up. It's much too soon for that.'

She stood up from her chair, and he very nearly stood up as well, but for the hand that pushed him back into his seat.

"Now if you'll excuse me. I think I've bled my heart enough for today. You just sit there and think about what I've said. Decide how much you're willing to risk and fight for Ira. After all, they do say 'third times the charm'."

She stepped through the door, feeling his eyes on her as she went, and wondered if she had made the right decision to tell him. Not just for what she had revealed about herself, but on the very real possibility that he might fail. Her sister may have beaten the odds, but that didn't make the odds better for anyone else.

Sirius' coronation was at dawn. Harry was woken two hours before by Luna leaving his bed. She had snuck in at some point last night and once gone her absence left a rather unpleasant chill. Reluctantly, he got up, feeling barely alive and sore everywhere, with the intention of getting another blanket. Any thoughts of sleep, however, were quickly dispelled when Jane entered.

"It is time for you to wake up, young shaman," she said, laying a bundle of clothes that were not his own at the foot of his bed. "You have responsibilities to perform."

Harry wasn't entirely sure when they considered him a shaman. Maybe it was as far back as when Voldemort had announced him his apprentice or maybe it was as recent as Greyback's quasi-possession. Either way, it meant new clothes, beaded with animal bones and feathers, and Jane painting his face with red markings. His responsibilities were very simple. The coronation was to be held in the clearing, and Harry spent nearly an hour cleansing the area with sage, while Jane painted the faces of a dozen other werewolves. Sirius and Remus were there, a single band of black painted over their eyes, looking all the more ominous for it. They did not approach him, and sensing that this time before the coronation ceremony was important to them, he kept his distance as well.

The sun rose subtly, a gradual fading from the black to dark blue to silver, and with it came the rest of the werewolves. The dark funeral clothes (for unlike wizards, werewolves did where black and dark colors to funerals) had been replaced with festival clothes, which varied from full length dress to barely clothed in every shade. Harry couldn't help but notice that almost none of them had their faces painted, and looking more closely the few that did were all strong alphas and their females or betas. He wondered what it meant. Were they Sirius' lieutenants? Did they hold some special purpose in the coronation ritual?

The ceremony itself was not particularly ostentatious. Sirius wore only his leather breeches and knives, and Remus was little better with actual boots and arm guards. Jane, resplendent in pure white furs, announced them both blessed by the Moon, and kissed their foreheads. The crowd stomped their feet and cheered, but Jane was not finished

"But Rhiannon is not the only god whose blessing you require," she said solemnly, and a ripple of confusion ran through the crowd. Harry stiffened, and turned to Luna, who stared fixedly at Sirius. "If you wish the blessing of Fenrir, our god of war, you will need to make an offering. An offering of battle. Will you sacrifice in the name of our people?"

"We shall sacrifice."

Jane stepped away from them to stand at the clearing's edge with the others, and from among them the painted alphas and their partners emerged, and slowly stalked towards them, forming a ring around their intended prey.

"What is going on?" Harry whispered to Luna, who still did not look away but did reply.

"We're at war, and the Moon alone is not enough to protect us. We need Fenrir. We need his blessing, and he won't give it lightly. Blackbone and Slivermoon, they'll have to fight to prove their worth."

"What? All of them at once? What if they can't do it?"

Luna finally turned to him, her expression tight, almost pained. "Do not interfere, Harry. This is what it means for them to be Head Alpha and Head Beta. The rest of us are putting our lives on the line based on the assumption that they're better than the rest of us. It's not something-

A loud snarl interrupted her, but Harry already knew what he needed to. He turned back to his godfathers in time to see Sirius smash his knee into an alphas' chest, sending the man limp and sprawling onto the ground. His beta, a heavily muscled female, made the mistake of jumping to his defense and got a kick to the face for her troubles. Remus wasn't slacking either. The beta might not be as strong or fast as Sirius, but he did know how to fight smart and dirty when necessary. Another male and female pair made to attack Sirius at once from different sides, but Remus jumped into their attack, smashing his fist into the females face before hurling her into her mate's path, tripping him up long enough for Remus to knock him to the ground.

And then things got ugly. It was horrifying and magnificent at once. Harry had always known his godfathers were special, that they were somehow stronger or just a bit smarter than the others, but he had never seen it demonstrated so dramatically as when they fought. Because they didn't fight as individuals. There was nothing

independent about their movements or their techniques. Without looking or speaking, they moved with their backs to each other, defending and attacking with such choreographed movements that neither was ever left exposed.

Even when the knives and the hatchets were drawn and the attacks by the other werewolves became more coordinated, they never faltered. Hits were taken when necessary and they were given even more freely, to the point where Harry was convinced none of them were going to make it out alive. Two of the attacking werewolves already appeared dead, and three others broken or bleeding beyond the ability to stand, let alone attack. But that still left seven.

Luna was practically wrapped around Harry's body, holding him back as best she could, whispering for him to let it play out, to be still. If he didn't know that what was happening weren't necessary on some level, she never would have succeeded in holding him. Magic or not, he was still bigger than her and with far more to lose.

"Damn you, Fenrir," he swore under his breath. "You have your battle and your blood, and you'll have plenty more before this war done, so just stop it. Stop it! Or I will."

He did not know if he had been heard, if even Luna could hear him over the snarls and screams and shouts of battles, and at first it appeared his whispered declaration dissolved into nothing as yet another werewolf swung his hatchet at Sirius, catching him upper arm. Harry fumbled for his wand, but Luna struggled to hold his arms so he couldn't reach. Sirius snarled in pain and anger, and swung his bare fist, smashing the attacker in the stomach and sending him flying... five feet... ten feet... sixteen... twenty... and stopped but only because he had hit the wall of spectators, knocking them all to the ground.

Everyone froze. Then slowly, very slowly, those werewolves still in the fight edged backwards, pulling the dead or unconscious or injured with them on their retreat. Sirius and Remus, both bleeding and panting heavily, growled menacingly at them but didn't pursue. Luna's grip, bordering on vice-like, loosened and Harry climbed to his feet. An eerie silence followed him, no one speaking or moving but for

Sirius and Remus' heavy breathing and the paranoid shifting of their eyes.

At last, Sirius' eyes settled on Harry, the only one who dared to approach. It wasn't a particularly welcoming look, and Harry stopped before he got too close. He had learned that much from Stephen's attack at least. There was something off about his eyes, the normally black color lightening to a golden brown.

"Sirius?"

The Head Alpha merely growled.

Harry blinked. "... Fenrir?"

That earned him a grin, and Harry glowered.

"What is it with you and possessing people? Shoo, you've had your fun."

The grin widened, and was followed by a dark chuckle. "For now. I imagine we'll be seeing each other soon enough."

The grin disappeared and Sirius' eyes faded to black once again, but then so did all his fight. He collapsed, and Harry barely managed to keep his head from smacking the ground, and even that much ended up dragging him to the bloody ground with him. Remus wasn't so lucky. He crashed, unimpeded, as dead to the world as Sirius.

The crowd surged forward, and on instinct Harry brought up his wand threateningly, ready to defend his godfathers if they any of them failed to realize that Fenrir's game was over. He needn't have bothered. They merely began to gather up and treat their wounded. Eventually, some of the healers managed to convince Harry to let them take Sirius and Remus.

He followed the Healers to their tents, now crowded with the wounded, and among them was Stephen, pale and bound in splints and bandages. They stared at each other for a long moment, the

bedridden alpha's gaze completely unreadable. Harry finally scowled back at him, before turning to focus on his godfathers, attempting to ignore the other.

Very little actually needed to be done. Their wounds were superficial, and all they truly needed was time to rest and they would awaken on their own. Harry lingered for as long as he could, hoping they would snap out of it quickly, but after an hour Stephen's heavy staring and pervading silence it became too much and he left.

It was near sunset when Voldemort finally managed to make it to the werewolf colony. The war was requiring a great deal of his time, and with Tom's escape a whole new list of concerns had popped up, demanding his attention. Missing the werewolf funeral, the ascension, and the coronation ceremonies was more than a little irritating. He had worked very hard to integrate himself into their society when Greyback was alive, and he despised the thought of time and Blackbone's own antagonistic nature getting in the way of that. It was more than likely that he would find himself dependent on Harry to maintain peace between them. Something he would be both proud and irritated by.

He passed through what once was the Goddess colony, and was now a sacred site. Magic was thick in the air and Voldemort felt his inner monster purr. The graves were freshly dug, heaped of loosened dirt marking each place. It would only require a simple spell to... no, no, that was a bad idea. Fenrir may have been little more than beast in his life, but in his death he was something he knew better than to trifle with. Besides, his old ally deserved more respect than that. If he bothered thinking about it at all, he might even miss the mangy bastard.

A short ways behind him, Morgan followed, as quiet and suspicious as ever. Although most couldn't tell, the man didn't like this place, and Voldemort understood that very well. It was haunted after all, by things wands had no power against, and men like Morgan had no business meddling with.

He continued his journey further into the colony, and to his surprise the presence of magic didn't weaken. He attributed this to the

abundance of blood he found in the clearing, but he couldn't guess its purpose. The werewolves that could be found to explain it shied away from him. Not unusual, but a little irritating at this point.

When he finally reached the main encampment, the area was thick with werewolves and their rough and tumble merry-making. Even in the whirl and ruckus of a several hundred drunken men and women (plus more than a few rowdy children getting underfoot), finding the Head Alpha's tent was only a minor obstacle. It was clearly visible, the largest structure in the encampment, and stood an oasis against the chaos.

The tent flaps were wide open and the inside brightly lit, revealing the Head Alpha himself and an rather eclectic ensemble. There was the new Head Alpha of course, his beta, several alphas, Harry in the black and encrusted garb of a shaman, that infuriating Luna girl, and what must have been the new vessel of the goddess. Blackbone was swathed in bandages, and beside him Slivermoon didn't look much better. This was a bit odd, but he didn't grow concerned until he saw Harry looking nearly in as bad a shape as godfathers.

"Was there another battle while I was away or did you decide to challenge Blackbone as Head Alpha?" he greeted blandly, inviting himself into the tent and seating himself beside Harry, across from Blackbone. Several of the gathered alphas glowered at him for the perceived impudence, but a sharp gesture from Blackbone had them slinking out of the tent. Harry looked vaguely amused at this, but was quickly distracted when Luna draped herself around his shoulders.

Annoyance reared its head as Voldemort watched her casual displays of affection with his protégé. He couldn't quite forget the one instance where she had defied his claim to Harry, and he rather got the feeling she was challenging him yet again.

"Greetings, God Eater," the young goddess said, regarding him with that same cool omniscience that followed her in which ever vessel she assumed. He nodded to her.

"My Lady. I hope these last few days have proven...fruitful."

Blackbone snorted. "That's one way of putting it. Harry couldn't stay out of trouble, of course."

"You're one to talk!"

Luna laughed into Harry's neck, making him giggle and playfully shove her off. He turned to the Dark Lord.

"Greyback ascended. He's now the werewolf's god of war and has a fondness for possessing people."

"Yeah, you missed quite the show," Blackbone sneered. Voldemort rather suspected he had. He weighed the chances of casting legilimens on Harry without him noticing, and quickly found it unlikely. Maybe...

"So down to business then, so we don't have to bare each other's company for any longer than necessary," Blackbone continued, and made a gesture towards Slivermoon, who was all but giving the Dark Lord the evil eye. "Slivermoon and I have been talking about your little arrangement."

Voldemort's eyes narrowed. "I do hope you are not backing out of our agreement, my friend. That would be... unfortunate."

The Head Alpha smirked and rested his chin in his hand, his casual posture revealing an arrogance that matched the Dark Lord's own. "Nah, I'll keep up my end. No worries there, friend. Just a minor detail we want worked out in advance. We were just thinking about the time in between missions. It occurs to us that a lot of things can go wrong during non-combat situations. We want to have one of my people inspect the living conditions of our troops at least once a month, and report directly to me."

Voldemort suppressed an eye roll. "Fine. We'll make arrangements. Anything else?"

Blackbone grinned and Voldemort realized he'd just made a mistake. He wasn't sure what sort of mistake just yet, but he definitely knew he had. Blackbone turned to Harry.

"Well, pup, you've just got yourself a new job. Congratulation, Inspector Harry."

The Gryffindor looked even more surprised by the announcement than Voldemort did.

"Lord Blackbone," Dark Lord warned, "You can not start randomly assigning responsibilities to witches or wizards. You don't have that authority. Besides, Harry has school."

Sirius shrugged, and turned to Jane, who was tilting her head curiously at this latest development. "Is Harry a part of my pack?"

She blinked. "That is your decision, Lord Blackbone."

"Well, then my decision is that he's part of my pack, and thus under my authority. He's the only wizard my men or I are going to trust, and the only guy, wizard or werewolf, I know you can't intimidate into lying to me. As for school, you pull him out of that for you political crap all the time."

However ineloquently put, Blackbone was right. There was no real reason to not to have Harry work as an inspector, or rather as an ambassador between them, and in a lot of ways it provided the training Voldemort desired his protégé to learn. That didn't mean he was going to agree to the terms without a price. At the moment, Harry looked too stunned to say anything one way or the other.

"Very well, I'll agree to this, but I have a few stipulations of my own."

Blackbone and Slivermoon didn't seem particularly happy about that, but they listened.

"Your girl here," he said, gesturing towards Luna, who blinked at him. "As darling as she is, she is getting rather inappropriately

attached to my protégé. When Harry comes here to make his reports, I expect her to be elsewhere.”

“Wait a minute, you can’t do that!” Harry shouted. Voldemort matched his look of outrage with one of his own.

“You might not give a damn about accidentally knocking up a thirteen year-old werewolf, but believe me when I say the rest of society is going to be raising a few objections.”

The boy turned dark red, partly out of humiliation and partly out of anger. “We.. we haven’t! We wouldn’t! And she’ll be fifteen in March!”

“I don’t suppose you’ve taken sex-ed in school yet?” Voldemort asked idly, and Harry turned even darker. He opened his mouth to protest again, but Blackbone beat him to it.

“Fine, but she’s here for holidays and festivals.”

“As long as I’m there to supervise,” the Dark Lord threw in, creating an opportunity to be invited back into the pack’s live just as he had been with Fenrir. Blackbone narrowed his eyes, seeing the demand for what it was.

“Fine. But I get all weekend, Friday nights through Sunday afternoons.”

“Wait a minute!”

“Done!” Voldemort agreed.

“Done,” Blackbone concluded.

“The hell it is!” Harry snapped. By now he was livid, looking very close to setting both men on fire, but before he could spout off a single curse or launch into an angry monologue, Luna stood and dragged him off. The men in the tent all watched curiously as she pulled him just far enough away that they couldn’t hear them

speaking. Which wasn't to say it wasn't informative to keep watching them. Harry's face was expressive; twisting between anger, frustration, surprise, and reluctance with every word Luna spoke. As for her, they couldn't see her face, but her hands expressed what her face did not, touching Harry's arms, ruffling his hair, tugging affectionately at his collar of his shirt. Then she kissed him, quick and chaste, and pulled away, disappearing into the crowd almost instantly.

Harry stood there for a long moment, staring out into the crowd, searching for her tell-tale paleness amongst the masses of tanned bodies, but she was already gone. He turned back and stalked to the tent, sinking himself down in his spot. He glared at each of them, including Morgan.

"And here are my stipulations. One, I'm getting paid. 4-66 may have been pro-bono, but if I'm going to have to put up with all of you trying to dictate who I'm dating, I damn well expect to be compensated for it. Two-" he turned to Voldemort, "I want apparation lessons. There's no way I'm driving all over the damn countryside for nine hours every month. And three... that's between Sirius and me, and you will agree to it," he snapped, pointing a finger at Sirius and practically daring him to contradict him. The Head Alpha wisely did not.

Voldemort opened his mouth to argue.

"NONNEGOTIABLE!"

The Dark Lord quickly shut it.

The penthouse suite in the Hotel Pont Royale was not a typical choice of meeting places, but given the variety of places they had been no one was particularly thrown off by their luxuriant surroundings. Phoebe had already raided just about anything that wasn't bolted down, and Johan had rather magnificent view of the Parisian art district, glowing and bustling even as midnight drew close. Krum was dozing in a chair, snatching what little sleep he could before he left for another city, another quidditch match, and another political rally against Voldemort's impending invasion. Tonks draped a blanket over him and turned the lights low.

“He’s late,” Timmons noted, nervous as always. Fredricks just grinned and helped himself to the liquor cabinet, and poured drinks for the both of them.

“Only just, my friend.”

“He wouldn’t be late. Not for something this important.”

Johan let out a biting laugh. “Dis is important to you? Don’t be asinine. He has the ears of kings and queens tonight. His pawns can wait.”

“Always such a cheerful fellow,” Fredricks chuckled. “He’s right though. Dumbledore has other places he needs to be.”

“Which I hope does not make you believe there is any place I’d rather be.”

They all jumped, including Viktor, who had seemed dead to the world only a moment before. Dumbledore walked through the door to the study, as if he had been there the entire time, smiling affectionately at them. He set his hat and traveling cloak on a nearby chair. Beneath them was a set of robes that could have been found in any of the grand courts and parliaments across Europe, but looked oddly out of place on one of the greatest wizards in the last century.

“How did it go?” Tonks asked.

“Rather as I expected,” he admitted ruefully, “Her Majesty is quite the formidable woman, and she was well aware of the dangers she is courting. Time will tell if she is truly prepared to face them.”

“She won’t help us?”

“No,” Dumbledore said, “But she will not hinder us either, so long as we do nothing to damage her relations with Voldemort. She’s not Seibligg. She won’t rush into anything and assume it will turn out in her favor.”

“Speaking of which,” Fredricks said, “What are we going to do about him? The election is in two days, and I don’t think Germany can survive another term under him. Half the Ministry Aurors are threatening to quit as it is.”

Viktor shook his head. “The alternative isn’t much better. Ivers is a pacifist. He might not provoke Britain, but he sure as hell won’t stand up to them either. He’ll compromise until Berlin is renamed New London.”

“Nevertheless,” Dumbledore interjected before a real political debate broke out, “I believe it is time for a change in regime. What ever Ivers faults, I do believe he’ll try to do what is best for his country. That is something I can work with.’

‘Viktor, I want you in Berlin during the election, rallying for Ivers. You might not be able to vote yourself, but your presence may be what is needed to convince the public that Ivers won’t simply pander to the Dark Lord whims. Fredricks, I want you to do what you can from within the Ministry. Start a few rumors if you must, but I want the rumblings of the Aurors against Seibligg as public as possible. Tonks, you’ll coordinate. If Seibligg does manage to win the election, we’ll need a quick and quiet getaway in place.”

“Vat about the rest of us?” Johan asked, not taking his eyes from the window.

“I want you all in Linz* by tomorrow afternoon. There’s a private militia forming there that I believe holds a great deal of potential, and I want you to feel them out. I’ve made arrangements for Timmons to meet with their commander. I’ll leave you and Phoebe to your own devices.”

Phoebe threw a smirk at Johan, who glanced back at her from the corner of his eye and then pretended he hadn’t, gathering up his things and heading for the door. He had his mission. He’d just as soon get it started, and avoid the inevitable trivialities of plans, concerns, socializing, and anything else that kept anything from getting done. He was barely out the door before three different

conversations started at once, and was more than happy to leave the old goat to his pawns.

Linz is the capitol of Upper Austria (Oberösterreich) in Austria.

Book V:

Chapter 20: Retaliation

Seibligg stood, staring out his office window as a small army of construction workers began erecting a large stage in front of the Department of Ministry Affairs, forcing pedestrians to crowd into narrow section of stairs where Auror's waited, discretely checking random passersby for dark magic. Tomorrow there would be Ministry debate, where he would meet Ivers for the first and likely last time, face-to-face.

The thought of his political opponent irked him more than it should have. Ivers was already out there amongst the crowds, ranting about peace and reconciliation and whatever Mama's boy weaklings thought was important. Stupid really. It didn't matter, he assured himself. The German people were proud, and if Ivers thought he was going to get them to compromise he would be greatly disappointed.

"You look worried," Oblitz stated, glowering at him from across the room. He had refused Seibligg's command to sit, like he always did, and forcing the minister into the unfamiliar position of looking up at someone else. "You should be. You're going to lose this election, then Ivers is going to throw you to the wolves in hopes of placating them."

"Shut up. What would a grunt like you know about politics? I won't lose. I can't. The voters know exactly what will happen if they lose me. We've made sure they know it."

Oblitz snorted. Seibligg was a bully, and like most bullies he was self deluded into thinking people thought the same way he did, even if they never admitted it. The voters were split at the moment, it could fall either way, but Oblitz knew the pep rallies over the next few days would be the deciding factor. Ivers was indeed an idiot, but he was charming and articulate idiot without in major blunders to his name. Seibligg could turn on the charm himself, but after his years of well documented tyranny, it would be a lot less believable and his provocation of Britain had done nothing to endear people to him. His

singular and one true strength in this battle was the fact that he had set up a situation where his leaving office would leave the country vulnerable. Ivers was untested in the field of war, and had already showed a propensity to shrink away from rather than face it.

It wouldn't be enough. Seibligg had too many enemies acquired over his career to think he would make it through the election on top.

Unless something happened of course. Another attack. Something to shake up the masses. Oblitz had hoped for something just before the election, but it seemed the Dark Lord was biding his time. He must have seen the attack on the werewolves for what it was. Nothing more than poking a sleeping tiger with a stick.

It seemed he would have to take matters into his own hands.

"As you say, Minister. I will see you tomorrow before the rally."

"I haven't dismissed you yet," the Minister warned. Oblitz ignored him and left pretending he hadn't even heard him.

~Page Break~

Snape leaned in the Headmistress' chair, his appearance deceptively calm. Inside, however, his mind was in chaos. He was now Headmaster of Hogwarts in everything but name, a position he had lusted after since he was sixth year Prefect. So strange that this dream should come to fruition as another seemed prepared to wither on the vine.

Except that dream wasn't quite dead yet. McGonagall had breathed some more life into it. He was stuck now trying to decide whether he should smother it once and for all or risk nurturing it with the high probability of failure. His new position made his internal struggle seem more pressing.

As mentor to Britain's 'prince' he had already received (and turned down) several proposals for marriage to several pureblood women, and with a highly influential position to be officially assigned by the

next school year his popularity was bound to make his list of potential wives grow. Women who were confirmed fertile and with title and wealth he could apply to his name, the newest primer pater* to appear in Britain since the war.

He would think about this, and his children, and his children's children, and feel a spark of pride and contentment. It wasn't until he started thinking about the present that he would get distracted by thoughts of Ira. Ira would love being the wife of a Headmaster, he found himself thinking. She'd keep house in Hogsmeade (which was quickly growing in population and industry from a village to an actual town), but would frequently be in the castle, making sure her husband wasn't terrorizing the students too badly and that he actually ate what the castles' house elves left him. In the evenings, after she had put their children to bed, he would tell her about his day and she'd laugh at the new way some troublemaker had found to aggravate him and she would tell him what mischief his own children had gotten into. When the children were old enough to mostly fend for themselves, she could take up a teaching position at Hogwarts, Magical Theory perhaps or even Care of Magical Creatures, and they...

Except there wouldn't be any children, because she couldn't have any.

Probably couldn't.

Which was why he should just let go altogether. Except that he had never been very good at letting go. Lily... oh, Lily. His first love, and though distance and silence had numbed that particular pain, thinking of her still brought a dull throbbing ache to his soul. Then there was Vesper, beautiful and darkly glittering Vesper, whose dream he carried on for the both of them. Now Ira, the perfect mix of academic intelligence and feminine warmth, clinging to dreams she could not fulfill.

Probably could not fulfill.

Snape let out a frustrated sigh and stalked out of the office. He wasn't getting anything done, and he still had DA&D assignments to grade. Making his way to the dungeons, he listened to the passing

conversations of students, a collective mix of inane prattle, frustrated rantings, and juvenile attempts at political commentary. The last of these centering primarily around Harry, which was hardly unexpected. The incident with the werewolf girl was not going to fade from anyone's minds soon, and with news of the werewolf colony massacre and Harry's own involvement showing up in the paper daily, there was not shortage of fuel for speculation and opinion on the matter. For once, Snape couldn't criticize their rampant imaginations. It was pretty weird and interesting and... worrisome. Snape hated werewolves.

Honestly, he couldn't understand Harry's affection for them, outside of their connection with his godfather who was a tentative connection to his real father. It was possible that Snape himself knew the boy better than anyone else, having been with him since his induction into wizarding society and reluctant guardian for several years now, and in a lot of ways Harry was an open book, but in others...

Thinking about the infuriating Gryffindor was always distracting, and if there was anything Snape needed at the moment, it was a good distraction. Entering the dungeons, he decided he would make his first real concentrated effort on unraveling the paradox that was Harry. It just so happened he had an unusual abundance of material to study from. Hermione had brought his trunk down to him for safe keeping shortly after the Gryffindor had left. Apparently, there was a history of other Gryffindors tampering with Harry's things. Why his goddaughter thought to lug the thing down to the dungeon's rather than to her own Head of House he couldn't begin to guess. It wasn't as if he was the more trustworthy of the two.

It took nearly twenty minutes to open Harry's trunk without setting off the defenses. There were an impressive number of wards and charms protecting it, but Snape had a reputation that was not about to be undone by fifteen year old, no matter how precocious.

Inside was an adolescent's treasure trove of the mundane and the magical. Clothes of course, and the usual hygiene materials, Quidditch magazines and supplies, bundles of letters, a few of which Snape was concerned to find he had never seen before. A fist sized stone of no obvious purpose. A bezoar (that little thief!). School

supplies and text books. Three small vials of unlabeled potion (very suspicious). Several unusual, if not exactly rare, magical objects; a reader's ring, an UnSilencing Bell, a couple of wands (where had he gotten those?), a tooth and claw necklace wrapped in leather, and a few other odds and ends. Several disguises of questionable taste. A knife, with no magical properties that he could detect. A sketchbook and several art supplies.

The sketchbook was revealing. Harry, despite his inability to retain a girlfriend, obviously had a healthy attraction to women if the abundant sketches of female students was anything to go by*. There were several portraits in fact of people Harry knew, including himself hunched over a cauldron, and glowering at its contents as if they had somehow insulted him. When had Harry done that, he wondered.

He continued his perusal through his ward's possessions, and nearly keeled over when carding through the boy's pile of personal books and came across Tom Riddle's journal. Merlin Almighty, he had forgotten about that little monstrosity. He had glimpsed in a memory once before, but had soon been distracted by some life or death situation and forgotten to investigate further. Stupid, stupid, stupid! He had to be going senile to have let something like that slip his mind.

Except that the journal was dead. Whatever dark magic had clung to it (he had seen Voldemort kill more than a few unwary witches and wizards with it back in the day, and it was a slow and ugly descent into sickness and insanity), was gone. In fact, any magic on it at all, was completely gone. There were a few scribbles inside of it in Harry's handwriting, some sort of attempt at communicating with the item, but otherwise it was completely blank. Quite the mystery. Had Harry killed it without even realizing it? Why did he have the journal in the first place? He set it aside, intent on studying it further, and looked through the other books.

An encyclopedia of Celtic Gods, which Snape copied a few sections from that related to gods and goddesses he had heard Harry or Voldemort mention before. A few books of ritual, self-defense, dueling, and charms practicum. A large and rather out of place book on Centaurian Prophetic practices, missing the first and probably a third volume of the collection. He opened the book, suspecting it was

being used to hide something, but was disappointed when it revealed nothing but text. He scanned it idly, and figured out what it was after a minute.

A naming book of all things, based on the date and time one was born. Curiously, he looked up his own birthday, January 9th, early morning.

Sicsano. Born in the Elder Youth of the New Day of the New Month of the New Year. Fated to a life of consistent change.

Snape smirked at that. True enough. He opened the book to Harry's birthday (one of the few he actually knew). He knew his Centaurian name was Ghihalmelan already, from discussions he had with him immediately after the incident with the dragon. He was, however, curious to see what the book said Harry's life was fated to be like. Fated to a life of annoying Sicsano, seemed a strong possibility.

Except the name wasn't where it was supposed to be. According to the book Harry's name should have been Nuscain, Nuscani, or Nuscast (depending on what time of the day he was born). The first of August. But why would the centaurs lie? Or had they merely been mistaken? Perhaps Harry had misheard. He scanned the page, and found Ghihalmelan a short distance down from where it should have been.

Ghihalmelan. Born as the Seventh Month dies. Fated to a life of conflict against powerful forces.

Snape threw the book across the room as if it had suddenly transfigured into a cobra and bit him.

~Page Break~

Ron was happy Harry was gone. No one would be surprised to hear this, but they might be surprised about why he was happy his pseudo-nemesis was gone. None of his reasons were personal. Harry was a complete crackpot minus nonsensical babbling in his opinion, but he figured there were reasons for that, the primary one being Voldemort (along with the second, third, and fourth reason) and

last one being childhood trauma (Hermione had accidentally blurted out once that the guy had found his parents with their heads blown off when he was eight, which earned a few sympathy points even from Ron. But just a few. Less than a handful really), so whatever grudge he had harbored against the other boy had puttered out over the years into a healthy rivalry (healthy in that he didn't plot his death outside of Dueling Club and DA&D).

No, the reason why Ron was happy that Harry was gone, was because Hermione had a lot more free time to spend with him now that she wasn't mothering Harry into doing his homework, eating right, and avoiding man-eating dragons. He was more than pleased to have her all to himself for the Halloween Ball, the Hogsmeade weekend, and any time they weren't in class or officially working on the paper.

"It's awfully gloomy for this time of year," Hermione commented, as they strolled beside the lake. They couldn't go far. New security regulations were forcing them to remain within easy sight of the school's new watchtower, but the weather wasn't good for a long walk anyway. The skies were overcast, threatening yet another early snowfall, and a biting wind was blowing in from the west.

"It's the dementors or so they say," Ron said, shrugging his shoulders. "It's going to be a nasty winter. Lestrangle will probably have us raising yaks for coat liners next."

She couldn't help but smile at that. Lestrangle was indeed keeping everyone busy gathering supplies for the war effort or increasing the protections around Hogwarts, and despite the grimness reasons behind these actions, it was becoming something of a running joke amongst the students. Then her smile faded.

"Do you suppose the war will still be going on when he graduate?" she asked, and Ron's initial instinct was to lie, but he thought better of it. One of the things he liked about Hermione was that he didn't feel the need to sugar coat things. She'd be insulted if he tried.

"I hope so."

“What? Why would you want...?”

“Well, it’s not a noble reason,” Ron admitted, shrugging. “I’m no Gryffindor, after all, but you know this war... any war really... awful as they are, they’re also great opportunities for guys like me.”

She frowned. “Guys like you’?”

“Yeah, guys who’ve got talent but nothing to their name. This sort of thing can make nobodies into somebodies, turn paupers into dukes, and fools into heroes. Of course, even if this war is done with by the time we graduate, there’ll probably be another one soon enough. I’m going to enlist either way. Bet I could make First Officer within a year if the fighting’s heavy enough.”

“Ron, that’s awful! You could be killed!” He felt genuinely pleased that she looked so upset about that, but far from persuaded.

“Yeah, well. Nothing’s free. Not even opportunity. I’ll take my chances.”

She shook her head. It was stupid and selfish, but she had to give him credit for being honest with her. Draco still treated her like a well-read but fragile china doll, and Harry... oh, she wasn’t even going to get into all the issues she was having with Harry’s self-sacrificing protective streak.

“Come on, Warlord Ronald. Lets go back. You can help me fend off Trudy Sabbat’s attempts to usurp my throne. You have my permission to use deadly force.”

He laughed, and followed her back to the castle.

~ Page Break~

“You look very handsome,” Voldemort commented, eyeing his young protégé critically. The Beast Brigade (a name of questionable taste, but it was the army) uniforms were cut in the same manner as the regular troupes, but they were pitch black and lined with grey fur atop

the shoulders. They gave an impression of a rather sinister mix of military ruthlessness and bestial savagery. They suited Harry nicely, particularly when the boy's intense green eyes were flaring angrily through his fringe of dark hair.

Just like he was doing now, from the far end of the conference table, hunched over a pile of forms.

“Although, the glasses lessen the impact. We really need to see about fixing your eyes permanently. If they work so well during the full moon, I see no reason why we couldn't make work for the rest of the time.”

Lucius chuckled, taking a sip of his wine and throwing in a bit of commentary of his own. “I don't know, I think the glasses add a... civilizing touch to the whole ensemble. He's a wizard after all.”

“I think the wand makes that clear enough, Malfoy,” Harry said, his piercing gaze sliding to the man, who had been subtly (subtly as a Malfoy bothered to be anyway) insulting werewolves and Harry since his arrival that morning. He was seriously considering biting the man just to give him a good scare.

“That's General Malfoy to you, Lieutenant Potter.”

And wasn't that just a delicious turn of events? Harold James Potter, Britain's beloved prince, under his command? Alright, it was only a technicality, and he would be hard pressed to order Potter to do anything at the moment, but there was so much potential there and he would be damned if he didn't take advantage of it.

“Now, now, Lucius, what is rank among friends?” Voldemort chided, clearly amused by their little tiffs. A little ‘sibling rivalry’ wasn't necessarily a bad thing. Neither could afford to be complacent. Particularly Harry, who had a tendency to take walking away from a conversation with dark wizards unscathed for granted (walking away unscathed for everything else was practically a miracle).

Or at least, that was what Voldmort thought. Harry, in fact, knew he was poking a sleeping dragon with his attitude, but frankly he was just so angry right now. Since the Dark Lord had shown up last night, things just seemed to worse and worse. He had to say his goodbyes to Luna his morning, feeling both hollow and alone. He left without speaking to his godfathers, and was starting to feel guilty about it, which just pissed him off considering they hadn't even apologized. Ugh. They he had spent the morning following the werewolves through orientation, and inspecting the facilities where they would all live, train, and sleep. Harry wasn't entirely sure what he was supposed to be inspecting, but as far as he could tell everything was clean, working, and devoid of mind altering chemical and spells (he had in fact tested the beds for memory spells just in case). They he had been dragged off to be fitted for his new uniform and fill out the paperwork for his rank and pay, while the Dark Lord and Lucius hovered like creepy versions of the Weasley twins, making inappropriate commentary and feeding off each other's amusement.

“Don't you two have something better to do? Like, conquering Europe or something?”

Voldmort smirked, and looked ready to say something witty and probably mildly insulting, but then paused. His eyes widened. “I knew we forgot something.”

~ Page Break~

The weather was lousy for so early in November. A cold drizzle and hard north was dampening the enthusiasm of the crowds at they gathered for the main event before the polls opened at noon. Viktor didn't mind. Durmstrang had forever set the standard for 'increment weather', and with his collar turned up and his hat pulled low it was fine as any spring day.

He wove his way through the crowd, careful not to draw any attention to his face. His own rallies (played out in the pub and bar districts) had been a rousing success as best Viktor could estimate, and he was never so grateful that he hadn't given up quidditch as he was now. Who knew an athlete could hold that much sway over the opinion of the working man? But now there was nothing left for him to

do but sit back, watch, and wait. The first and last debate between Ivers and Seibligg was due to start any minute, and he had agreed to watch for both Dumbledore (who couldn't risk being recognized) and Tonks (who was busy securing an escape route to Linz) even though he wanted nothing more than to go back to his hotel room and sleep for a week.

"How much longer, Dad?" came the telltale whine of a child from behind him. Viktor glanced over his shoulder at a young boy, no more than seven or eight, looking bored and miserable with his mouth scrunched into a full blown pout. He looked ridiculous. Viktor turned away quickly before the kid noticed him laughing quietly into his hand.

"Just a few minutes, Martin. One day you're going to be telling your own children about this," the boy's father promised.

"About what? I can't see anything down here! And it's cold!"

"I'll put you on my shoulders once it starts. And then I promise we'll have some hot cider afterwards. Okay? Just be good, and pay attention? It's very important and you're the only one I could couldn't on to understand. You're sisters aren't' as grown up as you."

Tat seemed to placate the child, and Viktor shook his head. Had he been that gullible at that age? More than likely. Some days he still felt that gullible. His father had raised him on pride and Dumbledore employed him on honor, but sometimes the dark reality of the world came crashing down on him and neither seemed to be enough.

"Ah, I think it's starting! Come on, Martin. Up you go!"

Viktor turned this attention to the platform, where both candidates and their entourage of security, family, and aides were filing onto their respective sides. Seibligg smiled and waved pleasantly, and Viktor fought the distinct urge to throw something at him. Ivers smiled, but it was ill suited to his solemn eyes. Viktor had only ever seen him in photographs, and truth be told they didn't do the man justice. He was rail thin and drawn, but he walked tall and purposefully. For all the

jeering about his pacifistic stance, the man looked strong enough to throttle Seibligg with his bare hands.

An excited hum ran through the crowd. Little flags began to wave and groups of people began to cheer, proclaiming their allegiances. Viktor was having a hard time differentiating which side was the more popular and inwardly cursed. He should have found a spot with a better vantage point of the crowd.

“Welcome ladies and gentlemen to this historic event!” announcer greeted, and a loud cheer rose up.

And then another sound rose, wailing and screeching over the din of the crowd like a banshee foreseeing catastrophe.

An alarm.

Aurors drew their wands, and immediately began pulling the candidates from the platform and towards the safety of the Ministry offices. The screech of the sirens were underlaid with the dull roar of confusion, and Viktor could already feel the crowd beginning to panic. He wasn't feeling too calm himself at the moment.

He had to get out of the crowd. He couldn't use his wand-

Heat, pressure, and sound so impossibly loud it felt like punch to the head.

He wasn't sure how long he was unconscious, probably only seconds, but in those seconds the world had changed. There was screaming, fear and pain, and pleas of help and the sound of an enormous fire. The air reeked of burnt hair, smoke, blood. Viktor blinked, realizing his eyes were still open, even though all he could was the black fog of smoke and dust. It hovered just above him, threatening to descend and suffocate him.

He tried to move, cautiously, wiggling his fingers first to make sure they were still there. Slowly, he tried his arms, struggling a moment to pull them free the weight of bodies resting on top of them.

“Uunnn...”

Was that him or someone else? He couldn't see, couldn't think, but he could hear out of at least one ear and really wished he couldn't. People were dying. Why was he just laying here?

He forced himself to sit up, and nearly vomited as a wave of dizziness sent the world flying. Blood trickled down the side of his face. His eardrum must have been punctured. He tried to stand, but couldn't keep his balance on the uneven ground and fell to his knees. Just as well. He could see when he stood.

Others were starting to get up as well, those who could, but it only made things worse. The people were panicked and tried to run, tripping over the dead and injured, hurting themselves and others, blindly groping for loved ones, for help, for a way out of the battle zone. The fallen were being crushed, and Viktor scrambled himself for some place he wouldn't be stamped on and crushed. Someone grabbed him, pulling him to his feet, and he almost pitched over immediately but his would-be rescuer held him firm.

“Quickly, before they come back,” A young man, only a little older than himself wheezed and dragged him through the blinding, suffocating haze. “Into the Underground. Just follow the others. Here, someone take him!”

“He was handed off to a man and a woman, who took each arm and lead him into a steady stream of people. After a while the air cleared a little, and he tried to speak again.

“What ugh *huck* w-what..?”

“The Brits, they finally did it. They attacked! My god there were children in the crowd!”

Martin, Viktor thought, That little boy was on his father's shoulders when the explosion...explosions?.. went off. He was higher up, more vulnerable. Did he make it?

Viktor found himself being taken down a flight of wide concrete stairs, and the smoke cloud and chaos of the outside fell away to reveal gleaming white tiles and fluorescent lighting.

“Where are...?”

“The Underground. The tunnels lead all over Berlin. Some of them lead out into the subway system. We think they’re sticking out the wizarding area of the city, so it’s the safest place to go.”

“Muggles...”

“We’ll figure something out...”

He was in no position to question it. He was in no position to do anything at all. God dammit, he was a soldier! He should’ve been out there assessing the situation, fighting the bad guys, rescuing the trapped and the injured! Not... not...

“Hang in there, kiddo. You’re going to be alright.”

It wasn’t himself he was worried about.”

~ Page Break~

1. I’m sure some of you forgot what ‘primo pater’ means. In Latin, it translates to ‘first father’, and it’s a term used in wizarding society to refer to the first wizard to appear with a particular last name. This is usually in relation to a long pureblood line, and is applied retroactively. Snape, however, is banking on the possibility of having a strong pureblood line stretching out for generations.

are not the only thing Harry draws in his sketchbook, but they are the only things he draws repeatedly.

Alright I've just discovered my story seems to have been removed from everyone's alert list without their permission (including my own) and I'm having trouble re-adding it. Dammit to hell. If you've come across this chapter and wondered why there was alert, it wasn't my fault! If you have any friends or are in any forums my story features, would you let them know I've updated?

Hello, everyone! Long time no see. Sorry about that. End of semester, but holiday traveling and Christmas sucked up my writing time. So here you go. I hope to turn out another chapter by next Tuesday, but of course my credibility is shot at this point. You' ll have to keep your fingers crossed.

Book V:

Chapter 21: The Eastern Front

Lieutenant Seitler internally cringed when Potter arrived at the front gates of Hogwarts and saluted him. He had been warned in advance of the boy's recent change in status, but two days was not enough to mentally prepare himself for the sight of a skinny adolescent boy in full military uniform standing in front of him. It was beyond inappropriate. It was an insult to the armed forces, both Cultie and Sentinel, not so much because of the person Potter was (Seitler like many of his colleagues felt he had great potential despite being a walking disaster magnet), but because the employment of someone so young into an extremely dangerous profession (especially these days) went against their very reason for being. They were meant to protect Britain's youth, not paint a giant target on them and set them loose. More irritating was the fact that Potter was probably oblivious to his own mortality, and that was dangerous for everyone.

"You're not going to wear that here," he stated, glaring at the younger man's black and fur-lined uniform. It wasn't quite an order. He wasn't mentally prepared to attempt to pull rank on another Lieutenant from the military.

"It's only for when I'm on duty," Potter said quickly, fidgeting a bit. It was obvious he wasn't yet comfortable in it. Good.

“Are you on duty now?”

“... no, sir.”

“Then go change. This isn’t Halloween and that isn’t a costume.”

“Yes, sir. I mean, no, sir...Er... I’ll go now.”

“Leave your luggage and be back in half an hour. There’s paperwork.”

“Yes, sir.” There was a definite hesitation on leaving his luggage with Seitler and his men, but nothing too suspicious. Civilians rarely liked to leave their belongings to be looked through by government entities. Seitler made quick work of it. There wasn’t much to find. Clothes and the usual hygiene materials mostly.

There were only two suspect items; a bag of leaves and five foot staff. The leaves were common herbs, nothing that couldn’t be found over the counter at any local apothecaries. The staff was holly wood wrapped in leather and sown with bones, feathers, and beads. It obviously came from the werewolf colony and set off their magical detection devices at nearly six feet.

He decided to run that by Snape before returning it.

Privates Tousack and Finn looked disappointed.

“Were you expecting a severed head?” Seitler snipped. Tousack, a recruit barely a year out of academy and who could sass with only his left eyebrow, grinned back at him.

“You never know with this one. Bit of an odd duck, he is.”

Finn tried and failed to suppress a smirk. “Could have stuck a werewolf puppy in here somewhere.”

“Good to know you gentlemen are not underestimating Mr. Potter’s propensity for trouble. I, myself, continue to be amazed at the level of chaos he has managed to achieve.”

Seitler tensed, but kept his face expressionless as he turned to see Snape gliding soundlessly towards them. How had he snuck up on them undetected? He nodded to the man.

“Professor.”

“Lieutenant,” the man acknowledged. Tousack and Finn had once again adopted their ‘game face’ which may have intimidated school children but had no affect on the de facto headmaster. “So he has returned then?”

He gestured towards Potter’s things.

“Yes. I sent him to change. He was... inappropriately attired.”

The other man had nothing to say to that.

“Find anything of interest?”

Seitler pointed out the herbs and staff. Snape checked the herbs first, sniffing tentatively. His expression remained completely blank, but the Sentinel suspected he was thinking very deeply. He set the herbs aside, and went to the staff. He did not touch it, but performed several spells that even Seitler was unfamiliar with.

“This... is coming with me. Inform Potter if you would that I shall be sending it to his vault in Gringotts,” he said finally, carefully taking hold of the staff.

“You do not wish to speak with Potter yourself?”

Snape’s expression remained stony. “Lieutenant, I am a very busy man these days. Idle chatter with delinquent students is not high on my list of priorities right now. Send him to Professor McGonagall. She can deal with him.”

He left without another word, and once out of hearing range Finn muttered 'jerk' under his breath. Seitler wasn't about to jump to the same conclusion. Snape... was not a likeable fellow. He was curt, sarcastic, and intolerant of incompetence. But he was also fiercely protective of his students (Potter in particular who was simultaneously the most troublesome and the most valuable of his peers) in his own merciless way. It seemed odd to Seitler that the man wouldn't speak with Potter directly, if not to chastise him then to at least learn what the Dark Lord was up to these days. The election of the new Minister of Magic in Germany was supposed to be today, and he couldn't be the only one wondering if they would be continuing the war against the idiot Seibligg or some complete unknown.

He wondered if something had happened (something more than the usual weirdness) that had created a rift between guardian and ward. He wondered if there might not be a way to take advantage of it.

~Page Break~

There was no way out of the Underground that lead to muggle Berlin. Those who had fled into the tunnels soon found themselves at a dead end, bricked over and heavily warded. Any spells sent at it ricocheted, and no one dared try more hardcore spells for fear of killing everyone crowded around them. Some turned back immediately, some just sat and waited for help to arrive, some lingered around the blocked passage and tried to find a way to tear it down. Some of those who left came back with medi-witches and wizards to help the injured. Some of them came back with news.

“ They've cut off the entire Court District and Lindt-Wilhelm University,” a man said, his thick winter robes smeared with blood and ash, to a small group standing near the blocked wall. Viktor listened with his one good ear as a young medi-witch tried to examine him. She was already exhausted from treating dozens of others, and he didn't try to rush her. She was doing far more good than he was at the moment. “They're raiding all the buildings, dragging out all the people. Sometimes they just took their wands and let them go, but other times... especially near the Auror's headquarters...”

The man covered his eyes and could say nothing else. A woman took up where he left off. She was ashen and despite the bright lights in the tunnels, her eyes remained wide and unblinking.

“It’s like they’ve got a list. This...death list, and they’re just sorting through everyone to find them.”

“List? A fucking list? Where the hell were you looking?” another man snarled. “They were killing anyone who had their wand out! And that was everyone! I saw them! Cut down a bunch of college kids trying to put out some of the fires. Kids I tell you! Not one of them over 22! Fucking sick bastards.”

“It’s not just people either,” another nervous fellow jumped in. “It’s places. They were burning all the wand shops on 42 ½ St. I... I don’t know if the owners were inside or not. They were destroying all the Ministry offices as far as I could tell... but it was dark from the smoke so I can’t be sure...”

“My God, how are they doing all this? How could they?” the woman sniffed, her wide eyes finally squeezing shut as tears began to fall and she sobbed quietly. Viktor, who either from his concussion or some other shock, was thinking clearly enough to know the answer but not clearly enough to realize it was a rhetorical question finally spoke up.

“I know this one. It’s brilliant. Horrible, but brilliant. It’s why they attacked the debate first... well, that and they wanted to kill the candidates I guess... This isn’t even their spell work, you know. They just... pirated it. It’s the Ministry’s. They set off the Ministry’s own fucking defenses.”

The medi-witch glowered at him. “Ssshh... enough of that. You’re hurt and confused. Hold still and I’ll do something about your ear.”

But everyone was looking at him now, and it seemed wrong to leave them wondering.

“The Ministry has defenses around the city to protect it from muggles. Most major wizarding cities do. The Brits must have found out where the main hub for controlling them was located. They attacked the debate, the Aurors protecting it all go to help the minister, then those that remain are wiped out by another group of Brits, and then they take over the hub, activate the defenses and then... amp them up. Doesn't take much to make a ward meant to keep out muggles from keeping in witches and wizards, you know.”

He must not have been very clear because they were all staring at him with the same vaguely horrified and confused expression.

“How... how do you know that?”

Viktor snorted. “Vikings did it in Londinium in eight hundred something... I know a lot about Vikings.”

“And I know a lot about healing,” the medi-witch interjected, “And if you want to heal, I highly recommend you shut up for ten minutes. Would all leave us be? He has a concussion, he doesn't know what he's talking about.”

Ten minutes later his ear was healed, albeit temporarily, and he could walk without feeling dizzy again. The concussion was gone, but his certainty in his idea wasn't. It seemed most of the others hiding in the tunnels were becoming increasingly certain of his idea as well, if only because no other plausible or even implausible explanation had been offered yet. He didn't stick around elaborate on his theory. The only one who might actually make use of it was Dumbledore and he had to find him quickly.

He back tracked through the tunnels, unconsciously searching the dirty, frightened faces of the people huddled together for Martin, the boy he had seen just before the explosion, but there were too many people to know if he was there or not. He continued on until he reached the stairs that would lead up to the surface, and found a small crowd standing there with apparently the same intentions. A young man turned to him as he appeared and gestured for him to stop.

“Wait a minute. We’re waiting for the scout to get back.”

He really didn’t have time to wait around for someone who might not ever appear. If Dumbledore was still in the city, it probably wouldn’t be for long. He had more than a little experience slipping through traps. Pushing and squeezing his way up, he tried to listen for any suspicious sounds, but there was nothing but the dull roar and occasional snap and crackle of fire. Outside the air was thick with smoke and steam, buildings and signs stood out as ghostly silhouettes in the haze. He searched for possible threats, but it was uncannily silent. Cautiously, he made his way towards the Lindt-Wilhelm University, an abandoned dormitory the agreed meeting place if things should go wrong.

The journey there was like a dream, shapes forming and disappearing in and out of the gloom, shouts and screams from out of sight, and the uneasy feeling of being watched. Viktor kept to the alleys wherever possible, and made it a point to look upwards frequently for broomsticks and snipers. There was no one else out on the street, but passing by some of the darkened windows he could see people trying to hide under tables and chairs. Some of the windows had been exploded and were now blocked with planks of wood or furniture. Paranoid eyes peeked out at him through doorways and gaps in the woodwork.

He didn’t encounter any real signs of battle until Leipziger, a café and bar strip a few blocks from the campus. Several of shops were now burning, while others were merely cinders and melted glass, and in the street bodies lay scattered. Men and women had been left where they lay, their wands out, some tucked behind a small tree or whatever possible cover they could find. They were not fighters, but even still they managed to take down a soldier or two. Viktor made it a point to memorize the look of their grey uniforms, but shied away from their faces, younger still than most of those civilians they had helped to murder.

Wilhelm was the main street leading to the dormitories, and here Viktor met the enemy. His only forewarning was the heavy trod of boots from up ahead, and quickly ducked a doorway and cast a

notice-me-not on himself. It was just in time. A small squadron of soldiers, at least a dozen, appeared with their wands up and their eyes alert, looking like wolves on the hunt. They were grouped together in threes, and positioned themselves in front of different shops, just a short distance away from him.

“Reducto!” one of the men shouted, blasting the door of a small restaurant into shards of glass and winter. Inside, several people screamed in fright. “Come out with your hands up or we’ll burn you all alive inside!”

The words were stilted, a rehearsed line by someone who had no real idea what they were saying. The soldiers stepped away from the doorway and after a moment a middle-aged wizard appeared with his hands up, followed by a busboy, then more and more people began to file out. Two of the soldiers grabbed them roughly and herded them into a line and forced them to their knees while the third kept his wand on those still filing out. When no one else came out the third went inside, and returned a moment later and signaled that it was clear. Some thirty men and women knelt terrified in the street.

Across the street another set of Aurors repeated what had just occurred, breaking down the door and ordering those inside to come out. While that was going on the first trio continued to the second stage of their routines.

“When I stop in front of you, surrender your wand, handle first, and you will be allowed to leave unharmed. If you resist, I will kill you,” he stated blandly. He moved to the first person in the line, the middle-aged wizard, who reluctantly pulled his wand from his jacket and handed it over. The soldier took it and snapped it.

“NO!” the wizard shouted and lunged for him.

“Crucio!”

The wizard fell to the ground and screamed, as did several other people in the line. Viktor clenched his wand in his hand and calculated the odds of killing the soldier and escaping with his life.

They were abysmal, but he could not stand watching the torture for much longer. The screaming finally stopped and wizard collapsed, struggling to breath. The soldier moved to the next person in the line, who surrendered his wand and did nothing more than cringe when it was snapped in front of him.

“Hey, Captain! They ain’t coming out!” one of the soldiers from the second trio called in English.

The soldier who was snapping wands turned to him. “Did you give them the warning?”

“Yeah, twice.”

The captain shrugged. “Burn it down.”

The soldiers nodded and lifted their wands.

“Oprimo viscera!”

Viktor’s curse caught the closest soldier squarely. The result was a shrieking scream, followed by burst of blood from his mouth, and then death. The others stared stunned just long enough for him to repeat the curse on a second soldier, this one as far away as he could still see him. More screaming, from the civilians in the street, from inside the buildings, and finally shouts from the captain to find the attacker. Viktor had already moved from the doorway to the closest alley, running as fast as he could without knocking over debris and giving away his position. A whistle went off somewhere behind him, alerting others to what the attack.

He risked crossing the open street to get to a large park located on the edge of the campus, and ducked into the undergrowth. He kept moving until he found himself at large pond. No one followed him, but he continued to scan his surroundings restlessly. When he was absolutely sure no one was going to be firing any curses at him, he sank to his knees and vomited.

Those people on the street, he may have killed them for all he knew. The captain had been willing to burn innocent people alive, would he think twice about killing those on the street now that Viktor had provoked him? Had his own misguided attempt to stop them really saved those people in the shop or had they burned it anyway?

Stupid, Viktor! If you had just stunned those two they might not have been as angry! They may have been distracted long enough for those people inside to surrender.

There was nothing to be done about it now. Maybe he had helped, maybe he had made things worse. For himself, there was no help. He would never reach the dormitories. He knew that now. They would find him, kill him if they recognized him, kill him if he tried to fight, and Dumbledore wouldn't even be there. He was gone. He had to be. All Viktor could do was run and hide.

For now.

As soon as he found a place to hide that was relatively safe, he would start planning. The Brits were working quickly to unarm the civilian population before a resistance could be mounted, but they wouldn't get everyone. They couldn't. Viktor just needed to find others, find out how deeply entrenched the invaders had made themselves, find a way to tear down the wards that entrapped them, and they might be able to win back the city.

Funny how that sounded so much harder without Dumbledore and a bag of lemon drops backing him up.

~ Page Break~

Katarina awoke choking on ash, her entire body convulsing in panic until she blindly kicked open the lid to her coffin and sent it flying to the other side of the room. She searched the room, expecting to see fire, but there was only a sickening smog trying to invade her undead lungs. Her rooms were shuddered against the deadly rays of the sun, but the electric lamps she kept on at all times glowed and she hunted her way through her room to the adjoining one, where six coffins lay.

“Wake up! Wake up!” she shouted, throwing open lids and pulling her groggy children from their beds and all but tossing them on the floor. “We’re under attack! Wake up the others!”

Disoriented, the younger vampires scrambled to their feet to do as she commanded while their mistress hunted for answers. Despite the smoke, none of the rooms were on fire, and no one had entered. The smell was atrocious, but being undead she was not forced to breathe it in, and despite the lack of fire her instincts were screaming at her to get all of her children out of the house. But what if that was what they wanted? What if they were trying to flush them out so they could cut them down once they left their sanctuary? Who were they anyway?

“Calm yourself, Madam.”

She turned letting out an angry hiss. Horace stood in the parlor, drinking tea, the smoke that had enveloped everything else parted away from him. He did not look concerned.

“What is the meaning of this?”

His expression remained bland, but there was an underlying tension she didn’t miss. He was angry with her, angrier than he had been when she had thrown his last command in his face and sauntered off to do as she pleased.

“The meaning? The meaning my dear lady is... that I told you so.”

“I beg your pardon?!”

“Beg away, I doubt it will save you.”

“You-“

“Shut up, you stupid cow! You didn’t want to listen to me before, wanted to prove something, and congratulations you’ve proven what spoiled brat you are and probably killed us all,” he snarled, a flick of his wand smashing her into the piano. The instrument shattered,

leaving her stunned in a pile a dangerously sharp wood and broken piano wire.

Goethe burst into the room, followed by half a dozen other vampires. One of them made a rush for the young wizard, only to burst into flames. He began screaming.

“Horace, stop!” Katarina screamed. “Please, stop! Please!”

The flaming vampire extinguished himself, leaving behind the charred remains of his clothes, and lots of exposed and unharmed skin. It had only been a warning. One she was not going to take for granted. Defeated, she let Goethe pull her to her feet, and looking down turned back to the wizard.

“Please, tell me what’s happening.”

The boy put his tea down, shoving it aside and began pacing.

“Voldemort’s army has invaded Berlin. They’ve locked down the wizarding city. There’s no way in or out. We’re stuck. I filled the house with smoke to trick the Culties from actually setting it on fire, but someone is going to catch on eventually.”

“I don’t understand. What do you mean Voldemort’s invaded Berlin?”

“I’m not sure how I can simplify that sentence,” he sneered. She bit back her own acidic retort.

“I mean... why didn’t you tell me?”

“Because I didn’t know. He told me to leave for Frankfurt so that we wouldn’t be caught up in this but he never told me his plans in case I was ever caught. Dammit, dammit, dammit.”

Katarina wanted to ask more questions, offer some suggestions, but she had a feeling anything she said at this point would only infuriate the boy further. Looking more closely at him, she could see he was

exhausted, his eyes bloodshot and shadowed and his hair and clothes uncharacteristically mused. At last, he stopped pacing and turned to glare at her.

“I’ll figure something out, but in the mean time I expect you to follow my orders to the letter or I swear on my life I’ll leave you here to burn with the rest of the city, is that clear?”

Once again, for the sake of her children as much as herself, she bit her tongue.

“Chrystal.”

~ Page Break~

Harry hadn’t even gotten the chance to unpack yet, and Hermione already had him sifting through enough homework to make his brain pop. His suspension meant he could not re-take any tests or make up missed assignments, which after two weeks was going to make a hefty dip in his GPA for the semester, and if he wanted any chance of bringing it back up before the end of the semester he was going to have to ace almost all his assignments and pick up as much extra credit as he could muster.

“ I’ve already talked to Professor McGonagall and Professor Slughorn,” Hermione reassured him, looking her most sympathetic as he gawked at the foot high stack of papers. They were in the library, cloistered into a quiet little nook where the stares and whispers from the other students wouldn’t bother them. “They’re both willing let you complete some extra credit work during the holiday break, and I’m pretty sure I can convince Professor Snape to let you tutor for the first years for extra credit, but he’s been in a mood lately so I think we should wait before we try discussing it with him. Professor Sprout and Professor Flitwick...eh... I don’t know if there’s much to be done about them. They’re both still furious with you.”

Harry nodded, hoping he didn’t look too panicked. “What about Vector and Toure?”

“Simple,” Natalie interrupted, inviting herself to squeeze in next to Harry, while Draco situated himself next to Hermione. “Bribe Vector with one of those cool pagan rituals with all the circles and triangles and things. Don’t even worry about Toure. She practically creamed herself when she heard you became an official diplomat for the Dark Lord. She’ll probably give you an Outstanding in her class just on principle.”

“Oh, yuck, Nat,” Draco cringed. “Do you have to be so vulgar? It’s hard enough listening to that woman’s ranting without you tossing in those wonderful mental images.”

“Prude,” the Slytheriness dismissed. She turned to Harry, and before he could react she pecked him on the cheek. “Welcome back, Harry. You’re looking much better, I have to say. Although, I’m sorry I missed seeing you in uniform. Cullis said you looked quite dastardly.”

He smiled a bit awkwardly. She’d caught him off guard with the kiss, and he was feeling a bit flustered, although she didn’t seem to have meant anything by it.

“We all are feeling quite deprived. How are you, you mad rogue?” Draco said.

“Getting madder every day. Did you hear-“

“No, no, no. Not now!” Hermione interjected. “You’ve probably got more stories than Beadle the Bard to share, but if you start on them you’ll never even get started with your assignments and you’ve got two chapters to study for if you want to pass that quiz in Arithmancy and a foot long essay on transmutation of alloys due tomorrow in Transfiguration!”

Natalie glowered at the other girl. “Oh come on! You’re here. We haven’t seen him in two weeks and the last thing we heard about him was that he got drafted into the military! Did you really get drafted?”

“Uh... yeah, I guess-“

Hermione glowered at him. "Harry, do you want to pass your classes or not?"

"Er..."

Draco chuckled and climbed out of the cubicle. "Uh-oh, she's got the evil eyes on her, mate. Best to just nod obediently at this point. Come on Nat, we can grill him at dinner."

"I'm not afraid of-"

The Gryffindor prefect turned her formidable glare to her. Natalie quickly shut her mouth. She glared back briefly, before letting out an indignant sniff.

"Have it your way, but Ron will be so disappointed."

She stalked off. Draco rolled his eyes as he turned to follow her. Hermione let out a frustrated huff. "That girls sometimes...Argh!"

Harry gave her a thoughtful look. "What was she talking about? With Ron, I mean? Why would he be disappointed?"

"Forget about it." She waved her hand dismissively. "He gets jealous about spending time with me sometimes. It's silly really, and I'm not going encourage his childishness. Now, chapter eight-"

"Hermione..."

"Harry, we really need to get started-"

"Thank you."

She blinked, and he couldn't help but smile at how surprised she looked.

"For doing all this," he elaborated. "You're a really good friend. I know I don't say that enough, but that doesn't mean I don't think it."

Her ears started to turn pink and she looked down quickly at her hands, flitting through her notes. "Oh...I... you're welcome. I mean... I know you'd do the same for me... well, you have done the same thing for me. With the acromantula and all, except of course you risked your life so really it's even bigger than... um.... chapter eight. Why don't you start copying my notes?"

"Sure," he said, taking mercy on her. Hermione might love being praised for her intelligence, but it seemed any other kind of praise turned her into a modest mouse. He looked down at the parchment containing her small, tidy script, and started to read.

As much as he missed Luna, there was something to be said about the comfort of the familiar and routine. It was a warm, safe place after stumbling lost through the wilderness. They had survived it together and they were bonded forever by the experience, but he had bonds here as well. Bonds formed through steadfast loyalty and shared affection.

It was good to be home.

~ Page Break ~

"Fire!"

Another volley of spells smashed into the wards, causing the air to shimmer like the oily surface of an enormous bubble, only to fade into its undetectable translucent state. Oblitz glowered at the line of Culties grinning at him and his men as yet another attempt to bring it down failed. A few of them actually clapped mockingly.

Oblitz ground his teeth. This was not how he imagined his day going, although even he could find a bitter appreciation for the irony of the situation. It had been his intention to stage a terrorist attack about midway through the debate, blow up a few buildings in a neighborhood shopping district, give everyone a good scare before they went to the polls and remind them of exactly what they were up against.

Except it seemed even Oblitz himself had underestimated what they were up against. He hadn't anticipated the attack on the city on Election Day. The move seemed too impolitic, too audacious for a creature as manipulative as Lord Voldemort. He had only himself to blame. He was in charge of the city's security, and now he had lost over 90 square kilometers, nearly two-thirds of the wizarding section of the city, including all of the Ministry Offices and Auror Headquarters. Seibligg was dead or else soon to be publically executed, leaving wizarding Germany without a true leader...

He might be able to work with that.

He turned to his men, a mere two hundred, not nearly enough to oust the estimated two-thousand soldiers terrorizing the city even without the wards separating them. They would need reinforcements.

"I want a perimeter set around this entire wall. We might not be able to get inside, but I want to make damn sure that none of these sons of bitches can get out either! Stay alert! I catch anyone of you sleeping on the job, I'll make sure you wish you were in there with the bastards," he snarled.

All of them saluted obediently and went off to do as instructed. They were well trained. Ten times brighter than any of the stooges making monkey faces from the other side of the ward, but they wouldn't be enough. Not yet.

"Sgt. Lars," he snapped, and a young Auror paused on his way to follow orders. Reluctantly he stepped up to his commander.

"Sir?"

"You transferred to Berlin from Hamburg, did you not?"

"Yes, sir."

"So you know the Head Auror there?"

"Er... by reputation only."

“Then by reputation only, do you believe he would spare some of his men?”

Lars stiffened. “Sir, with all due respect, any Auror worth his salt in Germany would willingly drop whatever they’re doing to help drive out these tyrants.”

“I’m banking on it. Go to Hamburg, tell them what’s happened. Have them spread the word. I’ll need men and supplies here as quickly as possible. By dawn I want these fools to know exactly what sort of hornets nest they’ve stepped in. Go!”

The Auror apparated away in a deafening snap, leaving Oblitz to wonder if he were truly doing the right thing. What if this was exactly what the Dark Lord wanted? If he took Aurors from the other cities then those cities would be vulnerable to attack. Yet what choice did he have? Berlin could not be surrendered after so feeble a battle.

He would think of something. There was no one else left to do it.

~ Page Break ~

“Harry!”

He awoke instantly, wand in his hand and pointed before he even registered that he had even been asleep. Something broke, a scone maybe, crashing to the floor. He blinked once, twice, grabbed his glasses and tried again.

Hermione stood by the doorway blinking down at the twisted piece of metal currently laying at her feet. He paled.

“Oh Merlin, are you alright?!” He clambered out of bed, ignoring the icy chill of the floor. In the other beds, boys stirred from their sleep, grumbling and cursing at the early hour.

“I’m fine,” she said, still looking down at the scone. “I didn’t know you sleep with your wand under your pillow.”

“I don’t. Hermione? Are you alright? I didn’t... bloody hell, I don’t even remember what spell I used!”

“Potter take you’re love spat outside! We’re trying to sleep here!”

She blinked again, and then seemed to shake herself out of her surprise. She grabbed his hand, leading him out of the dormitory and down the stairs to the Common Room. It was empty, but a fire had been lit to fight off the early morning chill. The grandfather clock showed it was only a little after seven.

“We’ll talk about what happened later. Did you know about this?!”

She shoved a newspaper at him and turned away to start pacing in front of the fire, chewing her thumbnail nervously. Looking down at the paper, it immediately became obvious what had her so agitated. Splashed across the front in words large enough to be read from across the room, Wizzarding Weekly practically screamed;

BRITAIN CONSQUERS BERLIN!!! MINISTER SEIBLIGG DEAD!!!

Harry’s eyes widened and he quickly scanned the article detailing the invasion of the German capitol city during the election, the subsequent death of the minister during the conflict, and the meager resistance that was so easily swept aside. There was more, much more, but he couldn’t bring himself to continue. He shoved the paper aside, too stunned to know what he should be feeling. Hermione took one look at him and her expression softened.

“You didn’t know.”

He shook his head, not trusting himself to speak. He had seen the Dark Lord the previous morning, the day of the invasion, had breakfast with him, discussed military politics and the werewolf funeral. Some how Harry doubted that the invasion of Germany had simply slipped his mind.

“What does this all mean?” he asked. “I mean... I sort of get why he... why we’re... no, no... I don’t get it. Well, I do, but... how? How can we invade a city? What’s to accomplish? It can’t be held forever! Merlin we assassinated their minister!”

She shook her head.

“I don’t know either. The Dark Lord must have a plan. Lucius must have a plan.”

Movement from the stairs distracted them for a moment, and Clyde ambled down in a bathrobe, looking only half awake.

“What’s going on?”

Harry handed him the paper, and he skimmed it. “Huh. About bloody time.”

They both just looked at him. He shrugged.

“Well, what did you think was going to happen? The stupid jerks got exactly what they asked for. We should have smacked some sense into them last year after the whole tournament plot.”

“People are going to die!” Hermione protested.

“People already died!” Clyde snapped back, the first real hint of anger. “They murdered those people in Dunnan Hill and Timir! They tore down our protective wards so they could go on to murder even more people!”

“How do those sins make it alright for us to commit the same sins against people who weren’t involved?! We’re only escalating the violence. This will only make things worse for everyone!” she shouted back. Clyde threw up his hands and turned to Harry who was staring into the fire.

“You know I’m right. They killed your friends, would killed your godfathers if they had been there. They have to be stopped and this

is the first real step to doing that. Explain it to her. I apparently don't speak intellectual."

"Harry, this is only going to get worse," she reiterated, but said nothing else.

Harry closed his eyes. "You're both right."

Clyde snorted and rolled his eyes. Harry glared at him.

"You're both right. This is going to get worse. It's only the start of things. More people are going die. A lot more people... but it... we couldn't do nothing. They did have to be stopped. I just... I can't imagine how this is going to end. I don't know what we're going to lose or win and whether it's going to be worth it. I just don't know."

They all stood silently for a long time after that, until finally Clyde nodded.

"Yeah, okay. That makes sense. Sorry, Hermione, didn't mean to snap at you."

Hermione nodded, not looking any happier.

"What do we do?"

Harry shook his head. "What can we do? We don't even know what's going on. We'll just have to wait. Gather our facts. Figure out what to do after that, if there even is anything we can do."

~ Page Break~

The Dark Lord and General Lucius stood across from one another in the meeting room, staring down at a map of Berlin. On it several pin pricks of blue and red dots were moving. A majority of the red dots were concentrated at the center of the city, with an even larger number of blue dots scattered around them. Amongst the concentration of red dots there was the occasional blue one, but they had been steadily disappearing since yesterday and would soon be

gone altogether. Their men had successfully taken the city. It was a matter of holding it that was of their primary concern now.

Around them several lieutenant generals, colonels, and majors were gathered to await news from the battlefield and receive their orders. Among them was Major Beartooth, the official leader of the werewolf troops for all of three days. He was large, bear-like as his namesake, with a thick ruddy beard and arms like tree trunks. He remained out of everyone's way and they likewise returned the favor.

An urgent knock on the door drew everyone's attention, and they all turned as the door as doors opened and a young private entered and saluted shakily.

"What is it?" Voldemort prompted.

"The most recent report from Maj. General Albertson, my Lord!" he said, holding out a scroll.

"Very well. Dismissed."

Lucius relieved him of the scroll and brought it to his master. Voldemort read it, smirked and handed it back.

"The wards remain stable, the Aurors inside have been all but annihilated, and our men have already disarmed an estimated third of the population. Ladies and gentleman, Berlin is ours."

The room swelled with cheers and applause. It had been a risky maneuver. The true scale of Berlin's defenses was unknown, but it would have been at its most alert with the election in place. It seemed providence was on their side. Voldemort let them have their moment of enthusiasm, enjoying it himself for few moments before he gestured them to quiet down.

"This is indeed a glorious victory, but we still have much work to do. The Polish Minister of Magic is a new and skittish ally. Our success in Berlin affords us some confidence, but we will need more victories and soon if we hope to keep it. Albertson has what he needs to hold

the city for at least six months, but we're going to need to take the states of Brandenburg and Baden-Württemberg long before then in order to secure the borders in France and Poland. After that, we'll move our troops towards each other through Hesse, Thuringia, Saxony-Anhalt, and Saxony, effectively splitting the country in half."

"Divide and conquer," one of the majors said thoughtfully.

"Precisely. The Aurors will be gathering in Brandenburg and what little remains of Berlin, so we will begin our attack in Baden-Württemberg. We'll start off with shock troops first, take out as many Auror and Ministry offices as possible, and then march our infantry after them to establish control over the local population. After that we'll have to wait and see how the Germans respond. If they stick to Berlin or rush to Baden-Württemberg or split themselves, we have plenty of options left to us in any of these events. Any questions?"

One of the Corporals, a hard-faced woman missing her left ear stepped forward.

"How much force do you wish us to use to subdue the civilian population?"

"As much as necessary," Voldemort said plainly, then added, "And no more than that. As tempting as it may be to punish them for what happened in Ireland and Scotland, they will suffer enough through their humiliating defeat. I expect all of you to be ruthlessly efficient so that they might fear you, but not so utterly ruthless that they will find rebellion the more suitable choice than surrender. Remember, the eyes of the world are upon us."

An audible snort drew his attention to the corner of the room where Beartooth stood, arms crossed.

"You have something you would like to say?" Voldemort asked smoothly. Several men and women quickly stepped out of the way so as not to be between the werewolf and the Dark Lord's wand.

“My people don’t give a damn about the rest of the world. Sure as hell don’t give a damn about German sensibilities. We’re here for one reason and one reason only: Kill as many as the fuckers as possible.”

Those gathered in the room held their breaths, certain that such a bold and disrespectful statement could only end in blood and/or screaming. The Dark Lord must have been in unusually high-spirits, however, because all he did was smile.

“Shock troops it is then.”

~ Page Break~

Snape stared out the window and down at the small gathering of students beside the lake. Harry was out there, weaseling some extra credit out of Vector by demonstrating some sort of pagan ritual for making fire with only diagrams of triangles and pentagons to the entire arithmancy class. Seitler was nearby, scanning for trouble, and more than likely some of his men were out of sight doing the same. He was thankful for their diligence. It was hard enough convincing his own students to be cautious and alert, let alone the castle’s own security detail.

Within a few minutes Harry succeeded in making fire. Small though it was, Snape couldn’t help but be impressed. He had heard Professor Seamus gloat to Vector that the spell was possible but way out of the league of a fifteen year-old novice. There were three hundred and thirty three parts to it after all, and they had to be arranged perfectly. Apparently, Potter had found an abridged version. Or had created one himself.

The Gryffindor made some sort of flinging gesture at the little fire, which suddenly exploded. Those gathered all leaped back in alarm, except for the conjurer himself who had been knocked three feet away and onto his back. Vector hurried to his side, but the boy was already climbing to his feet, patting his clothes to put out the little fires. He didn’t seem particularly concerned that he had nearly blown himself up.

Merlin, this was supposed to be the greatest threat to the Dark Lord?

No, it couldn't be. The child who had been prophesized to destroy Voldemort was dead and gone, and had been for fourteen years now. Buried in some unmarked grave with Frank and Alice Longbottom.

This was just coincidence. A mistake on the centaurs' part. Maybe even a cruel joke. After all, there was no proof Harry had been born on July 31st. There was no reason for Harry to lie about it. He didn't know about the prophecy.

However, Dumbledore did. Dumbledore who could have warned James and Lily. It would explain why they had fled Britain so abruptly, why they would hide their identities and pretend to be muggles, and why they might lie, even to their own child, about his age and birthright.

No. They had reason to flee already. The war was escalating and the end could be seen overwhelmingly in the Dark Lord's favor, and they had fled knowing they and their infant son would be killed if they didn't. Pretending to be muggles... it wasn't like they had any reason to cling to wizarding life after they left Britain. They must have thought being a muggle was somehow better than being a refugee, and in a lot of ways they were probably right.

It was too important a matter to guess at. He would have to know before he did anything. Wait, no, that's not right. If he knew, then he would have to do something. What exactly? Tell the Dark Lord obviously... or tell Harry. Warn him. Explain his destiny. Help him carry it out?

There had been a time in his life, one he was not proud, where he had doubted the Dark Lord's cause. The Death Eaters, men and women he had respected and admired, had been becoming increasingly fanatical, malicious, and barbaric. He had found himself becoming disgusted with their pointless cruelty and their lack of any true motivation beyond the indulgence of their own growing sadism. More than that, he was starting to hate the Dark Lord for encouraging them.

Only Lucius knew of his doubts, and was the sole surviving confidant of those dark times. The death of the Longbottom child and with it the only hope of the Dark Lord's defeat had stripped him of the possibility of defection, and despite the hopelessness that followed the months after, it eventually came to pass that the war ended. Lucius had pulled some strings to have him transferred to Hogwarts rather than taking up a Court appointment, sparing him the company of people he had come to despise (with the exception of Lestrangle of course, but then they rarely sought out the other's company).

Things got better. The country began to heal. Everyday the future looked brighter. A new generation, untouched by the horrors of that conflict, was appearing now.

Just in time for this new war to deprive them of their innocence.

If Harry really was the one capable of killing the Dark Lord, should he help him do so and put an end to this vicious cycle? Would that really help anyone at this point? Pulling Voldemort from his immortal coil would destabilize the government, the entire country, leaving them vulnerable to threats from within and without. There would only be more war.

If Harry was truly destined to kill Voldemort, and there was no definitive evidence that he was, Snape may not in fact be capable of stopping him anymore than he was capable of stopping Voldemort. The infuriating Gryffindor had survived countless obstacles at unbelievable odds for years, and in the process had obtained magical and political power. He had nearly succeeded in killing the Dark Lord once already. What if he sided prematurely? He was caught in a very precarious position between them.

Questions. Too many questions. He didn't know what to do. Had it really only been a week ago that his biggest concern was the future of his own genetic line? It seemed such a small and ineffectual matter, and yet perhaps if the future was really so grim it should be of primary importance. What if he did not survive? Who would carry on his legacy? Ira if he could have his preference, but life rarely asked his opinion.

What if he was just turning into a paranoid loon? Maybe Dumbledore cursed his office before he fled Britain. The years Lestrangle had spent here certainly hadn't improved her sanity.

He needed answers to two very basic questions before he proceeded to any others questions concerning his future.

Was Harry truly born on July 31st as the Centaurian naming book indicated?

And could Ira, in fact, be the future mother of his children?

Saturday was in three days. He would uncover the answer to both questions then.

~ Page Break~

"She won't come out," Timmons said softly, as he descended the stairs to the living room of the small town home they were currently borrowing. It all looked sadly empty. Krum was lost to them, as was Fredricks, both killed during the attack on Berlin or else in mortal peril that none of them could save them from. Dumbledore and Tonks had arrived as scheduled, and while their leader informed them of the sad turn of events, she had gone up to one of the empty bedrooms and would speak to no one. Timmons had heard her weeping, but he didn't think that was something he should share with the others. She obviously wanted to grieve in private. "I think we should leave her be for now."

Johan, for once, had nothing sarcastic or belittling to say. Phoebe, likewise remained silent.

"This..." Dumbledore began, then stopped and shook his head. "I find myself at a loss for words in this moment, at a time I know you all need comfort and reassurance. I can find none that would not be an insult to those we have lost."

"We don't know if they're dead," Timmons said quickly. "They're both very clever young men. They still have a fighting chance!"

“Yes, indeed, they do,” Dumbledore agreed, smiling sadly. “Please hold onto that hope for us, my friend. I am afraid we are running short on it. Matters have turned increasingly grave. I had not considered the invasion of Berlin possible with it being so far from both Britain and France. It would seem that the Dark Lord has made a secret alliance with Poland, allowing Britain to flank both sides of Germany. If something is not done, Voldemort will take Germany and make himself at home on the mainland. I don’t need to explain to you how vital it is that we prevent that from happening.”

“To hear people talk in Linz, it shouldn’t be hard to gain Austria’s alliance. It’s the bureaucrats holding things up, but with the invasion of Berlin, they’ll have to take a side soon,” Johan said. “Italy hates the Dark Lord. They’re calling him the anti-Christ over there.”

“Funny, they said the same thing about me at one point,” the old man said, trying at a bit of humor. It died rather ignominiously. “I am going to return to Germany. Without a Minister or their Parliament, the people will be in desperate need of reorganization. There aren’t enough Aurors there to protect everyone from an invading army, but if I can convince the public of the imminent threat I may be able to organize a civilian militia.”

They nodded. Timmons looked up towards the ceilings.

“Will you take her with you?”

The old man’s eyes closed and he let out a deep sigh. “No, not yet. Dear Nymphadora has always been a woman to carry her emotions in extremes, both the good and the bad. When the time comes, she will arise from this tragedy more fierce and driven than ever, but that time is not now. Let her grieve.”

~ Page Break ~

“We should offer a truce with the British. Just because they don’t know about our alliance with the Dark Lord doesn’t mean we can’t make one with them now,” Katarina suggested. She was sitting alone

in the parlor with Horace, the room devoid of illumination. They had cleared out the smoke when it appeared the Culties were through with ransacking the city. For now, everything was quiet. Too quiet for an 8:00 P.M. in a city like Berlin, but not even the vampires felt much inclined to merrymaking with the invaders hunting the streets for rebels. Her children were scattered around the various windows of the hotel, looking out for trouble.

Horace didn't even grace her with his usual glare. He simply continued to nurse his glass of brandy, pretending he could actually see it even though she knew he couldn't. "No. Grandfather will wish to maintain absolute deniability. There's no way he'll associate himself with you until the entire massacre fiasco is forgotten or he could convince everyone that you were in Frankfurt instead of Berlin when the attack happened. You'll all be slaughtered."

Katarina mentally sighed. Was he ever going to let that slide?

"Then what do we do?"

"We find the hub, deactivate the ward, and escape," he stated. She was tempted to throw something at him to see if he would duck.

"It'll be heavily guarded, and even if you succeeded, the Aurors outside would get in and slaughter your men. I doubt Grandpa would appreciate that."

That earned a small, barely detectable smirk. Yes, progress!

"The wards can't be continuous. There are too many different types of terrains around the city, some of them are even underground. We may be able to take down a small and inconspicuous section for a short period of time before the Aurors even notice. No harm, no foul."

She nodded, even though she didn't like the plan. It was too risky. The hub would be heavily guarded by trained and armed wizards, and while her own people were formidable, they were not invulnerable. They didn't even know where the hub was and if they

did, would Horace even know how to work it without tearing down the entire system?

Also, there were more immediate concerns.

“My children will need to feed soon, as will I.”

He glanced in her direction, his normal ruddy-brown eyes appearing entirely red.

“Then you shall hunt. There are enough dead in the street that I doubt anyone would question a few people going missing.”

Well, perhaps matters the situation was entirely bad.

~ Page Break~

Harry kept himself hunched over his Herbology essay, determined to ignore Draco's snickering from across the library table. It didn't help that if he glanced out of the corner of either eye he could see both Ginny and Hermione trying very hard not to smile.

“I can't believe you actually burnt off your eyebrows,” Draco finally said plainly, and both girls burst into giggles. He glared at them all. His eyebrows, thanks to Pomfrey, were right where they were supposed to be but no one in class seemed quite able to forget the incident in arithmancy. How was he to know that just a drop of blood would have that big of a reaction?

“Shut. Up.”

~ Page Break~

The Detrimonius Age Potion was the most reliable and the most precise age determining potion Snape had ever encountered, and also the most difficult to brew. He had only done it once before during his university days and afterwards had sworn never to attempt it again. It had seemed like such a uselessly over specific potion (who

cared if your birth was off by half an hour?) and so difficult to brew he was convinced its inventor a closet sadist.

However, if Harry was 'born as the seventh month dies' he would have been born close to midnight. A half an hour could have him born in either August or July. He had to be absolutely sure.

Time was not on his side. His duties stole away his daylight hours and snatched greedily at his evenings, and the Detrimonius Age Potion required time and concentration. He had taken to brewing it at three in morning in order to make the timing just right, subsisting on catnaps for the last three days. It did nothing to improve his disposition, and certainly wasn't endearing him to his students any. McGonagall actually had the nerve to call him a tyrannical ogre. To his face no less!

He hoped his lack of sleep was not reflected in the letter he had sent to Ira, requesting to visit her. Perhaps it didn't matter. She had written him back after all with her approval.

Snape dared a glance at the clock, before turning back to his potion. Just after six. He was to meet Ira at seven and he was still in the same clothes he had worn yesterday. He could rush his morning routine, but rushing potions was an entirely different matter. She would forgive him for being late, he reminded himself, the potion wouldn't forgive him for being early.

He hovered motionlessly over the cauldron watching as the transparent green fluid began to brighten ever so slowly. Five minutes passed. Ten. Fifteen. And finally, it was just right. He stirred the potion counterclockwise three times with a white elm twig and then clockwise with a cedar twig six times. The potion became colorless.

He let out a sigh of relief, and carefully ladled out the potion into six small vials, then separated the vials between his refrigerated cupboard and the storage cabinet. After all the trouble he went through to make it, he didn't want to ruin his work during a moment of insomnia induced clumsiness.

He looked at the clock and cursed under his breath. Abandoning his lab for his private quarters, he dug out some vials from his sock drawer and downed them. The stubble he had been sporting promptly fell out and his mouth tasted far too strongly of peppermint. Potions were delightful things, but they could not yet replace the need for showers or the regular replacement of clothes, which he did in record time. His hair was still soaking when he stepped out of the castle and into the dark chill of the November morning. A house elf had a horse from the stable ready and waiting for him when he arrived and the sentinel at the portcullis watched him suspiciously. He didn't dare rush his horse in the dim light, and by the time he reached Hogsmeade the sun was just starting to touch the tips of the tallest roofs.

The sentinel station was minimally manned so early in the morning, but the sole guardian did his duty, checking Snape's identity and authorization before letting him into the same room as their floo. He was seven minutes late when he finally stepped into Chief Sentinel Morgan's parlor.

The sun was just slightly higher here, and illuminated the room in a soft yellow light. It was much the same as he remembered it from past visitations. Dark wood paneling and large marble fireplace with a hunting scene carved into suggested it had been designed with a man in mind, but the predominance of artfully curved furniture, an over abundance of pillows, and the half dozen vases filled with flowers stated plainly that a woman ruled the roost.

"Severus? Is that you?" From the entry door, Ira made her appearance. Her hair was down, something he hadn't seen before. It made her look younger, he noted. He bowed politely to her.

"Good morning. Forgive me for my lateness."

She smiled weakly and gestured towards the small round table where a tea set was already prepared for them.

"I know your time must be especially precious to you these days. Morgan told me you had been promoted. Congratulations."

“Unofficially, I am afraid. All of the responsibility and none of the respect. I can’t complain, however. My pay has nearly doubled. And how are things at the university?”

They took their seats across from one another. She looked at him solemnly, as she poured him a cup of tea.

“I was fired.”

He wasn’t entirely sure what he should say to that. Then the slightest hint of a smile tugged at the corner of her mouth. He glowered at him for tricking him.

“I really was fired. Budget cuts. The funds are all being funneled toward military and defense projects. Man-hunting butterflies apparently didn’t meet their standards of scary.”

“I can’t imagine why not.” He poured a little cream into his tea.

An uncomfortable silence fell between them.

“It’s good to see you again, Severus,” she said finally. “I wasn’t sure if I ever would.”

“Yes, I’ve had a lot to think about since our last meeting. I admit, I didn’t think I was going to see you again either for a time.”

She looked down. “I’m sorry I deceived you.”

He smirked a bit at that. “That is quite alright. As a Slytherin, I have fine appreciation for deception. I didn’t come here to make you feel guilty, Ira. I want to tell you what I realized while I was thinking.”

She looked up again, uncertain. He purposefully kept his expression blank. It wasn’t his intention to pressure her or intimidate her. If he didn’t have her full enthusiastic cooperation, none of this would be worth it.

“I want you to be my wife.”

Ira dropped her tea cup, causing it to shatter. Tea instantly stained the table linen, then disappeared, charmed to remove any evidence of its owner's clumsiness.

“I-“ she started, her eyes wide and on the verge of panic.

“And I want you to be the mother of my children.”

Her panic morphed into hurt. She had such an expressive face. There was nothing she could hide from him, or anyone else for that matter, which normally earned his contempt but right now he found it comforting.

“Severus, don't...” she said softly.

“I believe you want the same thing.”

“I can't.”

“I am not convinced it is impossible. I think you should get a second opinion on your... condition.”

“You have no idea what my condition is,” she said, a hint of anger seeping into her voice. “You have no idea what you're asking me to do. I had the hope of a family crushed long ago, and I won't let you put me through that again. I think you should leave.”

She stood up, preparing to abandon him and his plan before even hearing it. He took her hand as she passed, forcing her stop.

“Please, wait...”

Refusing to look at him, she tried to pull her hand away. He didn't tighten his hold, but he didn't let go either. “Severus, don't. I know I misled you, but I never intended to hurt you. What you're doing to me now... it's beyond cruel.”

“I know,” he admitted, unperturbed. “But you’re also playing at being the damsel in distress, and frankly I don’t think it suits you at all.”

He caught her free hand just before it managed to make contact with his face. She glared daggers at him, her eyes darkening in anger. Staring back at her with his same cool, provoking expression he continued.

“Three hours. That’s all I ask.”

“Liar.”

“And unrepentant.” He let her go, and stood. “I have buried dreams myself, Ira. Do not think you are the only one who knows the anguish of resurrecting them. Right now, I’m hemorrhaging self-respect.”

Her expression softened, then hardened again, then cracked. She smiled.

“How can you be simultaneously charming and abhorrent at the same time?”

“I don’t know. Maybe you just find the abhorrent charming. Two hours and forty-five minutes?”

She crossed her arms, but she didn’t try to escape. That was something.

“And what precisely do you expect me to do?”

Half way there. He was very tempted to smile, but he didn’t want to frighten her.

“There is a medi-witch here in London. A woman with a... unique specialty. Her primary practice is prenatal care and midwifery, but on Saturdays she devotes herself to a different kind of patient.”

“Patients like me? Who can’t... un.”

“You do realize we’ve both completed a college-level education? It’s okay to actually say all those naughty words.”

“She sounds like a quack.”

“Geniuses usually do. I’ve called around. She’s very good. I took the liberty of making you an appointment with her at eight.”

She gaped at him. “You’re shameless!”

“It’s completely confidential.”

“Oh god!”

“You don’t need to be nervous. I’ll go with you.”

“Oh god!”

It took considerably more cajoling, arguing, and charming abhorrence to finally convince Ira to go. Snape was supremely thankful that Morgan was busy in Bristol and Mrs. Morgan was away on some sort of retreat, because he didn’t think he could survive the embarrassment of either of them reporting some of things he had said to their circle of friends. Nevertheless, he had succeeded. Five minutes to eight, he was escorting her to a large town house on the upper east side, looking no different from any of the other houses on the row except for the little sign hanging in the front garden reading;

‘Mothers-To-Be Midwifery; Medi-witch Juliana Jacobi’

A plump, middle-aged receptionist answered the door, and led them inside. The entire bottom floor had been converted into a clinic. The parlor served as the waiting room, the library as an office, and the bedrooms as examining rooms. Ira spent several minutes filling out forms, glaring at them hatefully every so often when the questions became a little too personal.

“It’s asking me if I’m a junkie,” she said indignantly. Snape peeked at her form, and smiled.

“It also asking if your chosen partner was ever diagnosed with a venereal disease. I’ll choose not to take it personally. The answer is ‘no’ by the way.”

“Mrs. Beadle?”

They both looked up to see a small woman with poof of white hair and a mouth that was made for smiling. She was dressed in the familiar white frock of a medi-witch, and had a file tucked under her arm. Ira clutched Snape’s arm as if she expected to be eaten.

“Good morning, dear,” the medi-witch said pleasantly. “No need to be nervous. We won’t run any tests today. We’re just going to have a bit of a chat. Get an idea of what you want. Would this be your husband?”

Ira blushed. Snape smirked. Jacobo smirked back.

“Ah. A libertine. Haven’t met many of those since college. Hoo-ha, those were the good old days. Follow me please, dear. Boy toys optional.”

He had to lead a gaping Ira into the medi-witch’s office, and quickly sat her down in one of the chairs. She seemed to come back to herself, along with all her embarrassment over being placed in this situation. Things would have quickly descended into an awkward silence if Jacobo weren’t so skilled in ignoring it.

“Would you like anything to drink? You seem a bit nervous. I have some peach schnapps in the cubby if you’re interested. I know it’s a little early, but some things are best not discussed sober.”

“Er...I... no thank you.”

“Suit yourself. Now then, what exactly seems to be the problem?”

Ira couldn't even begin to think of how to answer that. Snape frankly hadn't a clue. All he knew was what she had told him and that wasn't anything.

"Let's try this at another angle. Do you enjoy sex?"

The blush that followed could have stopped traffic.

"A lot of infertility is the result of underactive hormone production. If you find you are not becoming aroused, this can affect conception."

"N-n-no, that's not..."

"I didn't think so either. Are you menstruating?"

Ira stiffened. Jacobi nodded knowingly.

"Have you ever menstruated?"

A nod.

"At the usual age? 12 or 13?"

Another nod.

"When did it stop?"

"...I think I'll have that drink now."

It took three shots before Ira could be coaxed into saying anything, during which time her hand found its way into Severus'. It stirred in Snape distant memories of his youth, when his mother lay in her sick bed, weak and desperate not to be abandoned.

"It stopped after my husband poisoned me..." Ira said finally, listless, staring out the window to the empty street outside. Something inside Snape clenched. "...with my own birth control potion."

And the clench tightened until it became a stabbing pain.

“Why would you-“ he started, but Jacobi held up her hand to silence him. Ira went on as if she hadn’t hear him.

“I didn’t want him to hurt the children, you see? He hated children. Hated women. Hated everyone really. He liked money though. And my family had a lot of that. He used to work for my father as manager at one of his mills. I don’t remember what they made. His name was Winston.”

She took another sip from her glass.

“Daddy thought he was a nice man. I don’t know why. No one else thought so. I certainly didn’t think so, but he married me off to him anyway. Said he was a strong, intelligent man and that everyone was jealous of his ambition. Daddy was never very bright.”

Her eyes were starting to glisten with tears, but she wiped them away quickly.

“I wanted children,” she said, turning to Snape, pleading with him to believe her. “I really did, but... I couldn’t... I couldn’t bring them into that house. I wasn’t strong enough o protect them from him. So I started taking a potion. You know, those little home-kit versions? Mix the little blue vile with the little green vile once a week and take once after eating?”

Snape had no idea what she was talking about.

“Oh, yes, I remember those,” Jacobi nodded, “We used to hand them out like candy before the war. Useful, but hardly discreet.”

“So I learned. Winston found out. He did something to the vials. I nearly bled to death... if it hadn’t been for the house elf... Three months in the hospital, too weak to move, and when I came out of it Winston had divorced me, claiming I violated my marriage contract by taking contraception, and ran off with my dowry.”

“You never pressed charges?” Snape asked, unable to believe the man could walk away from such a vile act without some repercussions, especially if Ira’s father really was rich.

“I couldn’t prove anything. The medi-wizards said it was an accident. That I stupidly took the wrong combination of potions too frequently. Daddy believed Winston. What could I do with my own father calling me a lying harlot? Oh god, I can’t believe I’m telling you all of this.”

“Neither can I,” Snape admitted, rubbing her hand gently in his. His mother always seemed to calm down when he did this.

“Mom divorced daddy after that. She couldn’t forgive him for siding with Winston against his own daughter. She tried taking me to some other doctors, but they all said the same thing. That I’d... ruined myself with the contraception. Withered my womb into nothing. No one could help.”

Jacobi came around her desk and handed Ira a handkerchief, giving her a moment to come back to herself. She patted the younger woman on the shoulder.

“There, there, dear. You’ve gone through quite the ordeal, but its all in the past now.”

Ira just sniffled softly.

“Alright then,” the medi-witch said, taking her seat behind her desk once again. “I’ll have to perform some tests, but I think I may just be able to help you.”

~ Author’s Notes~

Just for clarification, the Brass Culties are only attacking wizarding Berlin. I had Oblitz state that the British had taken about 90 square kilometers, which would be 2/3 of wizarding Berlin. All of Berlin combined is about 890 square kilometers. So wizarding Berlin is about 1/8 the size of the entire city combined. If you’re wondering

what muggle Berlin is making of all that smoke coming out of seemingly nowhere, I'll get into that next chapter.

Now, as a friend of mine pointed out, some people might think that witches and wizards ability to apparate would make the geographical aspect of the superfluous, but that just isn't the case. Apparating may make it simple for individual fighters to move around quickly, but when it comes to moving entire armies it can't be relied upon. You can only apparate to places you can picture in your head, and since the British are not familiar with any of Germany the geography makes a huge difference. Additionally, you also have to factor in the supplies you would have to take with you for occupying a territory. Food, equipment, weaponry, etc. Once a city is conquered, anti-apparition wards would be the first order of business as well.

And yes, the prophecy exists in this story and has been effecting it from the beginning. Does it apply to Harry? Next chapter.

Sorry, this is just a wee bit late. It just didn't want to get done

Book V:

Chapter 22: Rebellion

It didn't take long for Viktor to find shelter or round up a group of willing resistance fighters. Or rather, they rounded him up. After three days of raiding and unarming the civilian populous of Berlin, the Brass Culties had settled into a routine of control and reconnaissance, leaving the disoriented and frightened survivors to find shelter and sustenance for themselves. Many of those survivors included college students from Lindt-Wilheim, who had found places to hide in the pub districts and underground where even the local Aurors were hard pressed to hunt them out. Viktor, like so many others, had come out of his hiding place in the park in search of food, and been recognized by a pair of young wizards and invited to stay with them.

There current pad was the burnt out shell of an Italian restaurant, another victim of the Culties burning raid. The windows had been blown out from the heat, and they didn't dare repair them lest they gave away that anyone was staying there, which left the place bitterly cold. The basement, however, had remained relatively undamaged, and with a working furnace and seemingly endless supply of stored food, it was a treasure. The city was overburdened as it was, with hundreds of stranded men and women from outside Berlin or the unreachable residential area of the city now cut off from their homes, and forced to rely on the kindness of strangers, the few untouched hotels and inns, and their own wits for shelter.

Ernst and Jacob, the young wizards who had rescued Viktor, were from the university but hadn't been there during the raids and managed to escape with their wands in tact. They intended to keep them too, and use them against the British invaders with extreme prejudice. Viktor was very pleased to hear this. Within in three days, he had fortified their hideout and recruited six additional resistance members, establishing himself as the young, but most experienced, leader of the group and Secret Keeper to their new home.

Now all that needed to be done was to actually make use of those skills he had acquired from Dumbledore. The first one being intelligence gathering.

It was nearly midnight, and their entire party had finally returned, not daring the streets any longer with the curfew in affect. They knew if they were spotted they would immediately be detained and possibly killed. They gathered around in a circle, eating their daily ration and taking in the warmth from the furnace, and waited for Viktor to speak.

Ernst and Jacob, the two university students, Ada, a librarian from the National Wizarding Library of Berlin, Christiane, her 14-year old daughter, Clemens, a mail clerk from the Ministry Department of Justice, Eleonore, a journalist, plus Engel and Hagan, brothers and co-owners of a now destroyed dueling and sporting supply store. Viktor had found them by chance, but selected them specifically for their unique skill sets. Together, they all knew the city like the back of their hands; the buildings, the people, the ways things came together and what caused them to fall apart. Out of them, only Engel and Hagan knew anything about fighting, but the rest could be taught. They were eager enough to learn.

“What have you learned, Ernst?” Viktor started their meeting. The older boy smiled ruefully.

“Nothing that will likely help us. The Culties set up a perimeter around the wards. They got some sort of spell going on that you get a nasty shock if you get too close.”

“How close?”

“Twenty, maybe twenty-five feet? I don’t know for sure, but it’s pointless. You can still see what’s happening on the other side of the wall. There’s a lot of Auror’s gathering there. I don’t know why since they can’t get in to help us.”

Viktor smiled, however. “No, this is good. If we can get close enough to the border to be seen without the Culties noticing, we might be able to get information on what’s happening outside. See if they might

have any plans to take down the wards that we can help them with. Well done, Ernst.”

The other boy looked a bit more cheerful to learn his day spent risking his wand by wandering in the cold, gloomy streets wasn't for nothing. The Culties were no longer tearing people out of their homes and businesses, but they were routinely stopping people on the street and searching them. He could have left his wand at the base, as Viktor suggested, but that wasn't something he was yet willing to do.

Their leader turned to Ada, who was gently stroking Christiane's hair, as she watched and listened in solemn silence. The girl hadn't spoken since they arrived, traumatized as she was by what she had witnessed, but she willingly followed her mother out into the city, perhaps hoping against hope to find the father who had not returned.

“What's the status at the Minsitry?”

“They didn't destroy all the buildings, like we originally thought,” Ada said. “They spared six of them as far as I can tell. They're still raiding the Auror Headquarters and training school, but once they're done they'll probably tear them down. They kept the Department of Records, the Department of Transportation, and the Department of Education standing, but no ones allowed into any of them. I think they're using them as dormitories and bases of operations. They're definitely using the Department of Education to store their supplies. It was crawling with people. Lots of security too.”

Viktor nodded. “I'll check it out tomorrow. If at all possible, I want to take it out. The siege has a better chance of working if we can make the Culties as desperate to get out as the Aurors are to get in.”

Hagan chuckled darkly. “Then we can blow these mother-fu-“

Ada covered her daughter's ears and glared at the other man, who smiled apologetically. The others chuckled. All but Clemens, who was staring blankly at the glow coming from the furnace. He was the oldest of their group, a mere fifty-eight or so, but out of all of them he was taking things the hardest. He spoke little, smiled less, and

thought on things no one could even begin to guess at. Viktor had no intention of guessing.

“What’s on your mind, Clemens?”

The older wizard didn’t say anything for a moment, nor did he move, and Viktor was just starting to think the man hadn’t heard him when he finally spoke.

“It can’t be allowed to happen again. Not here. Not ever,” he said, without looking at any of them. Without changing his expression at all.

“What can’t be allowed to happen, old man?” Hagan sneered. He hadn’t understood Viktor’s reasoning for taking in the scrawny little desk-jockey and still didn’t, and though he wouldn’t express his displeasure to their leader he saw no reason to hide his feelings from the man himself.

“The Wall. There can’t be another Wall in Berlin. It’s an abomination.”

“What’s he talking about?” Jacob asked, honestly confused.

“The Berlin Wall,” Ada said, “You should know about it. It hasn’t fallen that long ago.”

Jacob just shrugged, mirroring the attitude of several others. The Berlin Wall was not a part of their culture. It had never touched the wizarding section of the city, and even if it had it wouldn’t have made much of a difference to a society that traveled by floo, broom, and apparating. World War I and II were significant to wizards only for the inconvenience of the temporary isolationist policy against muggles that had arisen during the time. The Berlin Wall was little more than an abstract lesson about the tragedy of being a muggle to most wizards and witches.

Clemens, however, could not view it so blithely.

“I don’t expect any of you to understand this,” he said, finally turning to face them. “You didn’t have to grow up like I did. I was muggle-born. Magic could no more solve anything than wishing could, and as a boy that wall was as impenetrable as Avalon. God, you have no idea what it was like... how many families were torn apart by that... thing. My grandmother died of cancer, alone in some cesspit that passed for a hospital and was buried in a pauper’s grave by strangers. My wife didn’t get to see her parents for nearly twenty years. My eldest brother had a daughter and didn’t even know it until she was grown and had children of her own.”

He closed his eyes, his expression beyond painful.

“God, god, don’t let that happen here. I want to see my wife and children again. I don’t want to die here alone because we were so stupidly arrogant to think we couldn’t make the same mistakes as muggles.”

They looked away from him, shamed to think he might be right, that they themselves might have caused his suffering through their arrogance. That somehow, this might all be their own fault. They all looked away except for Viktor, the only one of them exonerated against the crime of indifference, who stood and walked to Clemens, placing a comforting hand on his shoulder.

“You have my word,” he said, “One way or another, that ward is going to come down, but I need your help. I need you to be strong. I cannot do this on my own.”

Clemens opened his eyes, and looked up at him, his expression still painful. They stared at each other for a long time.

“You are so young...”

Viktor, who had heard this often enough to be able to ignore it, just smiled.

“I am what ever is necessary. Can I count on you, my friend?”

The elder wizard stared at him for a moment longer, his stricken expression relaxing. He seemed to find what he was looking for in the young wizards' eyes, and finally nodded.

~Page Break~

Harry was thankful to get out of History of Magic and away from Professor Toure's less than subtle expressions of total adoration, but he wasn't sure how he felt about spending that time with the less than adoring Dark Lord. At least Snape wasn't there for once. The man had been pointedly ignoring him for the last week, and he wasn't sure what would happen if the dour wizard were forced to notice him. Voldemort and Lucius Malfoy together was bad enough. He didn't think his sanity would survive a Voldemort and Severus Snape combination right now.

He didn't bother announcing himself as he stepped through the portrait and into the Dark Lord's office. The man was at his desk, sorting through piles of paperwork, just as Harry expected. There were three assistants there as well, which was a little unexpected, but given how busy things must have been and the fact that Voldemort had left the convenience of one of his Court offices, perhaps it shouldn't have been. It did make Harry wonder why the Dark Lord would chose to come to him rather than the other way around.

His uncertainty must have been obvious, because when the dark wizard looked up from his work at him, he said, "Don't look so worried."

Which, coming from this man, didn't mean much to him.

"How are you settling back in to school?"

Harry could have gone on for an hour long lament of his Herculean struggles to catch up on his course work or how he seemed to be stalked by at least half a dozen people no matter where he went or that he really wanted Quidditch to be re-opened, but somehow he doubted the man would find any of it particularly interesting.

“Fine.”

“Well, that’s unfortunate,” Voldemort said. “Since, I’m going to have to muck it up again. I’ll need you for at least in week in France before the end of the month. I’m not entirely sure of the dates, so you’ll need to be prepared to leave on a moment’s notice.”

Harry could almost feel his blood pressure rising. For Merlin’s sake, was he ever going to get a break? Voldemort tried to look sympathetic, but just came off as inappropriately amused. Harry found himself a seat and plopped down into, trying to make himself comfortable.

“Please tell me you’re not getting married to the Queen of France.”

“Alas, no, although her Majesty is a part of the reason I need you. I am hoping to recruit additional werewolves from the new colonies and install them for training at some of our forts, as well as prepare the way for the Beast Brigade. She and her Parliament are understandably concerned over the rapid pace with which we are organizing ourselves within France’s borders. I believe your presence there will assuage their fears more so than my own. Plus I know you like her.”

Harry ignored the last statement.

“No offense, My Lord, but...well... fuck you.”

The Dark Lord blinked at him. The aides all stopped breathing.

“I’m not entirely sure how I can take that without offense,” he said finally and without looking at the aides, gestured for them to leave the room. They scurried out like rats escaping a burning building.

“Now then, would you care to elaborate or shall I just skip to the Cruciatus?”

Harry glared back at him, a challenge perhaps or just honest to gods anger. He actually had the nerve to stand up and stalk closer to the Dark Lord.

“I spent three days in the middle of a bloody fortress with you and Malfoy leading me around like a damn puppy, and in all that time you couldn’t have said, ‘hey, Harry, by the way, we’re going to invade Berlin’. You know, perhaps the morning you were actually going to fucking do it?”

“We really need to work on this swearing habit you’ve developed.”

“Or how about giving the men you hired me to look after, more than a god damn week to actually train so they don’t get themselves blow to shit in the first five minutes of battle?! God fucking dammit! How am I suppose to get fuck all done with you throwing this at me in the last possible second?! Or is that the point? Just keep throwing shit at me so I’m running around like a headless chicken and don’t know what the hell is going on, so I have to rely on you to tell me what to do and what to think!”

I hadn’t thought I was being that obvious, Voldemort thought unhappily, but Harry was still in full rant mode and plowed on before he could interject.

“And what the hell are you thinking invading Berlin? What possible good could come of that? You’ve just validated their paranoia! And for what? What? A sliver of land we won’t even be able to keep? A couple hundred dead witches and wizards on both sides? I mean, what the bloody-“

Fast as snake, the Dark Lord leaped from his chair, and Harry jumped back just as quickly, but the man caught his wrist before he could truly escape. His right was still free, however, and a flick of his wrist brought it to hand.

“Expell-“

Voldemort jerked him around roughly, unbalancing him enough to undo the spellwork and twisting his arm behind his back. Harry let out a pained cry, but it was smothered by the hand that came to tighten around his exposed throat.

The silence that followed was eerie in its displacement. No curses, no shouts or screams, no threats or taunts, nor shattering glass and wood. None of the noise and chaos Harry had come to associate with fighting. It was just him and Voldemort, wrapped around him like the snake that was his totem, squeezing the air out of him.

“ You seem a little tense,” the Dark Lord hissed softly in Parseltongue, furthering the snake allusion in Harry’s panicking mind. The tone was soft, but the grip told the truth of the man’s anger, threatening to pull his arm clean out of its socket if he didn’t asphyxiate him first. “Perhaps I can help?”

The hand at his throat loosened, enough for Harry to make a desperate gasp for air before a new sensation stole it away again. It wasn’t precisely pain and it wasn’t precisely pleasure, but rather a combination of both mixed with the nauseating exhilaration of falling from a great height. The room spun, his body became numb to all but the burning sensation of Voldemort’s hand on his throat, and his thoughts throbbed in time with his slowing heart beat.

He wasn’t afraid. He knew he should have been. This was a killing hold, and this man, if man you could call him, was a killer. Still, he wasn’t. The feeling wasn’t entirely foreign. It was not unlike that day in garden during the winter solstice, when he had briefly reached out to the earth and felt it reach back. It was like that... only nothing was reaching back.

When his legs gave out, the Dark Lord released his arm, allowing him to fall back against him rather than risk dislocating it. They sunk to the floor, Voldemort to his knees, Harry on his back, staring up at him, stunned. The dark wizard was not unaffected by whatever he had done to Harry, but seemed positively radiant with power as he leaned over the boy. His grin, however, was as dark and disturbing as ever.

“Feeling a bit more relaxed now?”

With the very last of his strength, Harry slung his arm up and over, slapping him squarely across the face. Voldemort jerked in surprised, then threw back his head and laughed. He withdrew his hand from his protégé’s throat to comb it through his sweat soaked hair.

“That’s what I like about you, my defiant young friend. Always the fighting spirit, no matter who, no matter why.” He chuckled, and Harry had to close his eyes. The sound made him feel dizzy. “Look at you, fighting me, even now, and why? Did you not fight an entire country to be by my side but a few months ago? Was it not you who swore your vengeance against those who threatened your pack and fellow countrymen? I have never doubted your loyalty, but where is your faith? However capricious I have been, I have done all I have for reasons beyond the fleeting passions of the moment. You, who are the culmination of momentary passions and have set in motion the very fate you defy, have no choice but to trust in my foresight. When you have a little foresight of your own, perhaps then you can afford such displays of defiance, but until then...”

Harry opened his eyes again as he felt the man pull away. The Dark Lord was moving towards the door. Was he just going to leave him there? He opened his mouth to speak, to call him back, but nothing came out. Voldemort returned a moment later with his aides following obediently behind him. He made a gesture at as prone protégé.

“Mr. Potter is suffering from magical fatigue. Please escort him to the infirmary and inform Professor Snape of his condition.”

They scurried to obey, two of them carefully picking Harry up from ground and wrapping his arms over their shoulders. They did it quickly and efficiently, and he wondered for an instant how often they had to carry people out of the Dark Lord’s office. He turned to Voldemort to ask what he had done to him, but he was already beginning to figure it out for himself. The floating sensation had eased, leaving him was a familiar, bone deep fatigue.

His magic was gone or at least severely depleted.*

Well, shit. He would have almost preferred a crucio. At least then it would all be over and done with. It could take weeks to restore his magic.

“We will talk again when you are feeling more rested,” Voldemort said, magnanimously. In Parseltongue, he added, “And if you can behave yourself, perhaps I’ll even give you back some of the magic you so carelessly fling about.”

Harry cursed at him silently, but even in his head it sounded feeble. In addition to his magic, the man had stolen most of his fight as well. Well, bother. The man was right. He didn’t have any foresight; otherwise he would have known he wasn’t going to walk away the victor of this fight. Merlin, would he ever learn?

Ah, but he had learned just how fast the Dark Lord was.

He made a point of remembering it.

~ Page Break~

While Katarina and her brood hunted the city’s alleys and basements for sustenance, Tom hunted for information. He moved silently through the shadows, alert but fearless, passing by small groups of soldiers every few minutes. He stopped every time to study them as they passed, calculating the odds of getting one of them alone, before moving on. In his head Horace was screaming at him to go back to the vampire apartments and hide, before someone finally noticed his black cloaked figure skulking about. Tom ignored him.

Nothing would be gained if he just sat around and waited. He needed to get out of the city before Katarina figured out his ruse or anyone else discovered him here. To do that, he needed information.

It wasn’t until well after midnight that the soldiers thinned out enough for him to risk taking any of them by surprise. He chose a pair of female Culties. They had broken off from a larger group in order to take a leak without being leered at by the men in their squadron. And of course, because they were women, they were more concerned

with watching out for peeping toms than keeping an eye on each other.

He killed the first one with Neck-breaking Curse before she had managed to undo the second clasp of her robe. Completely silent but for the soft 'snap', easily mistaken for a breaking twig. The second went down with a simple body bind, and he dragged her into one of the dozens of empty cellars.

"Lumos buyo," he muttered, sending out an orb of light once they were out of sight of any possible observers. The cellar was empty, but also partially flooded in places with half an inch of freezing water. He didn't bother trying to avoid it as he dragged the woman to the center of the room and dropped her onto her back.

He looked down at her. Her eyes were wide with terror, always satisfying to see, but otherwise there was nothing noteworthy about her. Her nose was a little too big to be attractive, her lips too thin, and none of it improved by the overtly masculine lines of her military clothes and haircut. Her insignia designated her a private, the lowest of recruits.

What are you going to do? Horace asked nervously.

"What do you think I'm going to do?" Tom said softly. Somehow, the woman's eyes grew even wider.

Don't! Let her go!

Tom reached down to hold her head steady as he looked into her eyes.

"Yes, just like that," he crooned softly. "Keep them nice and wide. Legilimens."

Stop! There was a brief moment of pain as both Horace and the woman resisted him, but all too soon they both fell away, overwhelmed by the images that passed before them, the knowledge that came and went, chaotic and meaningless at first. A day collecting

sea shells at the beach with her father when she was six, a fight with her best friend just before graduation, her first clumsy attempts at flirting during her freshman year with a boy in her History of Magic class, her favorite uncle's funeral. Slowly, they started to focus on her time as part of the Culties. The first day of basic, the overwhelming sorrow as her long wavy hair was cut and she said goodbye to all vestiges of femininity, her captain forgetting her name for the first three assignments in Walpole, meeting Donna Ravenwood, who would become her best friend when she was reassigned to a squad in Edinburgh, the first real fear since joining as she stepped out of the floo in a seedy little bar in Warsaw.

Warsaw, fearsome and alien, to a twenty year old girl who never expected to leave her own village. She had laughed and grinned with Donna about all the strapping young Polish men they would meet, but inside all she wanted was to go home. She didn't sleep that night, wondering why she was in a dirty little hotel in a country that were not technically friends with and what that meant. The early morning debriefing...

Yes, that was what he wanted! How did they take Berlin? How did they activate the wards? Where were the controls for them hidden?

Spies and traitors, yes, he had figured that was how they had found out where everything was. They didn't explain who exactly, but Tom figured it was a combination of bitter werewolves, French intelligence, and dark wizards longing for the return of a leader of Grindelwald's stature.

The muggles had been informed that there was a fire in a part of the city under construction. The local fire department was handling it. No need for extra fire trucks or ambulances, it was all taken care of. Just keep people out of the area. Who the bloody hell cared about muggles? He wanted to know about the wards!

The Ministerial debate would be attacked first to draw attention from other targets. Both candidates should be targeted, but she didn't get to be a part of that operation. She had been waiting behind a cauldron factory for three hours for the go ahead to start the raid on the university. Wards? She didn't know about them. They were one of

the targets after the attack on the debate. No one she knew which one. That wasn't a part of her job.

Whose job was it?

It was a technical job, wasn't it? It had to be one of the officers handling it. Who? She didn't know. She was just a grunt. She didn't hang out with the higher ups.

Tom broke eye contact with her and shoved her away in disgust. Useless! She knew nothing! Didn't want to know anything! She had barely made a splash before he flung out his wand, snarling out a curse.

“Opprimo!”

The woman died quietly, namelessly, her internal organs all but liquefied. Tom wasn't satisfied. Frustrated, he snarled out a half a dozen curses, pointless rending the corpse into so much bloodied meat. When the worst of his anger had dissipated he tore away her clothes and left them in the basement muck. When or if anyone ever found her, they would assume her the victim of an angry group of German wizards, and she would serve as a lesson of caution to other female soldiers if nothing else.

He ascended from the cellar, scanning briefly for any potential threats, then continued on his way. He would need to return to the apartments and clean himself up before the vampires returned. It would be inconvenient for them to smell the blood on him and start asking questions he wasn't prepared to answer. There were reasons he had gone off alone, after all.

It wasn't until he was standing under the hot spray of the shower that he realized Horace was being unusually quiet. Cautiously, he gave a mental knock, but there was no reply. The boy was gone. Hiding? Perhaps.

Some people really had no stomach for this kind of thing.

~ Page Break~

Voldemort did, in fact, visit Harry again before he left. Unfortunately, the boy was sound asleep. At a quarter to midnight, the Dark Lord decided that wasn't unreasonable. The infirmary was dark, the only light from the half moon streaming in through the window, and around him he could hear only the soft, wheezy snores of sleeping children. He moved down the center of the room, looking from bed to bed to find his protégé. He found him at the end of the row. Books and parchment were piled onto a chair beside his bed, and a few pieces had fallen and scattered across the floor. So the boy was trying to keep up with his studies? Admittedly, that wasn't something the Dark Lord had considered when he had been maneuvering him around his political chessboard.

If the size of the pile were any indication, it was clear he had his work cut out for him. It would explain why Harry was so overtly aggravated with him, when he had been much better behaved in Bristol even with Lucius provoking him. He was over worked and under rested.

The Dark Lord mentally sighed, and walked around to the other side of the bed so that he could stand beside Harry's head. He brushed away a lock of wild hair, a source of endless amusement for him. The boy didn't even stir.

I suppose, he thought wryly. This might count as good behavior. By Harry's standards, in any event.

He rested his hand on the boy's cheek, and cautiously, released Harry's magic. It gravitated easily back to its original source, only too happy to return, and he had to carefully adjust the flow else he risk actually hurting them both. Harry did stir now, just a little, sighing softly and turning his head into the Dark Lord's hand, seeking out the magic he had so recently been deprived of.

"Hhmm, you're making me soft. I should kill you, and do us both a mercy," Voldemort hissed softly in parseltongue. "But what's the point of holding the world in your hand if there's no one worth showing it off to?"

When most of Harry's magic was finally returned, he pulled his hand away. There were no further signs of stirring, and if anything his protégé appeared to sink deeper into dreams.

"Sleep well, young prince. There are yet still more dragons for you to slay when you awake."

He left as silently as he had come, and when his formidable presence had finally vanished, Harry opened his eyes and stared up at the ceiling. He did not close them again until dawn chased away the shadows.

~ Page Break~

I should never have accepted this case.

This was the conclusion Lestrangle had drawn after weeks hunting through London, scouring the McGunny's student and government records, and discreetly (and sometimes indiscreetly) interrogating his family and known associates, and finally drinking herself stupid in a seedy little dive in Knockturn Alley. Perhaps he was dead, she thought, nursing the hangover in the non-descript little inn in Daigon Alley. She might have gotten drunk in Knockturn, but her self-esteem wasn't so low that she'd actually stoop to sleeping there.

There was a police report about some sort of attack in his apartment resulting in emergency surgery. McGunny had given a statement about a burglar to an investigating Sentinel, but had disappeared shortly thereafter before it could be corroborated. Perhaps the statement was true, at least from McGunny's understanding. Maybe what he truly believed was a burglar was in fact an assassin sent by the former Minister to tidy up loose ends, and eventually finished the job at the hospital. Maybe McGunny knew it was an assassin and disappeared before anyone could try for his life again.

With the wards down over England, the little traitor could have escaped. If he was in fact still alive. And that was a rather important matter she needed to have clarified before she could take her investigation anywhere. The only problem was there was no way to verify it unless a body turned up, and that was highly unlikely.

Unless of course...

She smiled grimly to herself. She would have to go to Berlin. If McGunny truly was Germany's spy they would have to have a record of him at the Ministry there. The chances of finding that record were slim, especially after the destruction of so many offices, but she had run out of leads.

If he was still alive and she found him, she made a mental note to make him pay for all the aggravation he was causing her.

~ Page Break ~

"McGonagall wants to see you."

Harry looked up from his essay on Gertrude the Gratuitous (a prominent figurehead during the 13th century Hedonist Movement) at Fred (or was it George? No, he was pretty sure it was Fred this time) standing over him with a folded piece of parchment. Across the library table, Hermione's brow knitted in concern. Harry couldn't recall doing anything recently that would warrant a meeting with his head of house, unless he was now being called away to France.

That couldn't be right. It had only been two days since the Dark Lord's visit.

"Yeah, okay."

He stood up, and as he did so, he could feel everyone in his in the library turn to watch him. He really wished they would stop that. Following Fred out into the hall, he failed to question how McGonagall could have called him out of his study hall when she herself should have been teaching a class. He also failed to notice George Weasley coming up behind him until the older boy had successfully grabbed hold of his wand arm.

"George!" Harry yelped in surprise. He didn't immediately panic until Fred dropped back to grab his other arm, and they both turned him in

the opposite direction they had been heading, grinning like fools. Now he was trouble. "What are you-"

"Don't fret, My Lord Chaos," George said cheerfully. "We're just kidnapping you. You're overdue for it, you know."

That was not nearly as funny as they thought it was.

"We thought you could use a break from honest studying, and join us for a life of crime... or at least a semester of crime," Fred continued.

"What?"

"Step into our office, and we'll explain everything."

"Is that supposed to be an incentive?"

The twins grinned, but didn't let go of him until they reached their 'office', which was in fact 'Admiral' Lockhart's office. Harry could tell by all the obnoxious pictures of him hanging on the wall.

"Er... what if Lockhart shows up?"

"We'll tell him we wanted advice on how to perform a lobotomy on one's self," George offered, then made himself at home behind the man's desk. He opened various drawers, pulling out official looking documents and set them down. Fred guided Harry to a chair in front of the desk, then returned to the door to look out for spies (or possibly to block Harry's only route of escape). "Now then, Harry, you don't mind if I call you Harry?"

"It hasn't stopped you from doing so for the last five years," he said blandly.

"Yes, but that was social interaction. This is about business."

Harry pulled out his watch to check the time. He had twenty minutes until arithmancy, and he was hoping to review his notes in case they had a pop quiz.

“Oi, we’re being serious here mate!” George protested. “This is a serious money making venture I want to discuss with you!”

“You do know I have a job? A legal one with a real paycheck and everything.”

Fred chuckled from the doorway. “Yeah, I heard. Good on you, but for a guy in your position, it doesn’t hurt to have a little non-traceable funds on the side in cases of emergency.”

“Or if you want to buy a hooker,” George suggested. “And we would be willing to set you up.”

“With a hooker?”

“You have a dirty mind, you know that? No, not a hooker, a backdoor account. You see, we’ve got an in with a goblin bank in Belfast that specializes in this sort of thing. It’s no Gringott’s, but as far as discretion goes it’s second to none.”

Harry closed his eyes, not believing what he was about to say next.

“And what precisely is this little business venture?”

George grinned and leaned forward in his chair, adopting his salesman persona once again.

“I’m glad you asked, Harry. You see Fred and I, we were just sitting around the other day thinking, ‘hey, you know what would be great about now? A game of Wizer’s Rent*’, but of course, our last deck was confiscated Lestrage banned them.”

“You want to open a casino in Hogwarts?” Harry asked dubiously.

George blinked at him. “Well, I didn’t, but that’s not a bad idea.”

Fred coughed into his hand, drawing him back to reality.

“Right then, we were just thinking how much we’d be willing to pay to get those deck of cards. And then we started to think of all those other things that got banned over the last couple of years because of the added security and all.”

“Exploding Snaps,” the other twin said from the doorway, “two way mirrors, radios, food that isn’t pre-packaged, quick-quotes quills, broomsticks, just about anything in Zonko’s, pet mice... although that last one might be because they keep escaping. You know, just a bunch of perfectly harmless stuff the teachers are sick of dealing with. Normally, no body even pays attention to the bans on those sorts of things, but since Hogsmeade weekends were canceled, the only thing we’ve got left is post and the school can actually keep track of that. Unless, of course, you know your way around it. Which we do. So our thought was we’d start ourselves a little business, getting all the good little girls and boys their special treats, for a price of course.”

“Of course,” Harry smirked. “You little fiends. You want to be black market smugglers.”

He couldn’t help laughing, despite himself. It was such a Fred and George thing to do. Harmless and clever and likely to cause someone in authority a monstrous headache. “And what would you need me for?”

“Ah, see, we know how to mess with the mail to get things in, it’s getting the money out that’s the problem. Something about money* really screws with the system we’ve got going, and it all ends up getting diverted to the Sentinels, and that’s a group of wizards I don’t want to be locked alone in a room with ever again. Yick. We would need you to get the orders off the school grounds so they could be shipped without the Sentinels knowing.”

Harry snorted. “Yeah, because they never check my mail.”

George grinned. "Oh, we've thought of that. Now your mail gets checked if you send it by post, but what if you didn't send it that way?"

The youngest Gryffindor rolled his eyes. "Alright, how would I send it?"

"Portkey!"

"What?"

"All you have to do is put the orders and money in a box with a portkey attached to it, and once you step off the grounds, you can activate the portkey and send the orders where they need to go."

"Alright, I'll hand it to you, that's all very clever, but why me? Why can't you do it?"

The twins shared an exasperated look. "Mate, you're the only one who can actually leave the grounds on even a semi-regular basis. You already told us about visiting your godfathers at least once a month. And now you've got that thing in France you're going to. Lately, it seems like you're gone more often than not."

Harry mentally flinched at that particular truth. He sighed.

"And what would I get out of this?"

George grinned as if he had already won, and at this point he probably had. "Well, free use of our very handy smuggling operation for one thing. I seriously doubt you enjoy Snape proofreading your love sonnets to the lovely Miss Luna."

"Hey!"

"Plus ten percent of the profits," he added. Harry glared at them.

"Thirty-three percent. Even three way split."

“We have a fourth partner on the outside who actually fills the orders.”

“Then twenty-five percent.”

George shook his head. “Harry, Harry, Harry... this is going to involve a lot of work that you just don’t have the time or the know-how to pull off. It wouldn’t be fair to split it evenly when you’re essentially just walking out a door.”

Harry thought about it for a moment. “Twenty percent.”

“Harry-“

“Don’t ‘Harry’ me. This isn’t just about effort, George. It’s about risk. If we get caught, and considering Snape is running things now that’s a definite possibility, then guess what? I’m the one who’s really screwed over here. You guys have what? Half a year left? Then you’re gone. I’ve got two and half years and I live with Snape. Not to mention if Hermione found out about this. Twenty percent is cheap, especially since you already said you couldn’t actually pull this off without me.”

George rubbed his chin thoughtfully. “You make an interesting point. You’ll have to excuse me for a moment while I confer with my associate over there.”

The twins stepped out of the office for a minute, leaving Harry alone with the gaggle of Lockhart portraits trying gamely (and failing miserably) to impress him with their smiles and crisp looking uniforms. Honestly, what am I doing? Harry wondered, but he already knew the answer. He was reclaiming a tiny portion of his life. So much of it was already tied to the Dark Lord’s plans, plans Harry was no longer certain he wanted to be a part of.

But what’s the point of holding the world in your hand if there’s no one worth showing it off to?

Those words had stolen his sleep for the last two days, reminding Harry that the Dark Lord great and terrible, and above all else he was a conqueror. He would not stop with Berlin. He would take Germany, and then after that he would take another country, possibly France, either through war or through marriage, and then another country and then another. He would keep going until he held the entire world in his grasp, and he would drag Harry along for the ride, showing him all the terrors and glories a destiny that powerful entailed.

And Harry couldn't stop it. He had already been swept up in it, trapped in the momentum of history.

But he could stop this. If he wanted to. When he wanted to. He could start it or stop it, build it up or tear it down. It was something he could control, something that would be his. A small, desperate defiance.

He needed that if he wanted to hold onto his sanity. The herbs he was taking weren't enough. They quelled the anxiety attacks that seemed to bubble up in the quiet moments, when everything was still enough for him to realize what a train-wreck his life was swiftly becoming, but they could do nothing about the feeling of manic disorientation that dogged him.

Perhaps this wasn't enough to really save him either, but it was a first step away from Voldemort's shadow and that had to count for something.

The door opened and the twins stepped back inside. Harry stood from his chair and walked up to them. They were smiling. That was probably a good sign. Or a really bad sign.

"You drive a hard bargain. We should have known you'd be quite the negotiator," Fred said, looking quite proud of this fact. He held out his hand. "You've got yourself a deal."

~ Page Break~

"Mr. Potter, if you can't be bothered to pay attention perhaps you would do us all the courtesy of putting your wand away before you

send someone to the infirmary?" Snape hissed as the boy nearly exploded the armoire he was supposed to be preparing for storing dark artifacts for the second time in nearly ten minutes. It was a perfectly simple lesson, one the boy should have been able to handle easily, but was struggling to absorb.

He shouldn't be surprised however. Harry had been in the hospital wing for 'magical exhaustion' after a visit from the Dark Lord, and though he had returned to classes the next day, it seemed he was not truly recovered from whatever had been done to him. His eyes were wringed and his movements sluggish. Snape considered asking him about it, but then told himself if the boy wanted his help he could very well come and ask for it himself. He had enough going on with his current duties plus the 'Ira Project' as he had mentally dubbed it, without chasing after Harry's demons.

Ira had an appointment for some tests that Saturday with Medi-witch Jacobi, and though she had insisted she didn't want him there and the results wouldn't be in until later that week, Snape had every intention of visiting her later that day. It was a form of courtship, he told himself, for a relationship that was entirely out of order. He didn't think you were suppose to try to knock up a woman before the dating period was even over, let alone before you had actually married her. He wondered if he should be worried about Morgan coming after him in defense of his stepdaughter's honor.

"Mr. Weasley, keep your eyes on your work, not Mr. Potter's head. I assure you that despite the ample storage space you might find there, it would not make an appropriate receptacle for next week's assignment."

The youngest Weasley boy quickly turned away, his ears burning at having been publically outed for glaring at Harry. Whatever tolerance he had developed for the Griffindor had vanished, with Hermione's insistence to help her friend catch up on his studies it seemed. His irritation with Harry, was only irritating Hermione, who thus ignored Ron and continued to perpetuate cycle.

He rolled his eyes.

Good god, when was he going to get out of the classroom and all this teenage melodrama?

~ Page Break~

A week after the invasion of Berlin, the university re-opened. Classes were not officially opened, but students and faculty could now move about the buildings and begin to re-organize. The military presence was thick, the atmosphere tense, but the attempt at normalcy was welcomed by all. Viktor, in particular, was pleased to be able to move around campus without instantly coming under suspicion. People were still being stopped and searched for wands, but it was a half-hearted search by an already bored security force, and Viktor had gone through two of them already, more afraid of being recognized than that they would find his wand in his boot.

There was no worth while target on the campus for Viktor or his small group of rebels. There were a few security posts at each side of the campus that would make easy targets, but they would only serve to make the Culties more alert and brutal in their security measures and served to tactical advantage. His rebels were getting antsy about their lack of action, but if Viktor had learned anything from Dumbledore it was prudence.

The second thing he had learned was that once a path had been chosen it must be followed until its end, without hesitation or regret.

So Viktor's decision to explore the campus was not one of idle curiosity or ill considered actions. It just so happened that the university had a bell tower that overlooked the Ministry Department of Education, now the largest military supply depot in the entire city. He had spent two days straight in the bell tower with a cheap little sneak-o-scope, a note pad, and what seemed like gallons of hot apple cider, marking the movements of the soldiers in and out of the area. The time spent there was for more than just intelligence gathering. It provided him the time and the quiet he need to make a plan of attack and his people the time to gather what they needed.

And now his plan was ready.

At a quarter to two in the morning, Viktor was once again hidden in the shadows of the bell tower. He had left everything back at the base, bringing only a broomstick and an owl. He stroked the bird's breast gently, watching regretfully as it puffed and preened proudly under his attention. It was a common Tawny owl, one of hundreds trapped within the city along with their wizarding masters. Clemens had taken him from an abandoned owlry half a block from where he had used to work.

"I am truly sorry about this," Viktor said softly, carefully tying a small package to its leg. "It will be painless, I swear."

He moved to the edge of the tower, releasing the nameless owl to the darkness. He could follow it for only a few seconds before it all but disappeared from his sight. Its destination was already known, however, and Viktor turned his gaze to the Department of Education. He didn't have to wait long.

The explosion rocked the tower, knocking him off his feet, and causing the bells to swing in an atonal cacophony of ringing. Viktor covered his ears, which did nothing to stop their vibrations from flowing through his entire body, and waited for them to stop. It did not take long for their swinging to lose momentum, and he climbed to his feet to see what damage his bomb had done. Beneath him the ministry office burned, brighter than he had calculated, so that he had to remain low to avoid being seen. Over half the building had been destroyed by the initial explosion, and the rest now burned with massive blue and green flames. The fire had spread already to a neighboring building, empty as far as Viktor knew, but near enough to the Department of Records to be a threat if it continued to spread. Soldiers were already beginning to flood the area, little more than black ants to from his vantage point, for which he was grateful.

The second explosion was off its mark, exploding harmlessly over an already destroyed building nearly a block away from its intended target; the military dormitories in the Department of Transportation. Viktor swore under his breath. The soldiers were now alerted to the danger, and the third bomb was intercepted with a series of sickening green lights he readily recognized as the Killing Curse. He prayed the

bomb would still go off and take out at least a handful of the soldiers, but nothing happened. Dammit it all!

He spun away from the ledge. He couldn't afford to stay any longer. The Culties would be all over the area in minutes, and if he were caught here he would never escape. He wrapped his black cloak tighter around him, and reached for his broom. His fingertips had barely touched it, when an ominous chuckle froze him in his tracks.

"Oh my, what a naughty little boy you have been," a soft voice chided, dripping with femininity and cruelty. He didn't move for a moment, honestly stunned that someone had been able to sneak up on him, then burst into movement, spinning around and flinging out his wand. A curse was on his lips, but before he could utter it, the target moved, and he instinctively brought up his arm to protect his exposed neck and head. The blow caught him squarely on his lower left arm and the topside of his wrist, slicing through flesh and bone, and smashing him to the ground.

"Caedo!" he shouted, catching his assailant as she made for a second strike. She shrieked in pain and leaped away so that she now stood at the tower's ledge and in the light from the fires below. She was not a Cultie, was Viktor's first observation. She was not dressed in a uniform, but rather a shimmering silver dress more appropriate for a cocktail party than a battle.

His second observation was that she was a vampire. He watched in fascination as the normally fatal wound, cutting deep into her body, closed and healed before his very eyes. She glowered at him.

"I liked this dress!" she snapped gesturing to the torn and blood-stained garment. Viktor didn't even dignify her outrage with a comment.

"Caedo!"

She dodged this time, as he figured she would, giving him just enough time to snatch up his broom with his one good arm and leap from the tower. He felt her snatch at the tail end of his cloak, but it

dissolved in her hands (as he had spelled it to do in case of the all too common scenario that it got caught on something while he was trying run away) and then he was falling. With expert precision, he swung the broom between his legs and halted his descent with one hand, keeping his injured one tucked close to his body, and sped away from the tower as fast as he could.

Katarina watched him go, intrigued. It had been a long time since she had met challenging prey. Tom would not be pleased to hear that one of her victims had escaped. That is, if she bothered to tell him. Frankly, she didn't see any reason to do so, especially with him disappearing for long stretches of time without explanation. She watched the dark shape flying away until it ducked between a row of apartments and disappeared.

“Run, run, little boy, back to your mommy and daddy. We'll play again another night.”

~ Page Break ~

Lucius made it a point to change out of his uniform before meeting his wife. She respected the demands of his career and admitted freely that he looked very good in it, but she also felt it was the most unromantic thing he could possibly wear out to dinner. The last time he had done so their conversation had resulted in nothing but ‘yes, sir’ and ‘no, sir’ from her and ending with a mocking salute and the closest thing to a march someone could pull off in three-inch heels. Narcissa could be quite artful when making a point.

“You should have seen him,” Lucius chuckled, “He was so pissed off. I kept expecting something to spontaneously combust. I heard from Dorian, you know that little fop from the Nielt party?, I heard from him that Potter actually had the nerve to say ‘fuck you’ to the Dark Lord's face when they met last Wednesday.”

Narcissa nearly gasped, but decided that would be a bit too plebian.

“Oh, my, what happened?”

Lucius couldn't stop grinning. "What do you think? They had to carry him to the infirmary."

"She shook her head, but couldn't hide her own smile at his childishness. "You're taking far too much pleasure out of that boy's pain."

"Nonsense. It's not his pain I find so amusing, it's his stupidity. 'Fuck you', I mean honestly."

She chuckled behind her wine glass. It was pretty damn funny. She wondered what other nonsense those two got into together when no one was looking. Hopefully, he wasn't teaching those troublemaking habits to her children.

Suddenly, her husband's smile vanished, and his eyes which had been riveted on her all evening were now glaring darkly over her shoulder. She turned to see what was wrong. Two uniforms, colonels by the looks of it, were standing in the foyer of the restaurant having words (impatient, angry words by the looks of it) with the maitre d', and staring pointedly at Lucius. She turned back to her husband.

"Don't worry, Cissa, I'll take care of this," he said, kissing her cheek before crossing to the other side of the restaurant to deal with the men who had the presumption to disturb them. It didn't take long for the colonels to pale and begin to stammer excuses, and for a moment Narcissa thought that would be the end of it and they would leave, but then one of them said something and Lucius stiffened. He turned his back on them and stalked back to the table. She sighed internally when he didn't sit back down.

"I'm sorry, but the Dark Lord has called an emergency meeting. I have to go."

A monster temper tantrum was looming in the wings, but she'd let it out on the house elves when she got home. As the right hand to the man who ruled Britain, she understood she could never truly be his first priority, but why did his job have to be the only priority?

“I’ll make it up to you, I promise. Soon.”

She let him kiss her cheek, wanting nothing more than to turn away and spite him, but one thing neither of them needed was to end up the latest topic of conversation in the national gossip rags.

“You better,” she warned. He had the nerve to smirk at her, which meant he already had an idea, and that placated her somewhat. If he thought he could make this up to her, the chances were that he could. He was just that good.

Lucius left his wife at the restaurant to handle things there, and followed the colonels back to the base, where the Dark Lord and the entire war cabinet were waiting for him. Apparently, there had been some difficulty in finding him, allowing for everyone else to slip in before him. He felt distinctly unhappy about that, and the fact that he hadn’t had time to change into his uniform. Voldemort, at least, didn’t seem to care.

“There’s been an incident in Berlin,” his master said without preamble. “We’re going to have to move up our time table.”

Lucius frowned. They were already moving things forward at a ludicrous pace. He wasn’t sure how much faster things could go or why they should.

“What happened?”

“There’s been an attack on some of the compounds within Berlin. It was well organized and clever, but sloppily executed. Only one of the three targets was actually destroyed, but unfortunately it was the main supply depot. What should have been a six-month supply has been reduced to a two month supply, at most.”

Well, bother. Lucius nodded.

“If we’re to hold Berlin, we’ll have to change our plans and take Brandenburg before Baden-Württemberg. Long enough to evacuate or troops at least.”

Voldemort's crimson eyes narrowed. "I have no intention of surrendering Berlin."

The general stiffened, but nodded, not entirely sure how they could possibly take it and keep it with such frantic actions. The Dark Lord, however, did not seem too concerned.

"Don't worry, my friend. They think they are ready for us, and right now that may be the case. But soon, very soon, I'll have something truly nasty for them. Something they will never see coming."

~ Page Break ~

The summons came in the middle of night, without warning. One moment, Harry was deep in an exhausted sleep, and the next Snape was shaking him awake. Everything had already been packed and ready to go, except for Harry himself who couldn't focus enough to put his shoe on the correct foot, let alone make sense of what was happening. Eventually, with Snape's usual bedside manner, he managed to get dressed and out of the castle without breaking his neck. The cold revived him some, but also made him that much more cranky to be pulled prematurely from his warm bed.

There were two trips by floo and an hour long car ride, during which his surly disposition worsened. By the time he actually reached the werewolf colonies, it was nearly two in the morning, and Sirius didn't look any happier to have been dragged from his bed to meet him than Harry did. Snape said something about having to leave for France the next day, but they pretty much ignored him.

They're initial conversation involved a lot of grunting and nonsensical sounds, and eventually ended with Harry crawling into Sirius and Remus' bed with the half a dozen other werewolves* and falling back asleep with all his clothes still on. He woke up the next morning momentarily terrified when he couldn't figure out where he was. He sprung up with a gasp, the room an indistinguishable blur.

“Calm down, pup,” Sirius’ said from the entrance of the lodge, his voice laced with amusement. “It’s home #2.”

Harry squinted at him pointlessly for a moment, before hunting down his glasses from their usual spot beside the now empty bed. He found them quickly enough, and then curled back underneath the warmth of the blankets. He had been warm enough snuggled in with the others last night, but without their extra body heat he was not enjoying himself.

“Here, this should give you a little more spirit,” his godfather said, handing him a steaming mug of something. He sipped it tentatively. It was chocolate, spices, and something he couldn’t quite identify, but which peaked his curiosity.

“It’s good. Thanks,” Harry said, looking up at the older man. They hadn’t seen each other in weeks, and then they had not parted on good terms. Harry had been angry, was still angry in some ways, about how casually he had been passed around between him and Voldemort without being consulted and the careless destruction of his relationship with Luna. Still, Sirius was family. Whatever his faults, Harry never doubted the other’s love for him. “Where are the others? Remus?”

Sirius shrugged. “Working while it’s still light enough. The weather’s been unusually bad this time of year. We’ve had our hands full keeping on top of it.”

Harry flushed guiltily. Here he was lazing in bed while everyone else must have been up at the crack of dawn. Sirius saw his discomfort and ruffled his hair affectionately.

“Don’t worry about it. You were obviously exhausted. You didn’t even stir when we all got up. Have you been getting enough sleep?”

Sleep was never the problem, Harry thought glumly. Most days it was a struggle to stay awake. Left to his own devices he could sleep for nearly twelve hours, and still enjoy the occasional catnap. He suspected it was the herbs, and had stopped taking them for a while,

but after the second day his fatigue had given way to restlessness, headaches, and irritability and he started taking them again, fearing yet another anxiety attack.

“It’s just been a bit stressful,” Harry said. “I’m really behind on my school work, and then this thing with Berlin.”

Sirius grinned, and sat down beside him on the bed. “Yeah, that’s something alright. I didn’t know the old snake had it in him. That move took some nerve.”

Not exactly how Harry would describe it. He sighed and leaned against him, taking reassurance from the confident alpha.

“He wants to move the werewolves into France immediately,” Harry said softly. “I don’t like it. They can’t have had the necessary training in that short a time. Not for what I think he wants them for.”

The humor drained from his godfather’s face, and he stared solemnly down at him.

“Don’t worry about it. I’ve been in contact with Beartooth. If they had to be integrated with the regular army, I might be worried, but they’ve been given almost complete autonomy. They fight the werewolf way. They know how to do that just fine.”

“They’ll be fighting armed wizards, not bears. There’s a difference,” Harry said pointedly.

“A lot less of a difference than you think. Like I said, don’t worry about it. They all are proficient with weapons. Some of them even have wands. With the Wolfsbane potion keeping their wits about them, even the full moon isn’t so great a vulnerability.”

Harry wasn’t convinced. The only fight he had seen between werewolves and wizards had resulted in a lot of dead werewolves.

“I’m going to France today... I think that’s what Snape said. I honestly don’t remember much of what he said last night.”

“Hn. I doubt he said anything worth remembering,” he replied dismissively, then smirked. “Going to go flirt with the queen again?”

The young Gryffindor’s ears burned at the reminder of the regal woman. He had completely forgotten that he was going to have to actually meet with her again, and try, try very very hard, not make a fool of himself.

“Er... no, I... I’m going to look at some of the forts along the border. You know, do the inspector thingy. Maybe visit some of the colonies down there and do some recruiting. If I’m convinced I’m not just sending them out to be slaughtered, of course. Not that they have any reason to listen to me-“

Sirius grabbed his arm, cutting him off.

“Hold up a minute there, pup. What do you mean you’re going to the forts? Why would you need to go there?”

Ooohhh, it looked like the Dark Lord forgot to mention a few things, Harry noted. His godfather looked anything but pleased about this latest turn of events. Perhaps now was the time for a little revenge.

“Well, you know,” Harry said innocently. “My job. The one you so generously gave me. Have to follow the men out into the field every so often. Make sure they’re not being taken advantage of. I might swing by Poland while I’m on the mainland, just to get a better view of the action.”

Sirius opened his mouth, but Harry cut him off before he could speak.

“I’m going.”

“No. This was a mistake. I should never have suggested you take on this responsibility. You’re fired.”

Harry burst out laughing, startling his godfather. He startled himself for that matter.

“Just like that? I don’t think so. You gave me this responsibility, and I accepted it. Who else are you going to get to do it? I’m the only one who has feet planted in both wizarding and werewolf society. You need me to do this, and we both know it.”

“What I need is for my godson to be safe. If something happened to you...I’d never...I couldn’t... I didn’t think you’d ever have to get that close to the fighting.”

Harry tactfully refrained from pointing out that he was always close to the fighting. Danger and him were practically dating. He patted Sirius on the shoulder, and climbed out of the bed, searching for his boots.

“Don’t freak out yet. I’ll be surrounded at all times by the men you’ve expressed so much confidence in.”

Sirius glowered at him. “You really enjoy rubbing it in, don’t you?” Harry just grinned.

“There is no point in arguing with him,” a voice came from the doorway, and they both turned to see Jane step inside, solemn and mysterious. She eyed Harry critically for a moment, before turning back to Sirius. “He will leave and he will return, regardless of what you say or do. He understands the meaning of ‘the greater good’, something a Head Alpha would do well to learn.”

Hey, midget, Harry nearly greeted, but caught it quickly before it escaped. It probably wasn’t the best idea to provoke her. Especially since she’d decked him good during their last visit. Sirius, however, didn’t bother hiding his eye roll, causing his godson to hide his smile by taking another drink from his cup. Jane might be the nine-year old, but Sirius was definitely the biggest brat in the room.

“Hn. ‘Greater good?’ Seems to me every time I’ve ever heard that phrase used it was to justify the unjustifiable,” the man said coolly. He

stood and headed for the door, but turned back to Harry before he left. "This conversation isn't over."

The young Gryffindor watched him disappear, feeling exasperated and mildly triumphant. He turned to Jane.

"You think he's gone to find rope to tie me up with?"

She shook her head. "He is going to find Slivermoon and whine to him, until he agrees to come talk you into seeing things Blackburne's way. He is better at it than Blackburne himself."

Yeah, that sounded like Remus. He shook his head and went back to hunting down his boots.

"You are ill," Jane said, her bland expression never changing. He stiffened. "You have been taking too much of the Du'on nadi."

He looked away. There was no point in denying it. Although, he thought it more than a little hypocritical of her to criticize, seeing as she had been the one to give him the leaves in the first place. She seemed to read his thoughts, for her eyes narrowed very slightly.

"It is meant to be used in spiritual rituals, not as a recreational drug. What you are doing is more than dangerous. It's blasphemy."

So you did know what would happen when you gave me those leaves at the funeral, he thought bitterly, but didn't say. He had no intention of getting into an argument with the goddess he no longer trusted. What would be the point? He might as well argue philosophy with a Martian. They lived on entirely different worlds, and could never truly understand what the other.

"Oh," he said, simply. "Sorry, I didn't know."

She just stared at him for a long time, and he wondered if she could interpret what he was really saying when he himself didn't know. Was he going to stop taking the herbs? He should. That much was

obvious. How exactly he was going to do that without going nuts was a different matter altogether.

~ Author's Notes~

Voldemort stole Harry's magic. Yes, he can do that. Most witches and wizards are capable of it, but they can't use it themselves very often or at least not very well. It's like trying to use a wand that isn't yours (with the exception of course being when you've defeated the previous owner, which doesn't apply with directly stealing other people's magic). If one does wish to steal or use other people's magic, they usually do it through a variety of magical objects, which can absorb and store magic. Keystones are like that, except they can only be used by a single person (usually the owner) and are lest likely to disrupt the magic while it's being stored. There are other ways of absorbing and then converting another person's magic into ones own. Cannibalism for instance, as well as various dark rituals. Stealing magic is taught to Sentinels (and previously Aurors) as a means of disarming, but not widely learned among the general population because it's dangerous and unlike most spellwork it requires skin-to-skin contact. Not something witches and wizards are particularly comfortable with.

Wizer's Rent is a wizarding card game, in which each player draws six cards. The first player asks the person to their left "Do you have 'insert number' galleons for 'insert number between one and the number of cards the person is holding' rooms?" If the person has a combination of cards that add up to the 'rent' then those cards disappear from other player's hand. If the player to the left doesn't have enough 'rent' or has too much, it goes to the next player, and then the next, until there are no players left and then the 'renter' loses a card. For example a player asks the person next to them "Do you have 13 galleons for two rooms?" and that person has a six and a seven card, those two cards disappear from the other person's deck and end up in the first player's deck. The object of the game is to be the only person left with any cards. Don't ask me how I thought this up. It's just a complicated version of 'Go Fish'.

If you're wondering about how the twins smuggle things into the castle but can't get money out, it involves transfiguration which is

nearly impossible to do with wizarding money (it's spelled at the mint in a highly secretive process to prevent it from being counterfeited or transfigured for purposes other than currency). You can tell if money is counterfeit if you are able to transfigure it into something else, otherwise the entire monetary system is likely to collapse.

During the winter months, werewolves usually share their beds with several members of their pack to share body heat and as a bonding experience. There's nothing sexual about it.

Book V:

Chapter 23: Musketeers and Madmen

Hermione woke up earlier than anyone else in her dorm on Saturday, which was typical even before she had started helping Harry pull up his grades. It was still dark as she made her way down to the kitchens for some tea and coffee for Harry. The castle's house elves were all darlings, and doted on her just as Dobby did at home, luckily with somewhat less dramatic results. Part of the reason for this, she knew, had to do with her doting on Harry, whom they regarded as some sort of savior for something she could never get out of them clearly.

"But Mistress Hermione," Koki, a spindly elf with extra long fingers, said as she began to boil the tea, "Master Harry is gone. He left last night."

"Gone? What do you mean 'gone'?"

Koki nodded cheerfully. "He was summoned away. Professor Snape had Bicki and Po pack for him. Half asleep, poor Master Harry. He's going to France, yes? Meet important people! The Queen, herself!. Very exciting."

Hermione frowned. "Already? I would have thought he would have a week or two before he had to go. And why in the middle of the night? Did something happen?"

"Koki does not know, Mistress. Would Mistress like some muffins? Po is making banana nut and orange cranberry."

"Thank you, Koki. Would you send them up to my office? I think I'll try and get some work done today."

"Yes, ma'am! Koki is happy to help!"

Hermione left the house elves to their work, and headed for the Hogwarts' Herald office, lost in thought. She was worried about Harry.

That was hardly something new, but also something she couldn't shrug off. Harry had been acting... off... for a while now. As happy to be home as he seemed, he wasn't falling back into his usual routine with the same ease as he usually did. His concentration was shoddy, he kept forgetting what day it was and what classes he had, he barely ate and dozed off at meal times, and his performance during practicals was slipping. At first, she wrote it off as tiredness from his trip and being overwhelmed with catching up, but that didn't quite fit. He had mood swings, gotten angry over nothing and not reacted to something that would normally leave him livid, and no matter how much he slept he didn't seem any more rested.

He was obviously under some sort of stress aside from the obvious, and she had wanted to ask him about it today, but he had already been taken away. Another thing to worry about. If he was acting oddly here, in the closest thing he had to a home, what was it going to be like for him in another country and a whole new load of responsibilities weighing him down?

She should talk to Uncle Severus about her concerns, knowing he was the most likely to be able to help Harry sort himself out, but at the same time she didn't want to go behind Harry's back. He was a private person and she respected that, but sometimes he got in over his head. At the same time, with her godfather so extremely busy these days and more than a little stressed, involving him in Harry's problems could make things worse.

She sighed. Honestly, when did she go from being Harry's friend to his life coach?

The Hogwarts' Herald press office was empty as she knew it would be (she was one of only two people who actually had a key after all, Toure being the other), and didn't expect that to change until after lunch, when the staff would start coming in to work on their articles before their meeting later that evening. They were putting out another release that Monday, so if Harry's absence had an upside it was only that she would have more time to work on it.

Po's muffins and a steaming cup of cinnamon tea were already waiting for her at her desk, and she took a moment to appreciate it.

She got so very little time to herself these days. Between schoolwork, the paper, Dueling Club, Harry, Ron, and her sometimes needy foster brother, there was never any time to just sit and think.

After about ten minutes of thinking about her life and those she share it with, she decided thinking outside of schoolwork was vastly overrated and somewhat dangerous, and decided to start working. She began by making a check list of everything that absolutely had to go into the paper; the standard articles first; Teacher's Tutorial, School Announcements, advertisements (they did have a few sponsors from Hogsmeade, but with the cancellation of Hogsmeade weekends the ads were primarily for student tutors and selling of old school supplies or nic-nacs), sports, horoscopes, etc... then the main articles; this week it was Natalie's continued relief campaign for winter supplies for the Irish victims, a guide to preparing for Newts and Owls for the upperclassmen, and twenty different ways to entertain oneself indoors (important to know since everyone was getting stir crazy with all the extra security keeping them inside). Then the optional favorites; the gossip column, student opinions, romance advice (a section she tried to exclude whenever possible), other miscellaneous articles, and what Hermione suspected was going to be a speculation piece on Harry's abrupt departure for France that day.

She would have to write that herself, what with everyone else already working on something and her being the first to know, but it rubbed her the wrong way to do so. He was her friend, and socially and professionally it was in bad taste to write about him. Maybe she could just pretend she hadn't heard about it until it was too late to include in Monday's edition. It seemed dishonest to her, but at the same time it felt a lot better than betraying her other ethics. She started sorting through articles that had already been submitted and checking them for spelling and grammar mistakes.

By lunchtime, she had completed just about everything she could possible get done without the other staff members present, which was good because they were starting to trickle into the office. First, Collin Creevey, hurrying to the dark room to print his latest roll of film, then Susan Carmichael; who was responsible for Natalie's article, and gradually more and more. A few dropped into her office to submit

their articles, but a majority lingered outside it to gossip and discuss their work. Hermione didn't go out and join them, but left her door open so she could listen. The staff had a tendency to be intimidated by her, and sometimes it was easier to get an idea of what they wanted out of the next edition by ease-dropping rather than asking directly. Given sufficient time and quiet, most forgot she was even back in her office and could hear them clearly.

Trudy Sabbat was particularly forgetful, or perhaps just plain reckless.

"Slipped out in the middle of the night! Of all the nerve!" Trudy's perpetually scandalized (because everything that anyone ever did seemed to be a scandal after being processed by her twisted little brain) voice floated into her office, and Hermione let out a mental groan. It seemed Trudy had heard about Harry's leaving and decided to orchestrate a new melodrama. "Probably gone off to have a tryst with that werewolf girl! Mark my words, by the end of the school year she'll be knocked up!"

Hermione clenched her fists. Of all the nerve!

"Can it, Sabbat," Ron's irritated voice snapped. "No one wants to hear your trashy shit. The guy's gone to France for some diplomatic mission or something. I heard it from Malfoy."

"So he's gone to knock up that that Delacour tramp? Oh that's much better!"

Ron burst out laughing. "What is it with your obsession about who Potter is screwing around with? You're like a crazy ex-girlfriend stalker person."

There were several other snickers, and Hermione settled back in her seat, hoping that would be the end of it and she wouldn't have to go out and call Sabbat in her office for another 'little chat' about her rumor mongering. It wasn't meant to be.

"Screw you, Weasley. The only reason you're standing up for him is to earn points with Granger, who so in blindly in love with Potter he

could set fire to an orphanage right in front of her and she'd still think he was Merlin reborn. You're pathetic. You're both pathetic."

Collin's ever eager voice protested first, "That's not true. Why are you--"

"Shut up, you stupid little homo."

Ron voice cut in, physical violence a promise rather than a warning. "Why don't you shut up, you stupid little wh--"

"That's enough!"

The entire staff turned to their editor, who was now standing at her office door, her expression arctic and her body tense. Most of the Hogwarts staff was there, but had quickly moved away from the center of the rising fight, looking anxious. Collin was looking down, red-faced and humiliated, while Ron was looking directly at Trudy, red-faced and his fists clenched. If Hermione hadn't interrupted when she did she didn't doubt that he would have hurt the other girl. Not that she cared so much about that, it might even be somewhat satisfying, but it would also be the end of Ron's career at the paper and probably Hogwarts itself. Trudy, a pixie-faced little brunette who would have been quite pretty if she didn't look so superior all the time, was gripping her wand, probably realizing she shouldn't have provoked Ron, the only person aside from Hermione completely unintimidated by her acid tongue and with a reputation for violence under his belt. Trudy looked to Hermione, and smirked, probably thinking she was going to walk away from this having caused more harm than she had acquired.

She was wrong.

"You have to the count of three to start apologizing, Sabbath," Hermione said coldly.

The girl had the never to look indignant.

“Apologize! For what? He started it!” she shouted, pointing at Ron, who was still glaring death at her. “And then he threatened me!”

Hermione expression didn’t change. “You are the only I heard insulting anyone, Sabbat, and the only one with their wand out. One.”

“That not true! You’re just picking on me again! You always pick on me! You all saw it, didn’t you? Didn’t he threaten me?!”

“Two.”

No one said anything. Even Greystoke and Parker, two of the biggest gossips on the staff and the most tolerant of Trudy’s attempts at ‘creative journalism’, remained silent. The jilted girl glared furiously at all of them.

“You-“

“Three,” Hermione finished. “You’re fired. Leave now, and don’t come back.”

The other girl practically hissed in fury, and her grip on her wand tightened. Hermione might have been worried, except that Ron was still watching her intensely and she trusted him. That was a bit shocking to her, that even after their all their recent bickering, she still trusted him to protect her without hesitation.

Trudy’s arm lifted ever so slightly, and Ron’s wand flicked into his hand so quickly it was if it had always been there. She froze, her eyes darted to him. She apparently trusted him to look after Hermione as well. Reluctantly, she pocketed her wand and turned to stalk out the door.

“And one more thing,” Hermione said, before the other girl could escape. “If I find out you’ve started rumors about me or Weasley or any of my staff, I will formally challenge you to a duel. I want you to think about that very carefully before speaking to anyone else.”

“Are you threatening me?”

“I am warning you, just like I warned you about disrespecting the other staff members, and about making up stories without any proof. You chose to ignore me, and these are the consequences. If you choose to ignore me again, the consequences will be considerably worse. You can leave now.”

“I’ll tell Professor Toure about this!” she cried, petulant and unwilling to admit defeat.

Hermione didn’t even acknowledge her, and returned to her office.

“Just you wait! Everyone loves my articles! They’ll be demanding me back! Just wait!”

A door slammed and after that Hermione didn’t see or hear anything else from her, although she suspected this would not be the end of things. After a few minutes the deafening silence in the bull pen broke out into low gossip. It wasn’t hard to hear what they were saying, and luckily it was nothing too disgruntled about her short little power trip. Very few people had actually liked Sabbath, even though she was a natural leader when she wasn’t degrading everyone in the room.

After a few minutes, Ron walked into her office without knocking. She was about to snap at him for barging in, but he tossed down his article before she could say anything and she let it go. He sat silently, watching her as she skimmed his article, occasionally marking it with red ink.

“You alright?”

“I’m fine.”

“You seem a bit stressed.”

“I’m fine,” she reiterated.

“...You did the right thing.”

She looked at him, exasperated. "Oh, yes, I'm sure you think so. Abusing my position to oust someone I don't agree with without consulting the rest of the staff and then threatening her with physical violence is a wonderful example to set."

He snorted. "Don't even. You gave her more chances than she deserved, and she mistook that for weakness and deluded herself into thinking she was somehow more important than she is. You did what was needed to protect this paper and everyone who works here. That girl's poison and we both know it."

"Forgive me if I don't take your assessment to heart. I may not have called you on it in front of everyone, but she was right about you threatening her. You would have cursed her if I hadn't interrupted."

Now it was Ron's turn to look angry. "I don't curse girls. Even girls like that. I'd have silenced her, but that's it."

She held his glare for a moment, and finally nodded. Yes, that sounded right. He would have silenced her, maybe even scared her a bit, but he wouldn't have hurt her. He was Slytherin through and through, but he had an honor code that he stuck to as rigidly as any Gryffindor. More so, perhaps, given that so much of his personality was otherwise amoral.

"My mistake, but don't do it again."

He shrugged. "I don't have a beef with anyone else on board."

"With anyone."

He smirked. "Don't start power tripping on me now, princess. It didn't work with for your brother and it didn't work for Potter, it sure as hell won't work for you."

"If you don't get your temper under control, you're going to end up expelled."

“Now there’s the bit of sweetness we all know and love,” he laughed. “Don’t worry about me. I can take care of myself. How’s my article?”

“I doubt Professor Toure’s going to let an article encouraging the student body to riot unless quidditch is reinstated is going to make it to print,” she said blandly, but added, “No matter how well written.”

He took decidedly cheeky about the compliment and she regretted giving it.

“Well, we can’t have the masses thinking we’re under the professors’ thumbs now, can we? We’ll lose their trust.”

“I’ll see what I can do. I’ll have to speak with Professor Toure about Sabbat anyway. No promises though.”

He got up from his chair and did a mocking little bow.

“I leave it in your very capable hands.”

He ducked out before she could snap something at him, and she settled back in her chair. Honestly, he was incorrigible. Incorrigible, but at least he was also on her side.

When Collin entered her office a few minutes later, timid about seeing her after such a scary display of authority against Sabbat but needing to run his photographs by her for approval, he was surprised to find Granger was actually smiling.

~ Page Break~

“Would you like some of that peach schnapps, I know you’re so fond of?” Dr. Jacobi offered as Ira stiffly went about redressing. Her patient shook her head, not meeting her eye. Poor dear, she really was self-conscious about her body, and despite what the medi-witch had thought of Professor Snape, her examination made it obvious to her that the young woman hadn’t been touched by a man in a long time, perhaps since her first husband.

“How long before the results are ready?” Ira asked once fully dressed, and was finally able to look at Jacobi more directly. Jacobi lead the younger woman to her office so they could discuss the next steps.

“The blood tests should be ready in three days, but they won’t mean much until I can analyze the tissues sample I just collected, and that may take several days depending on the initial results. I’m optimistic, however. I’d like to see you again next Saturday.”

Ira nodded, a bit distracted, obviously anxious. This was always the worse part for the patient, not knowing if they could be helped or not, wanting to be hopeful but afraid of yet another disappointment.

“Professor Snape did not come with you today,” Jacobi said, hoping to distract her.

“I... no, I didn’t think...Umm... it’s a bit embarrassing really.”

“Oh? So he offered? What a supportive fiancé,” she laughed. “Most men are more squeamish about this stuff than the women who have to actually go through it!”

This made Ira smile a bit, although she was blushing too.

“Yes, he’s been really supportive. It was his idea to come here in the first place. I’d never even heard of this type of medical practice before... well, outside of the usual nonsense, of course. Drink ground up unicorn horns, sleep with phoenix feather under the mattress, that sort of thing. Even if I had known... I think I would have been too scared. I never would have gotten this far without him.”

“You two must be very close.”

Ira’s wistful smile faded somewhat.

“Do you think so? Would you find it funny to know that I’ve been on four dates with him, and broken up with him on two of them?”

Actually, yes, Jacobi laughed mentally, but it quickly faded. She was starting to wonder precisely what these two were up to.

“Ira,” the medi-witch began, cautiously, because she was going to mix personal and professional matters (how could it not when the creation of a child was involved?). “Have you given any thought to what you and Professor Snape will do if there’s nothing that I can do for you?”

The younger woman nodded. “I’ll let him go.”

Jacobi thought on that for a long time, before she asked her next question.

“Are you both together for the sole purpose of having a child?”

Ira opened her mouth, then closed it, then tried again.

“It’s more complicated than that,” she said, softly, “I love Severus. I really do. He’s the first man who ever made me feel like I was desired in my life, and the only one who made me feel like a real woman since...well, since Winston... I love him, and I’m grateful to him. That’s why I want him to have everything he wants, and he wants children. If I can’t give him that, then...I’ll let him go find someone who can.”

“And you? What will you do?”

“I’ll go back to what I did before. Work. Look after my mother. Maybe I’ll try dating again. There are men out there who don’t want children or who are willing to adopt. Whatever happens, I’m not going to regret having met him.”

“You don’t think he’s selfish? Requiring you to have children before he’ll commit to you?”

Ira shook her head.

“He is just being honest, both to himself and to me. Love isn’t enough. Not in marriage. We both have to be completely honest if we’re going to make that sort of commitment. We’ll only end up hating each other if we don’t.”

Jacobi’s profession brought her into contact with all sorts of people, all sorts of families, and far more unhappy marriages than she liked to think about. Young couples unprepared for the responsibility of a child that turned on each other, women haunted by the sin of infidelity against their husbands, unmarried women who through whatever course found themselves with a child and no one to help them raise it, and even women whose fertility lead the family into financial ruin. Ira and Severus were not those sorts of people, yet she couldn’t help but feel a bit of anxiety over what they were trying to do. Their hopes, precious and beautiful, were bound up in spider silk, ready to unweave at any moment.

“True enough,” she said, helplessly.

~ Page Break~

Harry took a train from London to Paris. It was not like the Hogwart’s Express beautiful and whimsical at once, but a military train, black and ominous with armored plating and more protection smells on it than a Gringotts’ vault. The interior wasn’t any friendlier. There were no private compartments in the passenger cars, only row upon row of open seating for the optimum number of soldiers and personnel to be transported from one place to another.

The passenger cars were all full with soldiers, and Harry’s was no exception. He had been invited to the officer’s car before the trip began, but opted to stay with the Beast Brigade. He said it was to keep the werewolves and regular soldiers from getting into fights in such closed quarters, but honestly he hadn’t wanted to be left alone with a bunch of witches and wizards of unknown intentions towards him. His excuse, however, turned out to be perfectly legitimate.

The Beast Brigade lingered together at one end of the train car, the soldiers on the other, and between them an invisible line none one

would cross. There was an obvious uneasy tolerance by both parties. It didn't help that the witches and wizards looked decidedly uncertain of Harry's safety, as several of the werewolves were engaging in dominance rituals (swearing, arm wrestling, glaring matches, and general rough housing) that the young Gryffindor had long since gotten used to (it was a very rare instance where any of the alphas felt the need to challenge Harry, either because he wasn't a werewolf or because his somewhat undefined status exempted him) and that they weren't allowing anyone else near Harry.

He suspected it had something to do with the letter he had hand delivered to Commander Beartooth on Sirius' request, but it may simply have been typical territorial pack behavior. He wasn't too concerned, but it was obvious the other soldiers were. They knew who he was, and they knew his rank and position both in a military and a political context, and it just didn't seem proper for him to be slumming it with the werewolves. Even if he was probably in the most highly secured position on the entire train.

Harry would have liked to talk to the other soldiers, perhaps get the werewolves to lighten up enough were they could interact civilly rather than glare and posture their way around each other, but Beartooth would have none of it, and Harry couldn't even pull rank on him. Not that it would have done much good anyway.

So he resigned himself to the company of the werewolves, and settled in to read the book he had picked up in London while they amused themselves loudly around him. The book was on Animagi, one specifically recommended by Remus from which the Marauders had originally learned their shape-shifting skills, and he was lucky enough to find it in the Londinium Public Library (the oldest wizarding library in Britain still in existence) before he had to leave to board the train (and before Beartooth nearly gave the librarian at the check-out desk a coronary). It was not exactly a large book. In fact, compared to many of the great tomes found in the Hogwarts library, it was actually rather modest, but the print was small, and the phrasing obscure, perhaps because it was meant for someone with a complete university education in transfiguration and animal physiology. He very quickly wished he had brought not only a dictionary, but perhaps

Hermione as well. One thing was obvious; he wasn't going to be doing any self-transformation anytime soon.

Four hours into the trip and they were well into France, the skirmishes had died down, the soldiers had started to relax, and Harry had given up on his book and was watching the scenery pass by in his window. He thought about his mission and what he wanted to accomplish, about his godfathers looking anxious and guilty as he left them safely within their territory, about the study date he had missed with Hermione, and most of all he thought about the little bag of herbs in his back pocket and whether he shouldn't just toss them out the window or the nearest trash bin.

He couldn't keep taking them. He knew that. Had known it before Jane had spoken to him, but now the reasons were more explicit. Taking the herbs was not only bad for his body, but bad for his soul. Blasphemous, Jane had said, although he doubted he could trust her anymore. She had manipulated him that day at the funeral, and he suspected she was manipulating him now or at least trying to. Maybe taking the herbs so often now would give him an immunity later on, so that he couldn't be possessed or go into a trance or whatever it was that had happened.

He still couldn't keep taking it, even if that were the case. The side affects couldn't be brushed aside as simple fatigue for much longer. Someone would figure it out, Hermione or Snape or anyone really, and then the whole point of taking it- not letting people realize he was probably going crazy- would backfire spectacularly. Lt. Harold James Potter of his Lordship's Army, student of the most prestigious school in Britain, diplomat, drug addict, and potential psychotic. Fan-bloody-tastic.

So he had to get rid of it.

Except that he couldn't.

At least, not now. This trip was going to be stressful, there was no getting around that, and he was already anxious about more things than he could count. This wasn't like at Hogwarts, where at least if he had a fit, he would be the only one directly hurt by it. If he had an

anxiety attack while with the queen or while addressing the werewolf refugees or while touring the forts with the Culties, the results would be humiliating for all of Britain with potentially disastrous results. He needed to find something safer to replace them with first. Which would probably require a prescription from a medi-witch or wizard, and that wasn't something he could be discreet about while in France.

He was such an idiot. He should have gone to Madam Pomfrey from the start. She would have understood. She dealt with stressed out students all the time, she had to have given out some anti-anxiety potions. Or did you need parents' permission for that? Would she need Snape's permission? Voldemort's?

Stupid, don't think about it. Just get through this trip and the first thing you do when you get back is go to Pomfrey. She's a meddlesome woman, but she's also discreet. If it's just for a little while, maybe she won't say anything, and you can find something more permanent. Charms or something. Maybe there's a God of Calm, Happy thoughts out there. Yeah, okay, you've got a plan.

Now you can think about something else.

Like whether or not the Beast Brigade is actually going to be more than cannon fodder for Voldemort's games and what the chances of getting back home without being kidnapped or attacked by Germans were.

That occupied his thoughts for the remaining two and a half hours, and much to his self-disgust resulted in him needing to discreetly swallow a few leaves of the Du'on nadi. No one noticed, or if they did they probably assumed it was just candy or gum. The anxiety melted away into a cool detachment, but his concerns seemed just as valid as before. He had a bad feeling about this trip, and the feeling would not dissipate even under the influence of the herbs.

He was still feeling detached and a little drowsy by the time they pulled into the station house in Paris, but after nearly seven hours on the train he wasn't the only one. There was a lot of yawning and stretching as the Culties roused themselves for their departure from the train. Harry pulled his duffle bag from the overhead storage

compartments, along with his sword (another reason for concern because when he had found it in his luggage that morning he could not recall having packed it before leaving and its spontaneous appearance usually involved immediate and life-threatening danger) which he strapped to his side. The Culties did not generally carry swords, but the Beast Brigade did (un-ornate, but enchanted to be light-weight and strong with the ability to deflect some simple hexes; Harry had considered several ways to make them even stronger defensively) and no one thought twice about him carrying one of his own, even if it was of a finer quality than the others. He strapped it to his side and followed Beartooth closely as they exited the train.

The train station was packed with military personnel, mostly British but also several French officers and even a handful of Musketeers, plus a few reporters and photographers milling about to talk to the soldiers. Harry made it a point to keep himself as obscure as possible behind the larger bodies of the soldiers, but it didn't take long for one particularly sharp reporter to spot him and scurry in his direction. The reporter, a scruffy young fellow in a leather trench coat and a quill in his fedora, pulled up short when several of the werewolves turned towards him and growled.

“Ah...” he started cautiously, holding up his hands to show he wasn't carrying a wand or any other sort of weapon, “Ezcuze me...um... you are Harold Potter, yes?” His accent was heavy, his English stilted, but he kept stumbling through it. “Why are you ‘ere? France? In France? Why are you in France? Are you staying far?”

Harry just blinked at him, and several other men snickered at his broken English.

A camera flash caused him to jump, his wand leaping into his hand without thought, but Beartooth was already shoving him behind him while the rest of the pack rose up around him in a singular, well-orchestrated, and unspoken move. Harry would have been impressed except now he couldn't see a damn thing now.

An argument broke out, in English (some of it heavily accented) at first, but then followed by French as others seemed to join in. It only lasted a minute and Beartooth and the others relaxed and the their

formation widened enough that Harry could see both the reporter and what was probably his photographer speaking to a musketeer dressed in blue and his young apprentice dressed in red. He couldn't tell what they were saying to the reporters, but they were obviously not happy about it. They also obviously weren't going to argue because the reporter nodded once and stalked off. Then the musketeer turned to their unit, and Harry once again found himself being shoved behind Beartooth.

"Oh, for Merlin's sake!" Harry snapped and stepped around the alpha. "Would you relax? What are you going to do when I meet Her Majesty? Tackle her to the ground?"

The musketeer let out a laugh, rich and rolling, his face curved with humor beneath his lightly graying beard. It was something of a relief after an entire day with so many glowering faces.

"As funny as that might be to see, please don't. She would be quite put off with my men and me if that were to happen. Lieutenant Bodine, at your service." The man took off his hat and made a dramatic bowing gesture, never taking his eyes off of them. Harry saluted him, and after a moment Beartooth did so reluctantly as well.

The name sounded vaguely familiar, and after a split second Harry turned to his apprentice. He did a double take. The apprentice smiled.

"Fleur? What did you do to your hair?!"

Gone was the flowing blonde hair that had seemed to dance with her every movement, and in its place was a shockingly short head of dark blond curls, the kind he might expect to find on a boy. In fact, he had thought she was a boy up to this point. She just grinned at him and pulled off her hat. There wasn't any more hair under there either.

"You do not need to look quite so 'orrified! It will grow back!" she laughed, and opened her arms. He slipped passed the other werewolves and into her hug, laughing himself. He hadn't seen or heard from Fleur since summer, and seeing her now was an unexpected surprise of the good variety. Lieutenant Bodine laughed.

“Come, my friends!” he said, gesturing towards the werewolves, “Let me take you to your living quarters before young Monsieur Potter ‘ere runs away with my apprentice.”

The hotel that was putting them all up was only half a block from the station, which the entire Brigade and most of the other Culties marched to. Fleur gave Harry an apprentice’s overcoat and hat as a disguise, telling him that his visit was a secret one until he was safely returned to Britain. The greatest protection they could offer him was anonymity.

There was a bit of a problem once they reached the hotel, however. It seemed that while the soldiers themselves were being housed there, a few of the higher ranking officers had been invited to the palace and Harry was among the requested. Beartooth wasn’t having any of it. He stated plainly that Harry was in his keep and he had no intention of letting him go anywhere without werewolf security. Bodine discussed it with him for several minutes, during which time Fleur snuck Harry out the back before anyone noticed. This seemed like a sure fire way to cause an ‘international incident’, but Fleur assured him that by the time Bodine was done with Beartooth everything would be smoothed over. There was a closed carriage waiting for them in the alleyway behind the hotel, complete with a footman and driver in resplendent matching uniforms and a quick, amused look that reminded Harry of Bodine.

They climbed into the carriage together and once alone, the playful atmosphere suddenly dissolved. They stared at each other for a long moment, each in their own uniform, both of them little more than teenagers and serving their respective countries at the potential cost of their lives.

“’ Ow are you, ‘Arry?” she said at last. “You look tired.”

“It was a long ride. I am alright.”

“I ‘erd about what ‘appened at ze werewolf colony. I am very sorry.”

He shook his head. "It was bad. It was very, very bad. I was there just after... I... don't want to talk about that. That's over and done with. There are other things to worry about now."

"Berlin," she agreed. "And more?" she asked.

"And more," he agreed. Her expression was sympathetic, but he didn't think she really understood what he was saying or if she did it meant something entirely different to her than it did to him.

"Viktor's missing," she said suddenly.

"What? How do you-"

"Everyone knows. It's in all the papers. He was supposed to play at a match with Italy a few days ago but never showed. Apparently, he told some of his teammates he was going to Berlin for the election."

Harry closed his eyes. He had expected this. Not in Berlin and not so soon, but eventually, somewhere and somehow Viktor would find the enemy he had been looking for.

"He may still be alive," Fleur said, a statement of fact rather than just a mere possibility. "He's smart, he might be in hiding or he might not be there at all. He may be using this as a way to disappear."

He nodded, but it didn't matter. Dead or alive, he doubted he would ever see Viktor again and that was a loss he didn't realize he would feel so keenly. They had saved each other's lives, and shared a time that was both frantic with joy and fear. He wondered if he should keep this from Hermione.

~ Page Break~

Beartooth was not happy with Harry when he returned to the hotel that night, but there was little he could do now that it was done and frankly, he wasn't going to get in an argument over it. Harry was not, technically, an alpha, but his shamanic status put him beyond the direct control of any alpha, and to some extent even out of the control

of the Head Alpha. The young wizard had been touched by both Rhiannon and Greyback, and despite the misfortune that befell the Goddess Clan, it seemed the boy was leading the werewolves to a future of glory and prosperity that they had never known. He never doubted that was the boy's intention in any event.

So he let Harry off with a glower, and instructions to get a full night's sleep. He complied gratefully, barely making it to his bed before collapsing. Walking up the next morning, Beartooth had to all but drag Harry out of bed, while the other men laughed to themselves as their leader was made to play mother. A shower and two cups of coffee, and the boy finally woke up enough to take care of himself.

"Queen Ophelia wants me to visit Vosges. They have a colony in the mountains there that's been particularly restless. I believe she wants me to recruit the more discontented werewolves into our army, so that the colony can stabilize in their absence."

Beartooth grunted, taking another bite out of his ham. He would give the Frenchies credit for one thing, they knew how to treat their guests. After two weeks of mess hall dining, it was good to have some real food, even if the wait staff looked distinctly horrified by his men's table manners.

"We could use the extra man-power," Beartooth said plainly. He had twenty good men and women, but that was small pickings for a military unit. Right now he didn't have anyone to replace the casualties they were likely to suffer either, and definitely none suitable to lead in his place if he were killed. Harry shook his head though.

"I want to see the Lorraine's Gate and the Stroudsburg Gate* and their commanders first before I recommend the military for any of them. I would have preferred seeing them before you all got dragged here to be quite frank," he said, looking irritated. Further down the table, Ire and Deepbite were getting into a scuffle over the last buttermilk biscuit, and Beartooth let out a warning growl. Harry shot them a warning look of his own. The older werewolf wasn't entirely sure whose warning had them more cowed in the end.

“You needn’t be so worried. We can hold our own against wizards. Greyback proved that in the last war, and thousands of years of continued existence proved it before that.”

Harry’s eerie green eyes looked up into his, sharp as knives and just as dangerous.

“It isn’t just about survival. You deserve more than just surviving. This is about respect. Mutual respect. You are men, as well as beasts, and should be respected as both. I would not see you mistreated simply because others believe they can get away with it or even because you do not really care.”

Ah, yes, this was why he was putting his faith in this frail child. More than Blackbone’s commands, more than simple protectiveness for a pack mate, Harry was the future. He saw things not just as they were, but how they should be, and possibly how they could be. Beartooth didn’t hold much faith in wizarding kind, but here lay the exception. Here sat a miracle-worker.

The vivid green stare slid sideways, back to Ire and Deepbite, who were now cat-calling a nervous young waitress bringing an extra tray of food.

“Respect,” Harry snarled, causing the two misfits to fall silent. “Works both ways. Stop embarrassing our unit.” When they looked down, appropriately contrite and the waitress could gratefully continue doing her job unharassed, he turned back to Beartooth. “I know you don’t like wizards much, and I don’t blame you considering, but please try to get along with them. You might find yourself delightfully surprised every so often.”

Beartooth shrugged, as if it was inconsequential, but he would try if only because he had more faith in the boy’s vision than he did his own. He wanted what was best for the werewolves. He had been a part of them since before the war, a listless young muggle looking for a purpose or at least a job, while hitchhiking across the English countryside when his life took an unusual turn. Surviving the werewolf

attack had been the easy part, surviving as a werewolf in the wizarding world was another matter altogether. The war had actually made things better for him, providing him a place to go and regular employment under Greyback, even if the work was dirty, but by then he had learned to hate witches and wizards and hadn't cared. Greyback had made him proud of his own strength, but there was little pride to be found in their history. Murder and persecution stretched back to time immemorial, and this new war was just a continuation of that for him. Only now it was revenge, cold and bitter and delicious, but as inconsequential as every other fight before it. If Harry could find consequence in it, find meaning and purpose for what they were doing, then he would try his best to help him.

Even if he did have to play nice with other soldier boys... and the occasional waitress.

~Page break~

"Morgana! Alyssa! It's time to go!" Kyle called out for what seemed like the thirtieth time in ten minutes. He was tired and aggravated after helping the movers pack up their belongings for most of the day, and he still had to get the children to the new house and then get some groceries to make dinner before he could call an end to the day.

"I can't find Izzy!" Alyssa whined, looking ready to burst out into tears as she scurried down the stairs.

"Oh, baby, we probably packed her up with the rest of your dolls. She's on her way to the cottage right now. Just like we should be," he said, trying to keep his voice sympathetic, when his patience was all but in tatters.

"But I had her just a minute ago! I know she was with me after the truck left!" she insisted. "I can't go without her! She'll be scared all by herself!"

Kyle sighed. "Alright, I'll help you look for her. Where's your sister?"

Alyssa shrugged and ran off to continue her search. Robert came into the foyer from the study and watched her disappear. He shared a sympathetic look with his husband.

“It’s just anxiety,” he said, “They’re worried about leaving. They’ve never lived anywhere but here. It’ll be alright.”

“I wish you were coming with us. They would feel so much safer if they knew you were with us. I’d feel safer too.”

“It’ll be alright,” he promised, “I just need to finish up with these last two clients, and then I’ll join you Saigr as soon as I’m done. I’ll be by every Sunday in the meantime. We talked about this, remember?”

Kyle nodded but didn’t look any happier. Morgana trudged into the foyer, with a glass of milk and a plate of cookies.

“Where are your coat and gloves?!” Kyle demanded. She just shrugged.

“I got hungry waiting for her to find her stupid doll.”

“She’s not stupid! Izzy’s the top of her class!” Alyssa shouted from somewhere upstairs. Kyle ran his hand through his hair in frustration. Robert just glowered.

“I’ll handle this,” Robert said, taking the glass of milk and cookie from Morgana and calling Alyssa down stairs and into the kitchen. Five minutes later they re-emerged, both of them looking very subdued, but dressed and ready to go. “They won’t give you any problems for the rest of the day.”

Kyle wasn’t sure if he should laugh or cry. “What am I going to do without you?”

“Funny, I was wondering the same thing.”

“Promise you’ll be safe?”

“I promise. The Fortifyers* will be in this Thursday to secure the house, and I’ll be done with business before Christmas. Nothing’s going to happen before then. Just be patient.” He turned to his daughters, who were still looking sulky from their reprimand. “And you mind your dad, you hear? I’ll be by every Sunday to make sure of it.”

They nodded petulantly, but didn’t turn away when he bent down and kissed both their foreheads and hugged them. Kyle took his turn as well, holding tight for a moment longer than was really necessary.

“I love you.”

“I love you too, you silly sap. Be careful.”

And with that, they left for the central Floo station in the Court district. Their private floo had been de-activated a week before as part of a city wide security measure, so that only a few select places in the city was connected to the national floo network. It was one of many security measures that had convinced the Reicher patriarchs that it was time to get out of the city before whatever the Court feared would happen did happen.

They had talked about what to do several times in the last month, until at last Robert decided to rent a cottage out in the Scottish countryside, in a little wizarding town called Saigr that was so obscure it wasn’t even listed on ninety-percent of the maps he had looked at. He would send Kyle and the children ahead to settle in while he finished his business obligations in London, then join them until the worst of the fighting was over. His tentative association with Harry had resulted in an unexpected influx of business by several very wealthy clients, many of whom were stationed out of their own country estates away from the big cities and he was confident he could continue to support his family from the little cottage and the London flat in the mean time.

They really were going to have to thank Harry for that later.

All of this was practical and responsible and for the best, but Kyle couldn’t help but look back at their little townhouse at least once, and

feel an uneasy regret. Would it still be there when they decided to come back? Did it even matter, so long as man still inside was with them in the end?

“Come on, dad, I’m still hungry,” Morgana whined, tugging him along. He forced a smile as he turned back to his daughters, staring up at him expectantly.

“Oh, now you’re in a hurry to go!”

~ Page Break~

Lord Voldemort arrived in Paris two hours after Harry’s departure, but did not overly concern himself with that. His protégé would be back in Paris in a few days, and they could discuss his progress then. For now, he intended to focus all his attentions on Her Majesty and take full advantage of the courtesy she was bestowing on him during his visit.

At this moment, he was enjoying her company in the palace solarium, a refuge of warmth and lush foliage in the gloom of winter. From somewhere way above them he could hear the soft twitter of birds, and brief flashes of red and gold. The room its self was like an enormous gilded birdcage, with magnificent granite and marble mosaic of Apollo and his burning chariot spread across the floor. A tea set had been laid out for the sake of decorum, just as the ladies-in-waiting and his own ‘man servant’ positioned unobtrusively at one end of the room were, even knowing that if either one of them decided to do something ‘inappropriate’ none of them could have done a damn thing about it.

The queen herself was looking no less resplendent than the room in a white and gold gown, the bodice accentuating the beauty of her feminine form, the seemingly endless tapestry of lace, pearls, and gold silk accentuating the beauty of the human imagination. Her wide, dark eyes should have made her look innocent but instead gave an air of magnanimity and the not-quite there curve of her mouth a gentle humor.

He could see why his young protégé would fall in love with her, however childish that love, but it was not attraction (although she was very attractive) that drew him to her. It was power, and they both knew it. Etiquette allowed them to pretend otherwise.

“You have made a great many people angry with you,” she said gently. The smile he gave her was not gentle, but he could tell by the slight hitch in her breath that she liked it.

“Have I made you angry at me, your Majesty?”

“Angry? No. Concerned? Very.”

“Then I feel doubly blessed. For having avoided your ire and been bestowed with your concern for my well-being at the same time. I am, indeed, a lucky man.”

“I am not sure if I should admire your confidence or disdain your arrogance,” she admitted, her expression never changing. “It is only a matter of time before the Germans re-group to attack you... perhaps attack my countrymen as well.”

He raised an eyebrow. “I doubt I am the only one in this room who hopes that is very much the case.”

She tilted her head, her eyes narrowing ever so slightly.

“Do you believe me so eager for war?”

“No, of course not. War is just a means to an end. Like fundraising or studying. I believe you are eager for change.”

“What sort of change do you think I am looking for?”

“The same kind I am looking for. A revival. A return to the glory days of our respective histories, when our politicians were the great thinkers, warriors, and dreamers of their day rather than the spineless sycophants to the mob we now have. Mediocrity has weakened our people, just as brutality and decadence ruined our people before that.

It is time to revive that which is worth reviving and learn from that which should remain buried. This war will shake Europe from the apathy that has overrun it, and force the ordinary to the extraordinary and the extraordinary to take responsibility. The threat of imminent death has a way of doing that."

"You have an interesting way of looking at war."

"Fire is my element. I have an interesting way of looking at anything that is traditionally seen as destructive."

"Hate?"

"The spiritual rejection of an injustice."

"Fear?"

"A means of survival, of the body, the soul, and society as a whole."

"Betrayal?"

"The limit of tolerance. There must be limit to everything. All of these ideas have their limitations. They are habitually destructive, but destruction is as necessary as construction for survival and for growth. I notice you did not mention 'love'."

He leaned in just a little, and her mouth curved up a fraction so that her not-smile was now a very modest grin. At the other end of the room, the ladies-in-waiting held their breath and the manservant frowned uncertainly.

"Do you see love as destructive?"

"Of course. I thought the French had a very good understanding of this. So much of your literature has love end badly. But love is dual in nature, just like hate and fear and betrayal. It inspires us to acts of selfishness and selflessness, for joy and despair, and is the

motivation of countless acts of conception and of murder. It is a source of some of the most powerful magic in existence.”

“And you have known this sort of magic?” There was the slightest, barely there hint of flirtation in that question, but he missed it due to the mental jolt of the words themselves. Had he known that sort of magic? Oh, yes. Not the exact kind she was thinking of, but...

He recovered quickly enough to give his own vaguely flirtation response without a hint of hesitation.

“It is also the rarest sort of magic.”

Let her interpret that as she would.

~ Page Break~

By early afternoon, the coffee had worn off and Harry was seriously wanting to hit someone. Beartooth had been willing enough to ignore the other Culties that morning, but neither he nor the rest of the unit expressed any interest in interacting with them either. In fact, they didn't seem to care one way or another about anything as they were flooded from Paris to the Lorraine's Gate, an abandoned castle at the base of a small mountain that had been reclaimed and refurbished by the French government to accommodate their British allies, and were escorted around the premises.

As far as Harry could tell it was a very fine facility if a little tight in the way of space, and the surrounding countryside was thick with old growth trees and rocky hills. The sort of place the werewolves could patrol and hunt in and feel at home, but which they seemed to show very little interest in. To make matters worse, the commander in charge was personally showing off the grounds and having detected their disinterest, was becoming increasingly irritated himself.

“If our fortification doesn't meet with your standards,” General Maxxis said, gritting his teeth as Beartooth snorted quietly. Harry shot the werewolf a warning look. They were alone in the man's office, a

rather somber little, and he didn't want to have to be the adult one out of the three. "You can always request a position elsewhere."

"General," Harry said with more calm than he felt, sitting in one of the chairs and trying to swallow what had to be the worst tea in the province, "Please do not take my friend's attitude to heart. We are all tired from our travels, and neither of us has the experience to critique this base one way or the other. He is placing his faith in my judgment, and as far as I can tell you meet all the requirements I think necessary to house this unit."

Maxxis, who was middle-aged and had the look of a Sentinel without the scars, nodded and seemed to calm somewhat. He eyed Harry curiously for a minute.

"It's an odd world we live in," he said. "When I was your age my biggest concern was whether my old man was going to flog me for failing Arithmancy."

Harry smiled a bit ruefully. "Oh, I'm still worried about failing Arithmancy too. I just have a few other things to worry about as well."

The commander nodded, but didn't smile back. He drummed his fingers for a moment, thinking. Then spoke again. "If you wouldn't mind, we have some time before your escort arrives to take you to the Stroudsburg Gate, and it would mean a lot to my men if you could talk with them a bit. Nothing formal, just shake a few hands, trade a few names. It might go a long way to ease any tension between them and well..."

"The nasty little beasties..." Beartooth finished with unfriendly little grin.

"Your words, not mine, but perfectly accurate if this your general behavior!" Maxxis snapped. Harry could feel a headache come on. He held up a hand to interrupt them both.

"Respect," Harry reminded them both, but doubted it was any use. Beartooth was already in a tiff about something and now had

Maxxis's hackles up. Maybe that was a good thing. Better to know that pairing them together wasn't going to work before the real fighting started. He had to hope he would have better at Stroudsburg Gate. In the meantime, there was no reason not to visit the other soldiers stationed here just because their commander was oversensitive. Maybe Beartooth just needed practice interacting with wizards without antagonizing them. "Alright, I would like that. Mind if I borrow your bathroom for a minute first?"

"Certainly, go right ahead."

The door had barely closed and already he could hear Maxxis and Beartooth muttering things at each other. He closed his eyes and wondered what he should do. He didn't trust placing Beartooth in the other's command, and likewise it was dangerous to leave the werewolf with someone he didn't respect enough to obey. But could he really request the unit be stationed somewhere else? Stroudsburg, maybe, if they didn't pick up any more recruits from the colony and overcrowded the barracks, but there was no guarantee that fort would be any better than this one. What was Beartooth's problem anyway?

Merlin, what if he couldn't find anywhere that they could fit in? Perhaps they could be stationed out of a private post, but that was only temporary solution. They had to integrate with the army at some point, and the sooner the better.

Almost without thinking, he reached into his pocket, grabbed a few leaves, and placed them in his mouth. A sense of calm detachment descended. Descended a little too quickly. The room swam in front of him for a moment, darkened, and with it came noise, growls and laughter and then pressure against his chest. It only lasted a moment, and the world brightened and then righted itself, and he found himself staring blankly at a shattered mirror, his reflection broken into a dozen pieces. He blinked, and spun around but there was nothing and no one there. He looked at his hand to see if he had hit the mirror, but the skin was whole and untouched.

What happened?

Shakily, he withdrew his wand and fixed the mirror. Maybe... maybe he had taken too much Du' on nadi. Had he taken some this morning and forgotten about it? He didn't remember doing so, but then again he had been groggy that morning so perhaps had just forgotten about it. It didn't feel like an overdose. He had never broken anything during the few incidents where he had taken too much. He didn't feel any different than he normally did after a normal dose, but what the hell was that?

A warning perhaps?

A knock on the door made him jump.

"You okay in there, Harry?" Beartooth asked.

"Uh, yeah... just a second."

Later, he could wonder about it later.

~ Page Break~

Bobby lingered in the upper tiers of the hill lodge with the other birds and minor sprites, trying not to fidget too much lest he gain the unwanted attention of the fae below. Dwarves and gnomes mostly, uninterested in someone of Bobby's skill, but scattered about were a few of the more dangerous members of the Seelie court; a veela, an earth elf, a young rock lord, any of whom might find a traveler of his skill and knowledge quite useful. If he were above ground, he would not be so nervous, but inside of a fairy hill Raecellos' influence and more importantly his protection was greatly diminished.

Normally, he would avoid a hill unless specifically invited inside, allowing for the protection of the host, but he needed information, the sort that one only seemed to find in the drunken ramblings in the taverns of the Underground. Nothing made fairies more philosophical than drink, and the philosophical discussion that resulted always involved one of three things; love, sex, or politics. Occasionally all three could be worked into a ramble, but usually it was one or the other.

Bobby was hoping for politics, because he had been hearing some disturbing whispers among the wind sprites. Normally, they were too frivolous and scatterbrained to take seriously and forgot what they were talking about within minutes of saying it, but for the last two days the gossip had been unusually persistent albeit vague.

Harry, Twilight Seeker, Gilharmelan they all chattered and laughed.

Greyback, Devil God, the Black Wolf King, they all growled and hissed.

Nothing to worry about really. These were common enough names these days, Harry being the latest pawn of the gods and Greyback being the newest of an otherwise diminishing pantheon. It was the fact that they were being mentioned together that had Bobby worried now.

“Bullocks!” snarled a particularly irritated gnome. “First god we’ve had in... what? A hundred years? Two hundred? And it’s got to be a damned war god, just what the hell we need. Nasty fellow too.”

“I hear he’s got a wife and kids, but you don’t see them none. Keeps them in their den, asleep. For protection... or maybe they’re dead and he’s just weird,” his rather subdued drinking companion muttered. “He’s got a whole court in that den. Servants and gold and meat and weapons. All of it. Won’t hire out locally though, and that’s bloody unfair. How’s an honest chap suppose to get any work what with all the minor gods dying off and the few new ones comes along aren’t hiring?”

The irritated gnome snorted. “Who’d want to work for that freak? Got blood on the brains. Crazy.”

“Like a fox,” murmured the earth elf, inviting herself into the conversation. She was rather fox like in appearance herself, with a pointed face and black gloved paws for hands. Sipping her wine, she waited a moment to see if her bait had been taken, and when the gnomes waited for her to elaborate she continued. “He’s a god. Not a

fairy. He's got plans. They all have bigger plans. He was in his den-kingdom until a few days ago, but now he's traveled to the mainland. What do you suppose he's doing there?"

The gnomes looked to each other, apparently having not heard of this latest bit of gossip. Bobby leaned in as far as the shadows would allow.

"What's he up too then?"

She shrugged. "I don't know, but the Twilight Seeker left for the mainland a few days ago too. Maybe he's following him."

"What for? He gonna kill him?"

"Maybe."

"Naw, he'd protect him, yeah? He was a part of his old pack, yeah?"

"Maybe."

"Except it might be the boy's fault they all got killed."

"Maybe. We won't know until the Black Wolf King catches up to him, now will we?"

The gnomes made some sort of reply, but Bobby had already retreated to the shadows and into one of the little rabbit tunnels that would lead him outside.

He had heard enough.

~ Page Break~

They huddled silently in the dark of their cellar, relying on the light of a single candle. Their furnace had stopped working the day before, and nothing they did seemed capable of restarting it. Lanterns and candles were in short supply in Berlin, the Culties having taken to raiding the local residences and business for supplies in order to

replenish their dwindling stores. Despite the initial thrill of their semi-successful assault on the British supply, Viktor and his rebels were now keenly feeling the backlash of their actions.

The Culties were pillaging those few places that had survived the initial raid, ousting stranded witches and wizards from what little shelter was available into the streets, stripped of anything of use from food and candles to parchment and medicines. Men and women were interrogated at random and not all of them walked away from the experience. The result was a lot of desperate witches and wizards roaming the streets, looking for food and for shelter, the strongest of them forcing out the weaker until it was almost as dangerous to meet a German wizard as it was to meet a British one.

To make matters worse, the Culties had begun to massacre the local owl population. They killed them by the dozens in the owlry, in the air, when they found them in residences, or anywhere else. There were rumors that the Culties were intending to eat them, but Viktor and the others knew better. Their previous plan would not work again.

And still, Viktor refused to relent.

“We mustn’t waiver,” he stated firmly. “We must increase our efforts. They are desperate. We’ve made them desperate.”

“Yeah, along with everyone else in the damn city,” Ernst grumbled. Viktor ignored him.

“What do you have for me?” he asked the others instead. Ada spoke up first.

“I got the maps you wanted; although I don’t know how much good they’ll do you. Some of them are at least a hundred years old. Half the routes are probably blocked or destroyed by now.”

“I’ll worry about that later. They’ll be a good starting point for what I want to do. Eleonore?”

The former journalist smiled, and it was decidedly unpleasant. She did not take kindly to the injustices she saw being perpetrated, and it showed in the casual mercilessness with which she had completed her assignment.

“It’s been arranged. We’ll have our weapons. I can’t guarantee it’s not a trap. These aren’t the most trustworthy guys we’re dealing with.”

“It’ll be fine. We know more about them than they do about us- ugh!” Viktor choked at a sudden wave of pain, unable to catch himself before letting the pained moan escape. Immediately, Clemens was on his feet and checking his wounded arm. They may have had plenty of food, but medical supplies was a different matter altogether, and Viktor’s wounded arm was slow to heal without the aide of potions. Clemens did what he could, but his knowledge was limited to first aide, and aside from a few wound cleaning and clotting spells not of much use.

“Dammit, Viktor,” the bespectacled man admonished, unwinding the bloody cloth he had been using as a bandage. “You need a medi-wizard! You’re going to bleed out or get an infection at this rate!”

He shook his head, and carefully extracted his arm, his expression once again masked by his usual resolve.

“It is nothing. God damn, vampire. Must have been trying to take advantage of all the fighting to hide her feeding. She might not be alone either. Keep your wits about you if you go out at night, got that?”

They all nodded obediently, not buying his attempt at distraction. Viktor was strong, but his wound worried all of them. He had every intention of helping them in the actual fighting, maybe even doing most of it himself, and he could not afford to have such a weakness. For now, however, there was nothing they could do but try and keep him from straining himself or making any reckless decisions before he was properly healed.

“Alright,” he continued. “I’ll review the maps tonight, and we’ll investigate the tunnels tomorrow morning. We’ll worry about the weapons when they’re ready. Everyone get some sleep. It’ll be a long day tomorrow.”

~ Page Break~

Katarina hunted the streets near where she had seen her prey escape first, but after two nights of fruitless searching, she moved deeper into the city in search of him. She had hoped that the Culties would have identified him for her, but the numerous wanted posters offering a reward for information on the ‘terrorists’ responsible for the Depot Explosion told her otherwise. Horace seemed utterly uninterested in the matter beyond the fact that it had conveniently eliminated one of the three places he suspected housed the ward hub and inconveniently increased security. She hadn’t told him about the man who had escaped her, and didn’t tell him that she was hunting him still. They were pointedly ignoring each other as much as possible.

So now she hung to the shadows of Lintz Street, haunting the alleyways and rooftops, hunting open cellars and abandoned ramparts. Prey was numerous, newly displaced and increasingly desperate, unarmed witches and wizards searched recklessly in the darkness for entrances to half destroyed buildings in hopes of getting out of the wind and coming snow, if not the cold altogether.

She ignored them. Let her children find them and feast. She had something a little more... challenging in mind.

~ Page Break~

“Civilians keep coming in demanding information or for action or whatever,” Auror Juelsvene complained to the other half dozen men around the table. The sun had set, and they were gathering to discuss their progress, or lack there of. “They’re making a damn nuisance of themselves. Half of them don’t know their way around the city, and my men have their hands full just keeping them from wandering into the muggle areas!”

Oblitz closed his eyes and shook his head in irritation.

“We can’t have civilians in an open combat zone. If some of them want to stay and help I’m sure we can find jobs for them to do, but otherwise I want them out of the entire city. The Dark Lord will have to send additional troops and supplies eventually, and if they’re still here when that happens it’s going to be a bloody mess! Start the evacuation first thing in the morning.”

“What about the people who live here?”

“Give them two days notice and then get them out of here, as well. We could use the space.”

No one looked happy to have to oust people from their homes, but Oblitz was right. It was too dangerous for civilians to be loitering around. They had received news just that morning that the Dark Lord had moving more troops into Poland and France, and more attacks seemed inevitable.

“Have we heard anything from the Austrians?” Oblitz asked.

“Nothing yet,” a tired looking female Auror said, sighing. “I don’t expect we will for another day or two. The minister will sit on his hands for as long as possible. I sent a request to some members of the Wizengamot to host an emergency session to help speed things along, but I don’t know if it will do any good.”

Oblitz snorted in disgust. “What about the Swiss?”

“Some good news, some bad. The Minister has agreed to lend us two hundred men, but they reserve the right to call them back if they come under attack themselves. We received a missive from Rome promising three hundred on the condition that we collaborate to assassinate the ‘Dark Spawn of the Devil Gods’. I assume they meant Lord Voldemort.”

“Sounds reasonable to me.”

The other men shared a look at that. They were not Voldemort fans, but they knew attempting to kill a man... a being... of that great a political and magical power was easier said than done. He had already destroyed most of their political infrastructure and overrun their capital. The German Wizengamot, who was laughably weak and ineffectual in comparison with its neighbors, had been called to into session in Dresden to take the helm until a new Minister could be found, but they were slow to make decisions and several members were attempting to use the opportunity to increase the power of the Wizengamot and themselves by proxy. Oblitz received orders from them every couple of hours and he ignored them for the most part. He didn't technically have the authority to ask for aid from other countries without their permission, but until someone actually questioned him (and for the last couple of weeks no one had dared) he wasn't going to question it himself.

And if someone did question him, he wasn't above insuring that they never did so again.

~ Page Break~

Crowded into the undersized mess hall, hot from the crowd of bodies and the warmly glowing lanterns, Harry was starting to feel a bit dizzy. He had traveled to Stroudsburg Gate, done another rather unproductive tour, and by nightfall had moved on to the colonies where a very enthusiastic crowd was waiting for him.

"It is so good to meet you in person! I cannot believe how young you are!"

"I wish to fight! Let me fight for you! I will make you proud, I swear!"

"Please let me shake your hand!"

Beartooth's characteristic over protectiveness had all but disappeared once they had entered the Vosges-Woolf , a two hundred strong colony with a disproportionate number of grown men eager to be out fighting rather than rebuilding their lives. The colony itself was only

partially constructed, and much of it appeared to have been done by wizards. The buildings were all wooden and cabin like, but with little character, much like the clothing the werewolves wore which were practical brown wool robes that all looked the same. Harry supposed they had not yet acquired the skills to be a fully self-sufficient colony, which likely hadn't been helped by the fact that Sirius and Remus had been called back to Britain before replacements could be sent.

The werewolves themselves couldn't have been happier with their accommodations. For many of them the little one or two room cabins were the finest homes they had had in years and the surrounding countryside was a vast improvement over the crowded slums they were used to. Those who actually had some experience with country living were granted a great deal of respect for what ever skill they could pass on to others, from anything as simple as cutting firewood to more complex skills like hunting or butchering meat. The witches and wizards that visited and dispensed supplies were few but kind, mostly volunteers from local church and civil rights organizations.

And they attributed all of this to Harry.

"Lord Blackbone told us all about you!" one lone female had gushed. "How you were rescued by a family of werewolves and promised to do the same for the rest of us! You even managed to convince the Dark Lord and Britain almost entirely on your own!"

There were several inaccuracies in that statement, but she looked so happy he didn't feel particularly inclined to nitpick. There were other stories his godfather had told them as well, about escaping from under the German Minister's nose and defeating several Aurors all by himself and apparently even Greyback had listened to him (which Harry thought was stretching things a bit) and he was able to walk with werewolves during the full moon.

He really wished his godfather weren't so damned chatty. Beartooth had laughed and said it couldn't be helped. It was a 'father's pride' sort of thing.

“What about the fighting? Are they going to send any of the werewolves to Berlin? I’d love to give those bastards a little payback for the shit they put us through,” snarled a thin, heavily scarred man. Harry noted that several of those scars had the unique shape or color of a Dark Arts curse, and mentally shuddered.

Several other werewolves were in agreement with him.

“Yeah, when can we sign on? Get our own spiffy uniforms?” one of them laughed.

“What’s the pay like?”

“What if you don’t have a wand? Damn, Auror snapped mine back in ’92.”

The Beast Brigade was hung out around the edge of the mess hall, grinning like indulgent fools, completely clueless as to what the other werewolves were saying (they were speaking in German which was not their forte) but having a pretty good idea what it was about. These were their future allies and pack mates, and already they were showing their allegiance to one of their own.

No help from them, Harry thought helplessly. How could he explain to these people that they shouldn’t join the fight? The visit to Stroudsburg Gate had convinced him of that. Where General Maxxis had been uneasy and irritable, General Thurston had been down right hostile and two fights had broken out between the stationed Culties and the Beast Brigade (which Harry had to break up before one of his men killed the others). Apparently, in close quarters and with a weapon, untransformed werewolves really could be more dangerous than wizards. It was a mess, and more than ever Harry was convinced that he couldn’t leave them in the charge of the commanders. They weren’t ready for it, and obviously didn’t even want to try. The whole fiasco had Harry reaching for more herbs, but luckily he caught himself.

For all the good it did him. He had three more dizzy spells since that afternoon, one of which Beartooth had actually seen. He had said it

was simply fatigue and a lack of food (Thurston apparently didn't have any dog food on hand, to which Harry said pointedly if he made one more smart ass remark like that he would be the damn dog food). He was having another spell right now, and it didn't seem to want to dissipate.

He felt himself tilting too late, and only another werewolf sitting beside him kept him from falling out of his seat. "Hey, are you alright?" someone said, but it sounded odd, as if it were from far away or underwater.

An uncomfortable heat came over him and with it the sound of growling and laughter, and a pressure against his chest. He had felt this earlier in Maxxis' bathroom, but now it was stronger. He couldn't breathe.

"Harry? Harry, what's wrong? Everyone get back! Give him some room!"

He was on the floor he realized. How had he gotten on the floor? The ceiling was swimming above him, the lamp light swinging oddly and making the shadows fly. Why couldn't he breathe? The voices in the room were getting dimmer, even as the voices that couldn't have been there grew louder. His vision was starting to darken around the edges, and all the strength in his limbs died.

What was happening? Had he been cursed?

A familiar, unpleasant laugh rumbled in his ear, and he closed his eyes tight as the nightmare rolled over him.

~ Page Break~

Beartooth's heart nearly stopped when Harry suddenly tilted and nearly pitched himself off the table. Then it nearly beat itself right out of his chest, as he scrambled to the boy's aid. Within moments, the dizziness had become full on disorientation, then paralysis, followed by tremors and a burning fever. Poison was his first suspicion and he shouted for a medic, and one of his men rushed out to find the witch.

In his arms, Harry struggled to breathe, his chest rising and falling quickly but unable to take in air. His wide, unseeing eyes finally slipped closed and his body stopped shaking, and for an unbelievable moment he thought him dead.

Then he started to breathe again, slow and steady. Beartooth (and not a few of those gathered around him) started to breathe again as well.

Then Harry opened his eyes and they stopped again.

One green eye, and the other... the other was milky blue.

A dark, wicked grin spread across the boy's face and everyone quickly moved away except for Beartooth, who could only stare and ask in wonder.

“Greyback?”

~Page Break~

The Dark Lord slipped out of the Queen's chambers silently, easing the doors closed gently so as not to awaken her. Pleasant dreams, he thought to himself, feeling simultaneously smug and generous. Harry might not talk to me for a month if he ever finds out about this. Which was also amusing for entirely different reasons.

The musketeers guarding her chambers did not look at him as he passed, but he could feel their hatred for him at his back. Their beautiful and pure queen, corrupted by a savage beast such as himself. Oh the horror. It's the way of the world, gentlemen. The queens mind a lot less than you think.

He was feeling energetic after his first tryst with royalty, and since he rarely slept to begin with, he didn't see the point in doing so now. Her majesty wouldn't mind his absence. She would prefer his discretion over his sentimentality any day, and he had no intention of humiliating her by having their sordid affair caught by a gossiping servant. Not unless he could find some gain from doing so at least.

He wandered the halls towards his quarters, still brightly lit even at 2 o'clock in the morning, and admired the architecture and the art that seemed to overrun every available surface of the palace. He marveled at the impossibly high arching ceiling, the stained glass windows, each made of thousands of different pieces of glass, the marble statues of naked maidens who looked away and smiled shyly as he passed. Such opulence was not to his taste, but he couldn't help but be impressed with the sheer quantity of it. There had to be easily ten times the number of magical artifacts and artwork within this building than there ever had been in Hogwarts, and one could spend their entire lives making a record of it and still only get a third of the way through.

And this was only the winter palace. He hadn't seen her summer palace in Versailles yet.

He wasn't exactly jealous, per se, but he did experience a definite sense of... competitiveness looking at it all. Could he create something that would surpass all of this? Without making it so damn awful gaudy? He decided to look into it when he got home.

His chamberlain was waiting at the door for him when he arrived, looking both tired and extremely nervous. The man was French, and for a servant very competent, and the Dark Lord was seriously considering asking the Queen if he could keep him but then decided that would be tacky.

"My Lord," he greeted respectfully, with barely a hint of an accent. "Thank goodness you're here. I sent servants looking for you hours ago!"

Voldemort lifted his brow. The servant opened the door to let him into his suite, and went through the expected routine of turning on the lights. Normally, he would help the Dark Lord disrobe into something more comfortable and offer a bath, but it seemed something else had to be addressed first.

"Some of your men stationed at Stroudsburg Gate arrived a while ago with some urgent news. When you could not immediately be

found, they left to try and take care of it on their as best they knew how.”

The Dark Lord frowned. If there was one thing that made him nervous, it was soldiers relying on their own judgment to make important decisions.

“What is it then? Have the German’s made a move?”

The chamberlain frowned, his expression pinched with genuine worry. “They do not know. I am not sure how to say this, but... Young Master Potter... he is... he is missing.”

Voldemort stiffened, his good mood vanishing.

“What do you mean by missing? What are the details?”

“I am not entirely certain, my Lord. They would not tell me everything, but from what I gathered Master Potter was visiting the Volges-Wulf colony as per his schedule, when he had some sort of fainting spell. One of the soldiers went to get a healer for him, and when they got back, Master Harry, the entire Beast Brigade, and almost the entire colony had simply... disappeared.”

The Dark Lord said nothing for a long moment, neither moving nor changing expression, and the chamberlain strained to detect any sort of emotion over the news that his protégé was gone and might possibly be dead. Finally, the Dark Lord turned away and headed for his desk.

“Please lay out my traveling clothes and then notify all relevant parties that I will be indisposed for a while, but they should expect me at any moment. Also, extend my apologies to her Majesty for my hasty departure. Given the circumstances, I am certain she will understand.”

~Author’s Notes~

The Lorraine's Gate and the Stroudsburg Gate are the names of the English forts in France near the German border.

Fortifyers are professional witches and wizards who install security and structural reinforcement to magical homes to protect them from thieves or those who wish the occupants harm.

Book V

Chapter 24: Destiny Unfolding

The forest was bare and colorless; nothing more than black skeletal limbs, clean white earth, and a grey sky that hung low and spread out into eternity. It should have been dreary and lonely, but beyond his five senses he could feel life in abundance. Or at least, what passed for life in this place. Perhaps Harry could not see them because he, himself, was not alive. He was very aware that he left no prints in the snow as he walked.

He stopped, and turned around, looking back in the direction he had come. None of it looked familiar. Had he really come from that direction? Where had he come from? How long had he been walking and where had he intended to go?

Turning in a circle, nothing seemed familiar. Another circle and he couldn't remember which way he had originally been pointing. There was nothing distinctive, the trees were all unique and yet uniform in their style of twisting limbs. Above him the sun was lost, dissolved into a diluted silver glow.

"Hello?" he called out, but despite the emptiness, his voice sounded muffled and barely discernable even to himself. "Hello?!"

He stopped to listen, but there was nothing be heard. Not an echo, not the wind, and certainly not a reply. What now?

There was really only two options available to him. He could stay where he was and wait for someone to find him or he could start walking and hope he found a way out of... whatever this place was. Passivity having never been one of his defining characteristics, he picked a direction at random and started walking.

~ Page Break~

Simon bolted upright in his bed, startled from deep sleep by the booming crack of the gun. The second shot had him leaping out of his bed, scrambling for the hunting knife on his dresser. The floor was icy

cold against his bare feet, and a faint blue glow from the window told him without a conscious thought that it was at least half an hour until sunrise. He stumbled over his things in the dark, the sounds of shouting and breaking glass from downstairs muffling his own clumsiness.

He regained his footing and seized the blade, pulling it free of its protective sheath. It was brand new and wicked sharp. His father had given it to him on this trip to teach him how to field dress pheasants, wild ducks, and rabbit and he knew just how to hold it without hurting himself. His father said ten years wasn't old enough to handle a rifle yet, but oh, did he wish he had one now.

There was someone... or something in their cabin. Something two shots hadn't managed to kill or scare off. Opening his door and creeping into the hall, he realized the shouting had stopped but there was still movement down below. Heavy footsteps and the opening and closing of doors and cabinets, as if it were looking for something. Dread threatened to steal the strength his adrenaline rush had given him, as his mind flitted through memories of all the scary books and movies where bad things happened to people who went out into the empty woods. Families haunted by murderous ghosts, hunters killed by demon possessed animals, vacationers hunted by mad hermits.

But this wasn't images on a screen or words on a page. This was real and it was inside. It had his parents.

He could still run away. He was on the second floor, but his bedroom window opened to the roof which slanted down until it was only six or seven feet off the ground. He had snuck out that way before, but he couldn't go yet, not until he knew if his parents were okay or not.

He inched towards the end of the hall, silently as he could, aware that the floor creaked in certain places and he couldn't remember where, and it didn't seem to know he was there and he intended to keep it that way. As he drew closer to the stairs, he started to hear voices, but he couldn't understand what was said. It wasn't French whatever it was.

"There isn't enough to feed everyone." The voice was deep and something about its accent made Simon think he might be Scottish. A Scottish killer hermit? In Volges? He didn't know and his English was really bad.

"This gun is for hunting. They probably have an ice box in the cellar for preserving meat. Tell one of the Frenchies to ask them," said another, this one English and somewhat nasally.

"Why don't you just go down and look, you lazy ass?"

"Because I'm the one with the gun now. I'm on guard duty, not recon. That's your job, idiot."

"The thing's empty!"

"How would you know? You were a wizard. You probably never touched a gun in your life!"

"I'm muggleborn. I know a thing or two about guns."

"Both of you just shut up."

The third voice caused Simon to falter mid-step, freezing his breath in his lungs. It was a voice like no other he had ever heard. It echoed on itself, simultaneously clear and young and deep and guttural. It was unnatural.

"Take these two into the cellar, check to see if there's a freezer while you're there. You check the upstairs. It'll be tight, but there might be enough room for all of us... if only for a few hours."

"Yes, Master," the other two agreed.

Then there were footsteps heading towards the stairs, and before Simon even had a chance to back away from the edge, a man he had never seen before appeared below him. He was a very strange looking man, tall and muscular in some odd sort of black uniform and a roughly cut beard. He stopped at the base of the stairs, his blue

eyes widening, as surprised to see Simon as the ten year old was to see him. He tilted his head curiously in a rather animalistic gesture.

"Well, what do we have here?"

Simon turned and flew to his door, slamming it shut and twisting the lock on the knob. He made it to the window just as the man reached his door, rattling the knob that would no longer turn. Sticking his knife between his teeth, he struggled to unlock and pry open the window, crying in fear and frustration as it jammed part of the way up. The rattling of the knob turned to heavy blows against the door, threatening to tear it from its hinges. He leaned over and squeezed his head through the space he had made and pushed his body through, tearing his sleep clothes as he went, until he was through. Behind him he heard the door finally yield to the intruder, smashing open.

From somewhere inside he heard his mother scream his name.

If the floor inside the house had seemed cold before, out on the roof it was mind-numbingly cold. It drained the warmth and feeling from his bare hands and feet, but he barely noticed in his adrenaline haze. He crawled awkwardly but quickly to the edge of the roof, while his pursuer struggled with the window and was still struggling with it when Simon slipped off the edge and tumbled the few feet to the ground. The ground was frost covered beneath him, but he paid it no mind as he ran for the gravel road.

And then a man stepped out from the trees in front of it. Simon stopped. Another person appeared, a woman this time. Then another man and another. He turned to flee in another direction but there were people there too. Then more people. They came from amongst the trees, dressed in black or grey, like ghostly apparitions, barely visible in the predawn light. No matter what direction he looked there were more there, and the harder he looked for an escape the closer they managed to draw towards him. He pulled his knife from between his teeth and held it out in front of him. It had seemed so large and impressive yesterday, but now it felt tiny and useless in his trembling hand.

"Stay back!" he shouted, voice cracking and shaking as badly as the rest of him.

"What have we here? A little rabbit?"

The others stopped moving in, and impossibly, Simon felt more afraid of that strange voice than all these strangers gathering around him. Turning, slowly, he found its source and he could not have been more surprised. It was a boy, not old enough to be out of school, small and pale and with glasses of all things.

Simon thought he should laugh, but even as ridiculous as it all seemed, he was still terrified of him. Perhaps it was the way the others turned to him for guidance, or the sword his hand rested on, or his strange eyes; one vividly green and the other a milky blue. Most likely, it was because he was looking at his hunting knife and grinning like the Devil.

"No, not a rabbit," the strange boy continued, "Rabbit don't have fangs. A fox then. You know, I had son about your age..."

The only words Simon understood were 'no, not a rabbit' and 'fox' and 'fangs', which sounded simultaneously nonsensical and ominous; quite in keeping with the speaker. When the strange boy stepped forward, hand held out, Simon slashed at him jerkily, but the move failed. Fast, much too fast, his wrist was caught and twisted, and a flare of pain forced him to drop the knife. Another twist and his arm was folded behind his back, and a hand was wrapped around his throat.

Simon shrieked and struggled, but a harsh shake made him realize how futile and painful that was. He stood there, terrified, expecting at any moment for the hands to tighten and his life to end for reasons he couldn't even begin to guess at. But the hands did not tighten. Instead, after a moment, his captor tossed him negligently to a man in grey, who held him by his upper arm, but otherwise kept his attention on the leader.

~ Page Break~

"Take him to the cellar with the muggles. The rest of you find someplace inside to sleep. We'll be leaving again come nightfall," Fenrir ordered, and those gathered seemed to sigh in relief. Their flight from the colony had been a sudden decision and none of them had been properly rested for an entire night's travel through cold, dark woodland and fields or had thought to bring food for the journey.

He snorted in annoyance, but knew there was nothing for it. Even he was tired, or rather, Harry's body was tired. It really was a frail and ridiculous bag of flesh, for all the conflict it had survived.

"Master Fenrir."

He turned to see Beartooth approach him cautiously, head as low as he could make it without actually stooping. He still towered over him by several inches, which grated on the war god's nerves, but wasn't worth addressing at the moment.

"What is it?"

"There was some meat found in the freezer, but I sent a few of our men to find some deer. What will you do with the muggles?"

Fenrir shrugged. He had originally planned to kill the cabin's occupants in order to secure it for his people, counting the owners as nothing more than a few casualties of war, but the boy made him hesitate. He had killed children in his lifetime, accidentally and always during the full moon, and quickly realized it never sat well with him once he regained his senses. He supposed it had something to do with his own traumatic encounters as a child, which had not only stolen his innocence but also three of his younger siblings. Orphaning wasn't much better. He couldn't let them go with what they had seen, and while he could glean some spells from Harry's mind the boy was not skilled with the spells wizards typically used to deal with muggles who had seen too much. The adult male might die anyway. He hadn't exactly been gentle when he trying to neutralize the threat of the rifle. If he did die, the woman and the child would need someone to look after them. The full moon wasn't that far off...

"I'll think of something."

"And the wizards? Voldemort will not ignore the disappearance of his protégé."

Fenrir snorted at that. If the Dark Lord cared about his 'protégé' so much, he wouldn't have sent him out here in the first place.

"We will leave the women and the children here in France to act as distractions until we are in Germany. After that... he's welcome to follow us."

"What if he hurts the ones you leave behind for helping you?"

Fenrir laughed at this. "They are all French citizens now, even the German ones. If he hurts them he risks ruining his alliance with the Queen. Jane explained it to me. All we have to do is get into Germany. After that, revenge will be our only concern."

Beartooth didn't look convinced, but Fenrir waved him off. He did not need to explain himself to the mortal. What must appear to be a mad suicide mission to the alpha, was in fact going to be a turning point in werewolf society. Too long their place in history had been remanded to the killing of random wizards or mass slaughter by wizards. Now, for the first time, they were going to unite as an army, as a people, to protect not only their lives but their newly founded sovereignty. They were a nation, scattered perhaps, but bound in a common lineage rather than a common land, and this battle would set the precedent that united they could overcome their enemies, even if they were wizards. Many would not survive, but they would not fail.

Rhiannon's daughter had foreseen it.

~ Page Break~

Land passed below Bobby like a dream, verdant green even in what should have been winter and interwoven with lakes and rivers, and the only sight of civilization the odd stone bridge and ancient castle fortress that looked as ancient as the land itself. Mists hung heavy here and moved around like a living thing, hunting for the unwary to devour. Even Bobby had to be careful of it, as the sky was no safer

than the land, and he could just as easily disappear into that blinding vapor.

The faerie realms were dangerous places; particularly those that brushed just a little too close to the spirit realms (or vice versa). It was easy to get lost in such places, easy to wander a little too far afield into the mists and find you had died without even realizing it. If Bobby didn't have Raecellos as his patron he would be considerably more concerned about this than he was, but the gift of an infallible sense of direction had not failed him yet.

For now all he had to watch out for were fae, and ravens were common enough even here that he doubted anyone would give him a second glance. His primary concern now was expedience. Greyback was apparently hunting Harry, and he wasn't certain how much of a head start the devil god had.

There was still a chance he could make it before the other. He actually knew where Harry was. Or at least, he had a general idea. They were both touched by Raecellos, so finding each other wasn't a problem as long as one knew what they were doing. Which Bobby did.

He passed over a small pond, unnaturally clear of reeds and water plants, and doubled back. He circled it twice, calculating how far he had traveled in the fairy realm and how far that would translate in the mortal one. He estimated that he was somewhere in North Western France and that if he waited until the next portal to appear he'd probably be in Germany.

Decision made, he dove straight down into the mirror like water, flying fast and hard to what would normally be his death. He slammed into the water without making so much as a ripple, and emerged above a shallow lake, the air icy cold and the sky painted with the first touch of dawn. He flew up higher and higher, letting the momentum of his fall carry him as far as it would go, until he was high enough to get his bearings. From here he could see mountainous forest deep into autumn, small townships and villages scattered here and there, and what he thought was the Saone River winding its way through it all.

This was farther from Paris than he had thought it would be, but it was possible Harry had been sent this way. There was supposed to be a werewolf colony a couple miles north of here. That was as good a place as any to start.

~ Page Break~

Voldemort glared at the Ward-Master, a middle-aged French wizard in charge of installing and maintaining the wards around Volges-Wulfe and looked more comfortable in an office than out in the field, or perhaps just more comfortable out from under the invasive presence of the Dark Lord. This was probably true of all the men and women the queen had given him to aide in his search for Harry. There were just under twenty, and he didn't want to risk anymore knowing what had happened, which wasn't really a problem at the moment since no one knew what had happened.

"Say that again," he ordered the Ward-Master, who swallowed thickly.

"The wards are all intact, and there was no way through them. Portkey, apparation, even floo don't work up here. The entrance ward only came down once yesterday, and that was at the same time your... people... arrive. No one came in. There's no sign of a struggle anywhere. For all intents and purposes, it appears they all just... got up and left."

"And your wards can confirm this?"

The Ward-Master looked down, obviously embarrassed about what he was going to say.

"I...no, I haven't... Um, there are very strict laws about what sort of wards we can use. The colony falls into a sort of grey area. It's not a prison and technically it's private land, so we're not really allowed to monitor when the... residents... come and go. I mean, we have wards set up to keep them inside during the full moon, but that's a public safety issue and they're all aware of it and...uh..."

Voldemort just stared at him. That was one of the stupidest things he had ever heard. Ministry stupid, except even the Ministry had known

better than to give werewolves too much freedom of movement. The Ward-Master started to sweat and fidget, as if he could read the wizards dark thoughts. He couldn't, of course. If he could, the man would have pissed himself. Finally, the Dark Lord turned away from him.

"Do not allow anyone to disturb me for the next half hour."

He didn't wait for an affirmation, but stalked towards the main lodge, the last place his protégé had been seen. Inside, the state of the place adhered to the Ward-Master's theory. There were plates of food and un-drunk beer in crude clay mugs, but no signs of struggle. No overturned furniture or curse-marks scarring the wood. The two remaining werewolves, one a part of the Beast Brigade and the other a German refugee, both swore they had been gone for only a few minutes after seeing Harry collapse and when they returned with the volunteer Medi-Witch, the place had been completely empty. They had done a search of the colony, and when they found nothing the lone Cultie had run to the nearest town and fire-called the nearest fort. Bureaucracy had tied things up for hours before word had finally reached him, and while search efforts were already underway the Dark Lord couldn't help but be furious over the delay.

Harry was gone, probably kidnapped, possibly dead and no one knew what was happening. How had anyone even known the boy would be here? Had the werewolves conspired to kidnap him themselves? He couldn't even begin to guess for what purpose. German aurors were the most likely culprits, but something this bold would only serve to draw the French closer to direct conflict with them and they didn't have the strength yet to fight two powerful nations at once. It was still possible, however. Current intelligence stated that Oblitz had taken command and was organizing the Aurors, and he was potentially hateful and reckless enough to attempt to kidnap Harry. Just as likely was a group of rogue aurors acting on their own without thought to the long term consequences. Dead or held hostage, Britain's Prince would soon be missed, and he didn't like to consider what that might mean for the war effort. He didn't like to think of what that might mean to him personally either.

A fatigue fell over him. It had been a long time since he had been concerned about the consequences of his decisions, and had forgotten how they could drain a man, even one such as him. He moved himself to a chair in the darkest corner of the room and sat himself down, pondering different spells he might try to find Harry or even just to determine if the boy were alive or dead.

No one came to bother him. Not even after the thirty minutes of required solitude had passed, and he had formulated a number of spells and rituals to divine the knowledge he sought even in the event of other spells put in place to prevent it. Time and supplies would be needed, neither of which he had in abundance while in France. He couldn't honestly afford to be away from Britain for more than a day at a time, but he couldn't imagine going back right then.

He was about to stand and begin the proper preparations, when one of the side windows sprung open without warning and a raven flew inside. It circled the room once, barely avoiding smacking into a beam and alighted clumsily on a table, apparently half blind after moving from the bright sunlight to the dim lodge. Voldemort's conscious mind went completely blank, struggling between the sudden recognition and the seeming impossibility of it. Luckily, his unconscious mind was ready for the unexpected, and he was casting a spell without thinking.

"Stupify."

The spell flew true, and the raven let out startled squawk before falling over, its black talons clawing at the air. Voldemort snatched the bird up off the table, examining him from head to toe, before realizing he was being stupid. If this was indeed who he thought it was, his physical appearance wasn't going to be what gave him away.

"Rennervate."

Immediately, the raven flailed and pecked and clawed at his hand, attempting to escape. Voldemort flinched as it drew blood, but didn't let go.

"Stop that or I'll kill you."

And suddenly, the raven froze. Slowly, it tilted its head up to look up at him.

"Bobbitimus."

Raven's don't glare. They lack the facial musculature to do so, but the Dark Lord could read the hatred in those beady black eyes easily enough.

"So it is you." This was... stunning. If it were any other time, he might be able to discern some sort of emotion, some sort of nostalgia, but at this moment his only thought was the raven's presence and his protégé's absence was too uncanny to be mere coincidence.

"Where is Harry?"

Bobbitmus' jerked, blinking at him stupidly. "He's not here?" Immediately, the raven realized he had already revealed too much. Before he opened his big beak he could have denied any interest or involvement with the young wizard. The Dark Lord's crimson eyes narrowed.

"Were you looking for him? What business do you have with him? Or rather, what business do the fae?"

Indignant, Bobby stabbed him sharply with his beak.

"Our business is our own. Not yours or the fae. Neither is my master, as you well know, seeing as you killed the one who was."

Voldemort's tightened his hands around him painfully, threatening to crush his fragile bones. He held his breath, held it in, refusing to scream from the encroaching pain that was soon to follow. But the Dark Lord's gripped eased, until he could once again breathe comfortably.

"It is only out of respect for your master that I do not kill you now, but I promise you agony beyond measure if you attempt to withhold Harry from me."

"Well, I'm not hiding him in my back pocket if that's what you're implying!"

"Don't try my patience, Bobbitimus. I ran out of it long ago. Tell me what you know."

The raven considered lying, considered saying nothing, and briefly considered pecking out the bastards eyes (although this was primarily done to make himself feel better about a really lousy situation), but realized rather quickly that of the two of them, the Dark Lord was the best suited to help the missing Gryffindor.

"The War God, Greyback is hunting him. I was sent as messenger to warn him. If he truly is not here and you don't know where he is, then perhaps it is too late."

Voldemort's eyes widened. "Why would Greyback..." a series of awful ideas slipped through his mind, and to his dismay all of them seemed possible with Greyback. In his moment of distraction, Bobby made his move. There was angry curse, and the Dark Lord snarled in pain as the mass of feathers beneath him transfigured into hundreds of razor sharp quills, stabbing savagely into his unprotected hands. Force to open his hand, Bobby tore free and flew as fast as he could through the still open window, leaving behind several of his transfigured feathers in the Dark Lord's hand.

The curse that followed after the raven took out half the eastside of the cabin and several fine old oaks, but Voldemort could hear the raven's wicked laughter ringing through the trees for a long time after.

"Lord Voldemort!" someone cried, and several witches and wizards swarmed to the door of the cabin to see what had happened. He only spared them an irritated glower, before turning to his injured hand. There were easily three dozen ebony quills buried deep into his right hand, and they were not going to come out on their own. He pulled a few of them free with his teeth, and hissed as he discovered in a rather painful way that they were not only sharp but also barbed.

"Just like old times," he muttered to himself, then turned to the frightened little minions hovering at the door. "Fetch me pen and paper, Lt. Potter's luggage, and the finest blade you can find."

The dozen or so men and women just stood there and stared dumbly at him, unable to comprehend exactly how (or why) he had just blown up part of a cabin and injured himself so badly. He flung out his wand, which sent anyone not quick enough to dodge, flying several feet.

"NOW!"

~ Page Break~

"This sucks Mermaid eggs," Ernst grumbled, as he sloughed after his comrades through the ancient sewers. The murky water was only ankle deep, but it was icy cold and hid the uneven floor so that they had to be constantly alert to keep from falling into it. The Schnauzer sized rats weren't exactly pleasant either. Viktor was at the front with the maps, carefully marking their progress through the underground, while Eleonore held up her lighted wand for everyone to see by. He was stuck playing pack mule carrying all their supplies and Engel rounded out their little party and followed behind them to guard their backs.

"Shut up, kid. You're the one who wanted to come along so badly," Engel grumbled. This was perfectly true, but then Ernst hadn't known their mission was going to take so damn long. The ancient tunnels had been interesting and sparked his sense of adventure for about an hour, but by the second he had had enough. They were on their fourth hour now, and he didn't like the idea that they hadn't reached their destination and after they did they would still need to go back.

"We're almost there now," Viktor said tightly. "We're right under the Department of Muggle Affairs, so the Department of Education has to be about a sixty meters to the left of us... there'll be a turn in just a couple of feet."

"I'm with Ernst," Eleonore muttered. "The sooner we all get out of this pit the better. This can't be doing your arm any good."

"It's fine," he snapped, and no one said anything else. It was obvious to everyone that it wasn't fine. It was clearly causing their leader a lot of pain, and the way he was stubbornly refusing to let anyone look at it made several in their group suspect it was infected. The only reason they hadn't pushed him to stay at home was that this might be their last mission together. If the ward hub really was under the Department of Education, then destroying it would cause the wards to come down and the German Aurors would re-take the city and allow Viktor to find a medi-wizard to treat him. Then what?

Eleonor had made it clear she would write about what had happened in Berlin for everyone to hear, maybe even a book, and do what was her journalistic responsibility demanded of her. Ada would take her daughter Christiane somewhere quiet and safe to recover from the loss of her father. The others... it was harder to say. None of them were technically Auror material aside from Viktor, but that didn't mean they wanted to sit on their hands while their country was under attack. Whatever Viktor's plans were, he kept them to himself and they respected that.

Viktor suddenly stopped and looked up from his map.

"Did you hear something just now?"

Immediately, they were all on alert and scanning the darkness for potential threats, which of course was pointless. No one could see anything. They remained motionless and listening for a long moment.

"Must have been a rat," Viktor finally said uncertainly. "Stay on guard just in case. It's possible that there are traps down here."

They didn't need to be told twice.

"Switch to dark vision," he ordered softly, "I can find the spot without the map from here."

Eleonore extinguished her wand, and a few softly whispered spells pervaded until they could all see again. The tunnel was... not exactly clear as day, but easily visible in a spectrum of white, grays, and blacks; nothing more than shapes and shadows. The map was

useless to them now, as the spell made it impossible to see anything written or drawn on a flat surface, and Viktor tucked it away into his robes. It freed his hand to carry his wand, and he was thankful for that. His left arm was stiff and useless, unable to unbend at the wrist or even clench his fist, and he had been forced to pocket his wand while carrying the map.

"Did you hear something?"

Everyone froze.

That hadn't been one of them. It came from ahead of them somewhere, the barest echo. Viktor turned and gestured for them to fall back further into the tunnels and they all ducked into another, and waited to see who it was.

"Echoes from the street and nothing more. There is no one down here. No one knows of this place," a female voice said simply.

"You know of it."

"But of course. These tunnels are the safest way to travel, night or day. We have the greatest mobility underground than above during the daytime, and the Ministry is unable to track our movements during the night. We are more familiar with the tunnels than the streets. The tunnels have remained the same for centuries."

"How much further, then?"

"It's just up ahead and to the right. Five minutes at the most."

"Hhhmmm... it seems you may yet redeem yourself, Katarina."

There was no response from the other, but Viktor felt his heart race. He knew that voice! He knew both of them! Their combination brought up a whole range of dark possibilities. He waved the others further back into the tunnel. They had to distance themselves.

He didn't fancy fighting vampires in this place.

The others moved back cautiously, but then the vampiress spoke again and they froze.

"Wait... I smell something... Goethe, Ramone, check it out."

"Yes, Mistress."

"What is it?" Horace asked, staring after the two vampires as they moved into the tunnel.

"There's someone here..."

"You said... never mind. We'll have to take care of this before I can-"

"Incendio!"

"Shit! Negatus incendius!"

Goethe and Ramone both just barely managed to get behind Tom's counterspell before the wall of fire swallowed them. The fire dissipated into scalding cloud of steam, burning and soaking them simultaneously. Katarina snarled like a lioness, and the moment the flames dispersed she flew down the tunnel to meet their attackers. This territory was hers and had been for centuries. She would not yield it to the wizards.

"Katarina, wait!" Horace shouted after her, but she ignored him. "Go and assist your mistress, you useless fools!"

She could sense the others, Goethe, Ramone, Fiore, Nanz, and Lila follow after her, foolishly leaving the wizard unguarded. She thought to counteract his command, but the enemy was already too close. She could hear the loud splashes and thuds of their feet as they scrambled to escape. Slowing just enough to let the others catch up to her she ordered them quietly.

"Split up and get ahead of them. Drive them into the Bone Well if you can, but whatever you do, keep them from reaching topside."

"Concido!"

The tunnel ahead of them collapsed, but Katarina merely smirked and turned down another tunnel with her minions. Gradually, they started to break off in different directions and passages opened up for them in order to find and surround their prey. The thrill of a true hunt filled her. This was so much better than the simple stalking and surprising of helpless witches and wizards caught out on the street or sheltered in the rubble. There was danger and strategy in this. If she made a wrong turn or didn't respond fast enough they could escape or catch her in one of those awful spells.

She kept track of their movements by the echoes of the curses and footsteps, carefully calculating how she might cut them off and in which direction they might next turn. It was obvious to her that they were completely lost now, turning randomly, and cutting off their ability to back track by collapsing tunnels behind them, and only through sheer luck had they avoided being caught in a dead end.

Their luck ran out as they made a turn down a wide tunnel that emptied out into the Bone Well. The Bone Well was a nickname given to the thirty foot wide chamber into which six other tunnels emptied at different levels. The chamber floor had collapsed into another tunnel beneath it centuries ago, creating a two story pit from which the only escape was a two foot drainage pipe that was routinely flooded or blocked or both. Whenever it rained the pit flooded with water and when the water finally receded a new collection of animal and human bones from the nearby catacombs, trash, and was left behind. The water was low at the moment, and dozens of mucky skulls leered up at them as they frantically searched for a way to one of the other tunnels.

"Ah hell, what are we going to do now?!" Ernst shouted.

"A bridge! We need to make a bridge!" Engel snapped, pushing him aside and pointing his wand to the rubble down below. "Pon constructio de os et later et mortarium!"

Beneath them the rubble started to move, rolling around and shaking itself loose from the muck, before pulling itself together into pillars of bone and brick and muddy mortar. Taunting laughter rang out behind

him, echoing through the tunnels and into the chamber, almost deafening after the long standing silence.

"Incendio!" Viktor cursed, driving back the shadowy figures he could see coming up behind them. "Dammit, how long?"

"Give me a damn minute! I don't have anything descent to work with!"

"Just hurry!" Ernst demanded, fidgeting frantically as the macabre bridge slowly began to take shape. The pillars were too thin and shaky, but it only needed to stand for a few seconds, long enough for them to cross into another tunnel. The walkway was only starting to form, when out of sheer panic, Ernst rushed it.

"You idiot! It's not ready!" Engel shouted, but it was too late, Ernst was already on the still forming bridge and it swayed under his added weight, threatening to throw him off and into the pit. He struggled to keep his balance then struggled to keep free as bones and brick came together around his feet, still in the process of forming the structure. Ernst screamed in terror and scrambled across, feeling the structure a hair's breadth from collapsing beneath him completely. By some miracle he managed to get to the other side, and still caught up in his terror he continued to run into the tunnel, abandoning his fellows behind him. Viktor called after him.

"Wait! Ernst, wait! Damn it! Go after him! I'll follow behind and destroy the bridge."

"But-"

"GO!"

Engel grabbed Eleonore's arm and dragged her onto the bridge. It swayed beneath them, but nothing like it had with Ernst. They were almost to the other side when they were met by Katarina. She stood at the entrance of the tunnel, smirking down at them, her right hand covered in blood. Viktor shouted for them to defend themselves, but it was already too late. Too quick to see, she moved from one side of the bridge to the other, catching Viktor's arm before he could execute his spell. Engel and Eleanore, still on the bridge, fell soundlessly to

either side, the silence of their death a direct contradiction to the intensity of sound that followed as the bridge collapsed, bricks and bones smashing into the walls and the floor and each other.

Viktor stood there, stunned. They were dead. All of them. His people, his mission, gone in an inexplicable moment. How? How had this happened? Why?

"Well if it isn't the naughty little boy. I had hoped that I would see you again, but I never dreamed it would be here, of all places," Katarina crooned, smiling happily. He turned to her. He blinked once then kicked out at her, but she didn't release his arm and with her free hand she caught his leg and tossed him onto his back. Filthy, icy water flowed around him, soaking the back of him from head to toe and when he rolled over to get back on his feet the rest of him was equally drenched. He only managed to make it to his knees, before he was grabbed again and thrown against the tunnel wall, and everything went dark.

~ Page Break~

It took the French minions hours to get everything the Dark Lord required, and if it weren't for the fact that it took almost as long for his own soldiers at Lorraine's Gate and the Stroudsburg Gate to arrive and that he had to wait around for the medi-witch to finish fixing his hand (apparently no one had invented a spell to deal removing so many barbs at once and most of it still have to be done manually) someone would have died, whether they were French or not. By early afternoon, Voldemort was feeling unequivocally frustrated and the rest of the camp thoroughly terrorized, but he finally had what he needed for the location spell.

The usual locating spells had naturally come up empty handed, and this was not surprising. Locating spells were notoriously easy to block or fool, and it took a sort of creativity and arcane knowledge that most people lacked to find or create truly magnificent locating spells. One of them, the Dark Lord had used to find Harry while he was in Germany through the use of dreams. He could not use that one here. If Greyback truly was involved in Harry's disappearance, the spell could easily be destroyed, and its reliance on Harry dreaming was

likewise problematic. There was a very high probability that the boy wasn't asleep or was trapped that way by Greyback and out of his reach. He needed a different sort of spell.

He let the others watch as he prepared the spell. Even now he was something of a narcissist, and he knew what he was about to do would have them talking for weeks. They gathered around the partially destroyed lodge, peering in through windows or the blasted out wall, as he blasted furniture out of the way to clear a space for himself.

"Vocabulum sanguis," he hissed, planting his still bloody hand on the floor. There was a delicious burn as the dozens of little wounds in his hand reopened to spill his life blood onto the floor, only for it be caught up by some invisible pen to inscribe a diagram and three hundred and thirty three symbols spiraled out until it was six feet in diameter. He withdrew his hand and the red symbols glowed for a moment before turning black, burning themselves into the wooden floor boards. At the center of the center of the spiral he placed a piece of paper written in Harry's hand, for some sort of barely started homework and at the end of the spiral he set his toothbrush. He stood at a short distance from the edge of the spiral diagram. After that, the incantation was simple.

"Patronus de Harry James Potter, ego invito protego tuus dominus."

The end of his wand glowed white to the point of blinding and he looked away with the rest of them. When it faded to a tolerable level he turned to examine his handy work. Harry's patronus stood stiffly in the center of the spiral, staring at him unhappily. Voldemort took a moment to admire it. He had never had the privilege of seeing it before, and though Severus had described it to him it seemed the potions master failed to convey its true magnificence. The stag was large and strong, his antlers heavily pronged, its gaze fierce and unflinching. Voldemort, who had always thought of deer as prey animals, knew this creature held a warrior's spirit.

There were several gasps from the observers, for even if they didn't know the patronus belong to Harry, it was well known that

Voldemort's patronus was a snake and to have summoned someone else's was unheard of.

"Your master is in trouble," the Dark Lord said to it, earning him an interested ear twitch. "A devil god has taken him, and I must rescue him before it is too late. I need you to guide me to him."

His message seemed to agitate the patronus, for it walked itself in a circle within the spiral, but did not leave it. This was the only truly difficult part of the spell, convincing the patronus to leave the spiral. Inside the spiral, the patronus still had the option of staying or returning to its own spirit realm, but once it stepped away it would be bound to the bidding of its summoner until its true master freed it or died. It circled once, twice, a third time and finally stepped out of the spiral.

"Come then," Voldemort commanded, and led it outside, and everyone there quickly moved away to give them room. He addressed his soldiers first. "Mount your brooms and prepare yourselves. This will happen quickly. When we find the werewolves, do not engage until I give the order."

As the Culties all began to mount their brooms, he turned to the patronus.

"Take me to your master."

A handful of Culties barely managed to dodge out of the way as the spirit deer careened through their ranks and into the woods. Those already mounted, shot after it while the rest scurried after them. It was a fast patronus too, the Dark Lord noted mentally, before he too followed. He had no broom and didn't require one, but instead employing a technique he had taught to many a Death Eater during the war years, dissolved his body into a thick smoke and shot into the air to follow.*

It happened as quickly as he had suspected it would. The patronus ran the gamut of trees and hill, ravines and streams, briar and boulder, and still all struggled to keep up from the air. Those who flew too low had to be cautious of the trees and those who flew too high

risked losing sight of their guide. Only Voldemort, who's insubstantial body held as little fear of the physical realm as the patronus did, was able to keep up easily, often moving so low and close he brushed against the side of the spirit deer, urging it to ever greater speeds. Less than half an hour later the patronus suddenly stopped before a large cabin in the woods, straightened itself to full height, ears spread wide and alert, and did not move.

Unprepared, Voldemort shot passed it, and ended up circling back, surveying the perimeter of the cabin as he did so. Immediately, he knew this was the place. It was heavy with magic. He reformed himself beside the patronus. It did not acknowledge him, but stared unblinking at the cabin.

"Go. You have done your part," the Dark Lord commanded, and the spirit deer disappeared in plume of mist. General Maxxis and General Thurston dismounted their brooms to stand beside him and receive their orders.

"Do not engage the werewolves unless I give the signal. I will discern the situation myself."

They looked ready to protest his engaging the 'enemy' directly, but he was already moving towards the cabin. He had barely taken half a dozen steps before the front door opened and Harry walked out of the cabin to meet him.

The next half a dozen steps and it became clear that it wasn't Harry who had come out to greet him.

"Greyback, you son of a bitch."

"Why yes I am," the monster laughed in his strange dual voice.

"Release Harry this instant," he snarled, stalking forward. There were several warning snarls from inside the house, and men started filing out from doorway. Voldemort ignored them. They were meaningless.

"I don't think so," Greyback said offhandedly. "I need him for something."

"I really don't care."

The devil god laughed. In an instant, Harry's wand was in his hand, and a spell he should not have known was cast. "Ignis draconis."

A dragon, composed purely of fire, formed from the air and sprang for the dark lord, setting the leaf littered ground ablaze as it went. The Dark Lord apparated out of the monster's path a few meters away from its massive fiery teeth, and then again when the thing spat fire at him. Culties sprang into action, sending offensive spells at it, but they were ineffective against something so strong. Voldemort himself was somewhat astonished at the level of the spell. 'Fire Dragon' was not really a difficult spell, but typically it was only intended to be the size of a large pony not an actual dragon, and for someone to make it that large required a great deal of magic and control. Greyback should not have had either. The monstrosity roared and swung its tail, smashing several trees into smoking cinders and sending a handful of Culties flying without the aid of their brooms.

"Ignis dissolutus!" Voldemort snarled and the dragon exploded into so many embers, floated up, and disappeared. He turned to Greyback who was still leering at him confidently.

"That was fun. I see why wizards might like this sort of thing."

"How?" he demanded, but the devil god merely waved the question away.

"Not something ya need to worry about. I was just showing off. Those German bastards are in for quite the surprise."

"Stupify!"

The spell caused Greyback to stumble backwards, but he threw it off with shiver and a smirk.

"Mine was cooler."

The Dark Lord's crimson eyes narrowed. He was not prepared for this fight. He knew a thousand spells that could kill a man or a god, but none that could kill a god without hurting the body of the one possessed. Stunning spells and simple hexes wouldn't work on the likes of Greyback, and anything stronger risked Harry's body.

"What do you want, Greyback?"

The devil god grinned and spread his arms, as if welcoming him for a hug.

"I want the same sort of things you want; a strong nation, a happy people, and my enemies writhing in agony at my feet. Is that so unreasonable, old friend?"

"I was giving you all of that already! Why betray me now?!"

Greyback narrowed his eyes, and Voldemort felt an uncomfortable anxiety at seeing the devil god's anger and hatred shining through Harry's young face.

"You cannot give pride! We are not your dogs! We will take our revenge on our own terms."

"And you would betray your allies to do so? You would dare to betray me? I will kill all of your kind down to the last man, woman, and child before I will tolerate such arrogance!" he warned, raising his wand towards the house where the werewolves were still trickling out the door. They froze when they saw the Dark Lord pointing his wand at them. It would only take one simple spell and cabin and everyone inside (and likely anyone anywhere even close to it) would be dead.

Greyback glowered at him, but made no move to obey.

"It's funny ya should say that," he said darkly, and from his back pocket he removed the hunting knife he had taken from the muggle boy and raised it to his neck. "I was thinking the same sort of thing."

The Dark Lord hesitated, the devil god grinned.

"You wouldn't..." but they both knew he would.

"Harry is as much mine as he is yours, old friend. He belongs to my Queen and to my people. Killing this body means nothing to me. He will die as Britain's prince and be reborn a godling in Rhiannon's court, my brother and my servant. Do not attempt to test my resolve here. I'm fucking crazy and we both know it."

Black hatred welled up in the Dark Lord, the likes of which he had not felt since the war, when Dumbledore continued to aggravate and harass him and his forces at every turn. He had thought he had outgrown such pettiness, but now he could feel it blooming again like a perennial flower.

"If you harm a hair on his head, I crush the souls of your last living children and feed them their own hearts."

Greyback snarled, lifting Harry's wand to truly attack him, but a new voice interrupted.

"Quit being so stupid, the both of you. Threatening each other won't get you anything but a lot of very dead innocents."

They both turned to a rather singed tree, where Bobby had landed himself, his feathers blending in to the blackened wood. His feathers were looking rather disheveled, having lost several of them in the Dark Lord's hand, but otherwise he looked as arrogant as ever.. Greyback glanced at the Voldemort.

"Did that bird just talk?"

"Unfortunately."

"My Lord, should I...?" General Thruston began, his wand raised and ready to silence or stun or kill the interloper, which honestly was all very tempting to the Dark Lord at the moment, but he wasn't making any progress with his 'negotiations' and Bobby used to be fairly good at such things. He gestured for his men keep their wands lowered. Greyback made the similar gesture to his own people, one of which lowered the rifle he had been aiming.

"Who the hell are you and what do you want?" Greyback growled.

"I am Bobbitimus IV, and I represent an interested third party that consists of everyone who isn't a raving psycho. Now, how can we get back young Harry without him getting killed?"

Greyback thought about that for a moment. It was not Harry that he needed per se, and killing the boy served no purpose, but he did need the collateral to keep Voldemort off his back and the magic Harry had to deal with any magical defenses he came across along the way. He thought on it for a moment, glancing at the Dark Lord to see if he was willing to listen to this 'interested third party'.

"Safe passage to Berlin is all I require. My people will take care of the rest from there."

"If you go to Berlin in that boy's body, he will be killed," the raven pointed out.

That was very true.

"I'll leave him somewhere safe before the fighting starts. I have plenty of other willing followers that I may inhabit for the battle. I just need to be left alone."

At this last part, he looked pointedly at the Dark Lord. That's all he really needed, just to pursue their justice on their own terms and not as cogs in the dictator's machinations. Voldemort shook his head.

"You'll never make it to Berlin. You're hardly being subtle. The Aurors will find you and kill you before you get ten miles across the border. If you had just waited a few weeks, we could have invaded from the Polish side and done this properly."

"We will make it. We'll take the bloody train if we have to."

"Subtle," the Dark Lord muttered.

The raven cocked his head, considering.

"I can take you there. I can even make sure neither the Germans nor his Lordship here can bother you while you travel."

Voldemort glared at him, but it was useless. Greyback was already interested.

"I'm listening."

~ Page Break~

Harry wasn't sure how long he walked. No matter how long or how far, the sky never lightened or darkened and he did not tire. Every so often he would blink and wonder if he had been dreaming. Then he reminded himself that he was probably still dreaming and started walking again.

However long it had been or how far, he wasn't where he had started. His surroundings had ever so slowly begun to change. At first, it was the trees. They started to become larger and more spread out. The change was so subtle and gradual he hadn't been sure there was really any change at all, until the ground started to change too. Before it had been blanketed in thick white snow, but that snow had begun to melt away the farther he went until blades of grass and pale purple crocuses had started to pierce the icy barrier. Harry wondered if he went far enough he would find the place in full spring. How long had he been traveling?

The sky was as silvery grey as ever, but it hung low now, obscuring the tips of the tallest trees. By the time he reached the theoretical spring, he might not be able to see it if the fog continued to descend.

He still had no idea why he was there or where he was going. It was hard to concentrate in this place, hard to tell when he was daydreaming and when he wasn't. It took him a long time to realize the sound of water wasn't merely in his head.

It wasn't particularly loud, but in the endless silence it could not be missed. Harry stopped and listened, then turned in the direction of the sound. It didn't take long to find. It was a creek, wide and shallow with

round black and bronze colored stones lining the bottom. They reminded him of his own keystone. Curious, he reached out to pull one of the stones out.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you."

Harry nearly leaped straight into the creek. He just barely managed to stop himself and fell clumsily onto the bank.

"I am sorry. I didn't mean to startle you. It's just better not to touch those stones. Once you do you'll be stuck in the creek until you find a willow to pass under. Funny rules this place has, but there you have it."

Sitting about fifty feet away and partially obscured by a bush was a man Harry had never seen before sitting on an overturned log. He was in his fifties or very spry sixties, with thick brown hair on his head and face, both neatly trimmed and streaked with grey, giving him a distinguished look. He bore the robes and staff of a druid priest.

Harry closed his eyes tightly for a moment and then opened them. The priest was still there. In fact, the priest was the most real thing he had seen, and the dreamy cloud that hung over his thoughts seemed to dissipate at the sight of him.

"I'm not a dream. Don't worry. Come sit with me," he said, gesturing to a spot on the log.

Cautiously, Harry did so, taking a spot just out of reach. From there he could see the man's eyes were green and wrinkled with laugh lines. He seemed amused by his cautiousness.

"You need not be afraid. I would not hurt you, Harry."

"Who are you? How do you know me? Do you know why I'm here? Where is here?"

"Hhmm... to answer your questions in order of their importance; you're here because this is where Greyback thought he could hold you the longest, and you're stuck here because the gods saw fit to

punish you for abusing the Du'on nadi. Which, by the way, was very very stupid."

Harry ducked his head in embarrassment. Yes, he was realizing that now too.

"'Here' is a spirit realm. It has various names that would be meaningless to you, but it is the place where a spirit resides when the body is at the edge of death, when it might return to either the mortal realm or deeper into the spirit realms at any moment. Typically. You're a special case. You're here for timeout."

"So I'm not dead?"

"No. Just in trouble."

Well... that was something... different. Honestly, how did he get into these messes?

"Wait a second, you mentioned Greyback. What does he have to do with any of this?"

The priest's expression shifted from mild condescension to sympathy.

"Unfortunately, it is Greyback who is currently in possession of your body. I dare say he's proven almost as troublesome as you. He is leading a battalion of werewolves to Berlin as we speak."

"What?!"

"You know, I'm never going to finish answering your questions if you keep throwing in new ones."

Harry was very close to snapping something, but when he glared at the man he immediately felt like a fool. He had a million questions, and so far this man had answered them, and he had to be some sort of jerk to take his own frustrations out on him.

"You...I... never mind. Please continue."

"Thank you. My name is Carrigan by the way. Seamus Carrigan."

It was like getting hit with a Lighting Jinx and a Stunner at the same time. He felt as if his heart was going to leap out of his chest and yet he could neither think nor move, his head and body filled with a electric buzzing. This was the Dark Lord's mentor? The only person, according to Dumbledore at least, that Voldemort may have ever respected and loved?

"I see my reputation precedes me," Carrigan chuckled.

Harry could only stare.

"I'm flattered and all, but I'm dead. It would never work out."

His ears burned in embarrassment and he ducked his head. Merlin, this was ridiculous.

"As for how I know about you... honestly, it wasn't that difficult. You're hardly inconspicuous," he said. There was something about the vagueness of the response that bothered Harry, but he decided it honestly wasn't that important.

"How did you find me? I've seen... nothing... since I've gotten here."

"Which isn't surprising given how focused you've obviously been. I assure you, you are hardly alone here. If you truly want to get out, you're going to have to be more alert to your surroundings."

"There's a way out of here? You mean, I don't have to wait to be released?" he asked, although he was aware that Carrigan, if that was who this truly was, had once again evaded his question.

"If you wait your body will likely be destroyed before you can reclaim it. You'll be released once you've gone through an ordeal fitting to the severity of your crime. Waiting is a trial in and of itself, but you can't afford to stay here for much longer. Not if you want to stop Greyback."

Harry nodded. He was still confused and had a thousand questions, but he knew enough to know what was truly important. If he didn't stop the war god the werewolves who he was responsible for would be massacred, and that was something he didn't want to ever have to experience again.

"What do I have to do?"

Carrigan turned and pointed at the creek with his staff.

"Water and caves have always been the natural portals between realms. This creek leads to a lake. That lake is your portal to the mortal realm. Once you reach it you will submerge yourself and then emerge in your own body, evicting Greyback in the process."

"He won't try to fight me?"

"He will, but not in the mortal realm. He can't win against you there. He lacks the necessary skills to anchor himself. Instead, he'll try to stop you here in this realm, where he has more power. He will place obstacles in your path. The closer you get to the lake the more dangerous it will become."

Harry grimaced. The idea of fighting Greyback, who was a god for Merlin's sake, was terrifying. He took a deep breath and rallied his courage. It wasn't as if this were the first time he had faced danger head on. It should have been as routine as Wednesday at this point.

"Okay. I should get started then."

He stood and turned to Carrigan.

"Thank you," he said, sincerely, but knew it wasn't enough. He may never have found his way out of there without the other's help. He had an idea. "Would you like me to give Lord Voldemort a message from you?"

Carrigan serious expression broke into a smile. "Tell Tom... no, no don't tell him anything. He won't believe you. Tell Bobby-"

"Bobby? As in Bobbitimus IV? You know that Bobby?"

The priest was all out grinning at this point. "I certainly ought to. He was my familiar. After he died and became a raven, of course. Before that, he was my brother."

"...There is a whole lot I want to say about that, but I'm afraid I don't have that much time to spare. What did you want me to tell Bobby?"

"Tell him to take you to the Numanti Ring when you have the opportunity. You'll find a stone that has no business being there. I have buried something underneath it that I would like my dear Tom to have. Do this for me, and I will consider any debt my assistance has earned to be paid in full."

"The Numanti Ring... okay. I'll remember it. Anything you want me to tell Bobby directly?"

"Tell him to get a girlfriend."

Harry couldn't help but grin, despite the circumstances. He and Bobby really needed to have a little chat about what the raven had been keeping from him. They hadn't parted on the best terms, but if he wanted to keep his word to Carrigan (and he most certainly did) then he would have to track him down eventually. This might be an interesting way to open up a conversation.

"I'll do that. Are you going to come with me?" he asked, although he already knew the answer.

"No, I am afraid not. This is as far as I can go."

There was something ironic in the other man's smile, but Harry didn't have time to question it. He had already wasted enough time as it was. He turned and started walking. If there had been enough time, he knew he would have spent hours, days even... just talking to the man about a thousand different things, but he didn't that time. Not today at least. He turned back for one last question.

"Hey, do you think we'll ever see..."

Carrigan was already gone.

~ Page Break~

It was raining in Warsaw when Lestrangle stepped out of the International Floo Depot, after having spent almost two hours in customs and she couldn't afford to wait it out if she wanted to check in with the British Embassy before the office hours ended. Spells kept her from getting drenched in the down pour, but did nothing to take the wet chill out of the air or from soaking her boots.

Wizardsing Warsaw was an odd little city, seeming to contain a bit of architecture from every country except its own. Tidy little Dutch tenements, Russian orthodox cathedrals, French style cafes, Italian fountains, and British gardens rose up around her and fell away as she made her way to the Embassy. All of it obsessively maintained in a picturesque state, so that while the structures could have been anywhere from a hundred to a thousand years old they looked as if they had been built the year before.

And that probably wasn't far from the truth. The war against Grindewald and the German air raids during World War II had been hard on the city and its people, and it expressed itself in their need to utterly erase any reminder of those dark days.

Lestrangle didn't care. She wasn't there to play tourist. Her primary concern was that the recent events in Berlin and the Polish Minister of Magic's fickle loyalty was going to complicate her own mission. At the moment, entrance into Berlin was impossible, and communication was spotty and unreliable. Even if she did request information, without being able to reveal its purpose she doubted that anyone would bother to help her. Her best hope was to somehow implement herself into one of the Cultie troops for the second wave invasion of Berlin, and begin her search for McGunny amongst the German Ministry records once things were stabilized in the city again. It was risky, but she had run out of leads in Britain and she needed to demonstrate that she had not been idle when the Dark Lord called upon her to give a report of her progress.

Perhaps she might even be of some greater use in the invasion. It had been a long time since her Death Eater days, but she remembered that time clearly as some of the best in her life. She had never felt so powerful or feared as when she had been running missions for the Dark Lord. This could be a renewal of those incredible times. This cheered her a little, but not much. As much opportunity as there was to be had, she couldn't forget that she had been banished on a wild goose chase because of that damn Potter boy.

She didn't think she would be truly happy until she found some way of paying him back.

~Page Break~

Madam Puddifoot's Tea Shop was not normally a place Snape would be caught dead in, but he had few options available for a visit from Ira. He had no intention of bringing her into the castle and inciting an endless wave of shameless rumors, and since Madam Rosmerta in the Three Broomsticks was as shameless as most of the students at the school that option was out, as well. He wouldn't take a lady within a hundred feet of the Hog's Head, so that left Puddifoot's. The Tea Shop was ridiculously feminine, but at least the owner and her employees were discreet.

"It's not that bad," Ira said, trying to hide her amusement and failing miserably. She too, found the décor ridiculous, but unlike her companion she could enjoy the absurd now and again. He glowered at her, which only made her smile widen.

"Any word from Jacobi?" he asked, changing the subject.

"No, and I doubt I will hear from her until my next appointment. I think she likes to give news in person when she can. How are things up at the school?"

"The usual nightmare. The restrictions on the grounds have left everyone a bit stir crazy, which is driving me crazy. I'm going to strangle one of the little dunderheads before Christmas. I know it."

She rather naively thought he was joking and kept smiling. He nearly corrected her presumption, but then thought she look rather pretty when she smiled like that and decided to let it go.

"Which reminds me, how is Harry? Not getting into too much trouble, I hope."

He sighed.

"No, he's been unleashed in France for the time being. I expect we'll hear word of burning villages any day now."

"France? What's he doing in France?"

"I honestly have no idea. Some diplomatic mission. He'll be back soon. Not that it will make a difference. He's going to fail his classes if he keeps taking all these excursions, and coming back acting like a zombie. He's going to need tutors-"

Snape flinched and dropped his tea, and the porcelain cup shattered on the floor. He grit his teeth and reached for his arm that was now throbbing painfully. Ira jumped from her seat.

"Severus?! What's wrong?"

He shook his head. "It's nothing. Just...a summons. I have to go."

He watched Ira's eyes widen as she realized what he was saying. They had never spoken of it, but he knew she knew that he had been a Death Eater during the war and wore the mark on his arm like all the others. He would have been happy to never speak of it, but the unwelcome reminder wasn't something either of them could ignore. One day, one day very soon, he was going to have to explain exactly what that mark meant for both his past and their possible future, but that day wasn't today.

He kissed her hand, which made her smile but did nothing to wipe the strained worry from her eyes as he walked out of the tea shop, leaving a few sickles on the counter as he went. He would worry about it later. The horse he had taken into Hogsmeade was ready

and waiting for him outside, and he rode it full speed through the village and up the road to the school. McGonagall was waiting for him at the portcullis, her expression tight.

"It's Harry," she said once he had dismounted and left the horse to find its own way back to its stable. Snape's first thought was, no duh.

"Are burning villages involved?" he asked sarcastically, startling the older woman. Her eyes suddenly narrowed.

"Not to my knowledge. The Dark Lord is waiting for you in his office."

He shivered. This was the first time in nearly ten years since he had been called by the dark wizard in such a manner, but he could recall very vividly what the man had done to those who had arrived late. He wondered what sort of idiotic mess Harry had gotten himself into that would incite Voldemort to that extent, and how he was going to thank the walking disaster once it was all sorted out.

The Dark Lord was in his office, but fortunately wasn't waiting for him. He was talking animatedly with several Culties and Sentinels of rank, Lucius among them. None of them looked happy, and it didn't take long for Severus to figure out why.

"My lord, I'm not sure how we can do this," Lucius said, struggling to remain calm. "We were told we had another week. Our people are still scattered all over the country. They haven't been assigned official commanders, and we haven't finalized our plans of attack so I couldn't even debrief them even if they were. Not to mention we've only gathered about half the supplies we need-"

"I don't want to hear excuses, General," the Dark Lord snarled, stalking away from the man so that he could stand behind his desk. "I taught you everything I knew about warfare, including how to organize a battle on short notice. Do not tell me you've gone senile since then."

"No, my Lord," Lucius said tightly, and Snape suspected he was biting the inside of his cheek. The potions master hoped his friend

remembered his lessons from the war quickly, particularly the one about swallowing his pride in the face of the Dark Lord's verbal abuse.

"Good. Now get out. All of you. Finalize your plans. I will meet you in Bristol in two hours to help you," he sneered and sat down in his chair, gathering up parchment and a quill. Snape's eyes were immediately drawn to the blood soaked bandages around the dark wizard's hand. Lucius and his men saluted respectfully and left, completely ignored by the man who was now focused on new task. The Malfoy patriarch gave him a completely unnecessary warning with his eyes as he went, and Snape nodded in acknowledgment. When they were gone, he was left alone with the Dark Lord.

Patience was one of Snape's natural virtues (one of the very few he actually possessed), so standing in the office without fidgeting or trying to draw Voldemort's attention was not so difficult. Even after twenty minutes of doing nothing but watching the other man write a letter and giving no indication that he even realized Snape was there.

"Harry's leading a small army of werewolves to Berlin," the Dark Lord said at last, not looking up from his paperwork. Snape knew he should be surprised, and to some extent he was, but not enough that he couldn't hide it.

"Ah," he said, "Is he under a spell or some other form of coercion?"

The Dark Lord finally looked up, and despite his obvious aggravation he seemed pleased with Snape's question.

"He's being possessed by Greyback. It is how he is able to command them even against Blackbone's instructions."

Snape wasn't entirely sure how Harry could have been possessed by the dead alpha, and thought now was not the time to ask. He had set a good precedent for this meeting by asking only what needed to be known, and thought he might yet walk away in better favor with the dark lord than when he had entered.

"What do you need me to do?" That was usually the safest question, even if the answer wasn't always pleasant.

"Right now I cannot simply stop him. Greyback has threatened to kill Harry if I try, and he has moved himself and his people beyond my reach."

Snape had a hard time believing that was possible. Where could anyone go and be safe from this man?

"I will have to intercept him in Berlin, but in doing so I must engage the Germans in a battle I was holding off for another week. If I am fortunate, I will be able to remove him from the battlefield before the fighting starts, but if I am not, I will need to keep him safe until the fighting is over. That is what I need you for. You will be his protector and his keeper until I am able to deal with him myself."

Snape flinched at the very notion of going into a full out battle. He had done his fair share of fighting since the war (not a little of it because of Harry), but a full out battle between wizards and werewolves was not something he ever wanted to be a part of. It wasn't as if he had enjoyed that sort of fighting. It was all chaos and luck and who was the most ruthless. He still had nightmares about it sometimes.

His only consolation, and it was a very small one, was that the full moon wasn't for another week and it seemed the battle would start well before then. Fighting both German Aurors and fully transformed werewolves was the stuff of nightmares.

"As you wish," he said, because there was no backing out of it. "I do not know that I am the best choice, however. I am not as young as I used to be."

The Dark Lord smirked and turned back to his papers.

"That is exactly why I need you. Someone with your experience will not panic and over react to every little thing that happens. Besides, potions are more effective at subduing werewolves than spells. I suggest packing a broad selection. You have an hour."

Knowing he had been dismissed, he bowed respectfully and walked out of the office. Once outside he set a tapestry on fire for the hell of it, and stalked down into the dungeons. He had an hour to pack his things, find a substitute for his classes and his headmaster duties, write to Ira to explain why he couldn't make it to her appointment this Saturday (and perhaps that he wouldn't be coming back at all), all because the Dark Lord had a soft spot for the kid who was possibly going to kill him in the future.

That thought stopped him dead in his tracks. Harry might one day kill the Dark Lord, if he was the truly the boy from the prophecy... It was something he had managed to push out of his head for the last few weeks as he concentrated on Ira, but now it couldn't be ignored any longer. He had to decide now where his loyalties lay before he risked his life for all the wrong reasons.

"Dammit," he hissed under his breath and continued further into the dungeons. Once inside his rooms he went straight for his private lab, and opened the refrigerated cupboard, pulling out the age testing potion and setting it on the counter. From another drawer he pulled out a tiny little vial labeled 'HP/Blood Nov. 6, 1999'. He added a drop of blood to the potion, shook it once, and set it aside.

Forcing himself away from the potion, he went to his bedroom to pack what he would need. It wasn't much. Mobility was key on the battlefield, and most of what he needed would be worn on his person. His old battle robes were a little tighter around the middle than he remembered, but otherwise fit like a glove. They were not the same as the ones he wore to dueling club classes or competition, half the spells he had on this gear would have his exiled from the sport for life if he did. The duffle bag he carried across his back was weightless and served as an extra layer of protection. Inside he could fit those bare necessities he would need. Potions for injuries, non-perishable food for energy, a spare set of clothing in case his own was ruined irreparably, and a book for those unbearably long hours of boredom before and after the fighting.

By the time he was done packing, he knew the age testing potion would have his results, but he chose to write his letter to Ira first otherwise he might not be able to do it. He kept it brief and vague,

stating only that Harry had run into some trouble and he was going to pick him up before things got serious, and he would hopefully be back within a few days. He couldn't bring himself to get any more detailed than that. He didn't want to worry her, not when she was already so nervous about the test results.

He checked the clock and cursed. He had ten minutes to inform McGonagall that she was in charge until he got back and to send his letter. There was no putting off checking the potion any longer.

On the counter, he could see the potion had already turned a dark purple and as he approached little golden number could be seen floating inside it. He picked up the vile and held it close to face to read.

07311982

He closed his eyes. His suspicions had been confirmed.

He opened his eyes and shoved the vial in the drawer, slamming it shut. What now? He couldn't delude himself into believing it was all a fluke. Neville Longbottom had been murdered for nothing, and the true assassin was perhaps the Dark Lord's favorite. He didn't believe in God, not in the traditional sense, but he hated Him at the moment. Hated the twisted little world He had created and the intolerable cruelty of the fates it wove. He hated Harry and the Dark Lord both for dragging him into it.

The only question now was who did he hate more? Voldemort with his blatant cruelty and undeniable greatness or Harry with his selfish nobility and endless potential? Either of them could destroy the world and rebuild it anew.

But only the Dark Lord was a guaranteed winner.

...Or else the dark lord shall reign for a thousand years...

That had been part of the prophecy as spoken by the ever questionable Sybille Trelawny, a hack fortune teller from a long line of true seers. He knew. He had been there when she had related it to

Dumbledore, and likewise related it to the Dark Lord. But there had been no future foretold if the Dark Lord were defeated. There were no promises of a steady rule or even that the 'hero' would survive long after. Fate apparently didn't think it was important to mention.

But Snape needed to know. He needed to know what would happen if he sided with Harry and the boy eventually defeated the Dark Lord. Would he rise to take the dark wizard's place? Or would he leave wizarding Britain without a leader, vulnerable to her enemies and civil war? Harry was not immortal like Voldemort. Even if he did take the role of leader, how long could he survive in a government founded by the man he had destroyed? He would have to tear it all to pieces and build it anew, and that was civil war all over again. Lucius would be the greatest threat, and behind him Draco and Narcissa would always stand, with Hermione caught in the middle.

The only sure thing was Voldemort, and though he felt squeamish and uneasy about the Dark Lord ruling for a thousand years, he couldn't imagine the chaos and fighting that would follow his absence would be any better. The fight now... he could see an end to it. Not soon, but eventually. Fighting for fighting sake was not the Dark Lord's intention. He had a vision, a glorious vision that sometimes left even Snape in awe.

Harry just wanted to save everyone.

As horrible a person that it made him, Snape knew that wasn't enough.

He checked the clock again. Three minutes. He was out of time. He went to the secret cupboard, the one hidden behind a secret wall, where he kept his collection of poisons. There was no need to think which one he should take. Merciful Sleep was obvious. It was his own special brew; tasteless, colorless and like its name suggested a painless and quiet death in a bottle. It could be applied orally or topically, slipped into food or drink or bathwater with the same affect. There was no way to test for it. No one but him even knew of its existence.

He had never used it on a person before. He had never imagined that Harry would be the first to test it.

Shoving the inconspicuous blue bottle into his duffle bag, he hurried out the door before he could think on it any further. He knew what he needed to do now. There was no point analyzing it endlessly, clouding the waters with uncertainty that he did not yet possess. If he were lucky the boy would be dead before he ever reached him.

Che. Like he hadn't thought that before.

McGonagall was still waiting for him at the portcullis, convenient since he didn't have the time to track her down or write her a letter. She looked just as tense as she had when he first arrived, and he supposed she knew no more now than she did then. He spared a quick glance around them, but the Dark Lord was not there and the Sentinels had to be elsewhere guarding their flock of students.

"What's happening?" she asked, immediately.

"I have to go get Harry in..." he wanted to say France, but McGonagall wasn't. He was less worried about frightening her than losing her trust when she found out he had lied to her. Despite the Dark Lord's favor, he didn't have many allies within in Hogwarts, and she would have been his most important one in any case. "...Berlin. I don't know how long I will be gone. I will need you to look after the school in my absence. The wards already recognize you as Deputy Headmistress so there shouldn't be any problems."

She took a deep breath.

"Berlin? How did he get... is he alright?"

Snape shook his head. "I don't know. I can't tell you much. Please don't mention this to anyone else. Not the other teachers and most certainly not my goddaughter."

She nodded, worry lines dominating her expression.

"Don't worry. I'll hold things down here. You just concentrate on getting Harry out of there," she said. He felt uncomfortable as her voice hitched a little as she spoke, and her expression continued to tighten with repressed emotion. "It's really bad this time, isn't it? Worse than the first time they took him?"

Technically, no one had taken Harry. Not in the traditional sense, but he nodded anyway.

"You'll find him, won't you?" she asked. He nodded. He didn't doubt for a moment that he would find him. In what state was another matter altogether. "You promise?"

He hesitated. It wasn't a promise to find him that she was asking for. She wanted him to protect Harry as well.

"I can't," he said. "You know I can't promise that in complete honesty."

She closed her eyes, her expression laced with pain. "Please...for Lily's sake if no one else's."

She couldn't have hurt him more with those few words than if she had stabbed him in the heart. Lily, long dead and gone and never his to begin with. He had managed to not think about her as more than one of a thousand regrets for a long time now, a moment of nostalgia in his better moments. Now he was going off to kill her son, and he might as well be killing her all over again. He jerked away from McGonagall, hating her in that moment as much as Harry and Voldemort for smashing his certainty without even trying.

"Do not make a liar out of me, Minerva. I have enough sins to my name as it is," he said coldly.

What was a few more?

He was spared her reply, her possible begging, by the arrival of the Dark Lord who swept between them from out of nowhere. He spared neither of them a glance, but headed straight for the horses that were waiting for him at the end of the portcullis. Hurrying to catch up to him,

Snape didn't look back. He didn't want to see the hurt in his colleague's face at his callous refusal.

He didn't want to see her disappointment in him.

He hated himself enough at the moment.

~ Page Break~

"You better not be playing with me," Fenrir warned, glaring up at the raven as it circled low, but not low enough to snatch out of the air as he wanted to do. Around them the air was warm and clear, and the land stretched out in an endless green sea of rolling hills. Everyone had stripped down to their underclothes, it was too warm otherwise, and a few had even taken off their shoes and were carrying them in makeshift bundles on their backs. There was no road to follow, but the ground was soft and made their traveling easier. Their numbers were fewer now that he had left most of the women and the weak behind, and without the trees steep hills in their way they traveled in a neat little line behind Fenrir. Most of them seemed to be enjoying themselves.

He wasn't so naïve to think this might not all be a trap.

"I could say the same thing," Bobby said, the edge of warning in his voice. "You might be a god, and a nasty one at that, but don't think I couldn't dump you in hell if you double crossed me."

Fenrir smirked. So the little feather duster had a spine? Good. It would give him something to chew on later.

"How much further?" he demanded. The raven circled once more, letting him hear his irritated sigh. The bad part about traveling in such open country was he had few places where he could safely perch while in Greyback's company.

"At this pace? Three days. Like I said the last time you asked. And the time before that. And before that."

The war god glowered up at the raven, contemplating shooting him out of the sky with his wand but decided against it. He had no idea how to get through the faery realms. He doubted anything here could truly hurt him, but he had two hundred other people to look after and a bloody revenge to exact. The unpleasant fact was that his run in with arrogant bird was a turn of good fortune. He now had the means to safely travel to his destination without worrying about either Voldemort or the Germans finding him before he reached it, and the distance they now needed to travel was a small fraction of what they would have had to go before. Jane's promise was starting to come true. It didn't mean he had to be grateful for it though.

"If you double cross me-"

"I'm ignoring you now," Bobby said pointedly and flew off ahead of them.

Fenrir grunted in annoyance, and counted the ways one could eat a raven.

~ Page Break~

Viktor could hear before he could see, and before he could hear he could feel. He felt the too tight pull of ropes on his chest and on his wrists, the weight of his head and the ache in his neck from holding it, and the freezing chill of his still damp clothing. From this alone he knew he was alive and had been captured by the enemy.

When hearing came he learned who that enemy was and what they wanted.

"You know him?" That was the vampire that had been called Katarina, the one who had killed his comrades. His hands twitched involuntarily at the sound of her voice.

"I do... you could say we were school acquaintances." This voice was familiar too, but for the life of him Viktor couldn't understand what it was doing here. He had last seen Horace McGunny the day he had warned him of Voldemort's orders to arrest them during the TriWizard Tournament, and had not thought of him since. Now he was back,

playing a dangerous game with dangerous people for reasons he could not even begin to guess at.

"What will you do with him?" the vampiress asked, and moved to stand behind him. He could hear the rustle of fabric as she moved, and he suspected she had changed out of her tunnel wear and into a dress.

"That all depends how useful he proves to be. These maps, for instance, are quite valuable."

"I could have told you anything you found on that map."

"Except what I needed to know. These mark the location of the ward hub. I was wrong assuming it was in the Department of Justice. It's under the Department of Education, as our dear tunnel rat apparently figured out. We were fortunate to have found him when we did. An hour later and the entire system would have been destroyed, and we would have been trapped in the middle of the fighting again."

Viktor's confusion mounted. McGunny wanted to find the ward hub but not destroy it? Why would the vampires bother helping him do that?

A hand touched his shoulder and he couldn't stop from flinching.

"So you're awake," Katarina purred in his ear, and he shifted away from her, pushing up his shoulders instinctively to protect his exposed neck. She chuckled cruelly and moved away. Cautiously, he opened his eyes.

He was in a bedroom, a suite, with lavish furnishing that swung towards the feminine. Two large windows were sealed shut with heavy shutters, leaving a series of candles and strategically placed mirrors to light the room. There was a fire burning in the fireplace, and McGunny was watching him with a cold expression he had never seen on the boy before. Katarina stood by the bedroom door dressed in a dark green chiffon evening dress and eyed him hungrily.

"Hello again, Krum," McGunny greeted, smiling at him humorlessly. "I see you've continued to make a nuisance of yourself after graduating. They must be missing you on the Quidditch Pitch by now."

Viktor just glared at him. Seeing the young man wasn't interested in playing his game, Horace got down to business quickly.

"These are very interesting," he said, gesturing to the maps in his hand, the same ones Viktor had brought down into the tunnels. "Where did you get them?"

"The library," he replied, because he saw no reason not to. It was hardly going to incriminate anyone now.

"Huh. I suppose I should have thought of that."

"Why are you doing this McGunny? What are you even doing here? If-"

"Stupify."

Viktor immediately fell limp and senseless in his chair. Katarina frowned, disappointed.

"You're not going to question him more?" she asked.

"Later. He's not really important right now. I'll interrogate him properly once we're safely in Frankfurt."

She didn't believe him. Something in the boy's eyes as he studied Viktor told her he had something in mind, and it wasn't interrogation. A wave of irritation and jealousy washed over her. It wasn't fair. She had seen him first. She had been the one to catch him. What possible use could Horace have for him?

Whatever it was, he didn't say and merely turned back towards the maps he was holding, ignoring her completely until she left.

~ Page Break~

There were rumors circulating in the school. Well, there were always rumors circulating in the school, but for once some of it was of interest to Ron. Nancy Salibi said she received a letter from her brother, who was a private in the Brass Cult saying that they were moving to invade Germany within the week. Ron wondered if Private Salibi was going to be taken into the woods somewhere and executed for sharing national secrets with a thirteen year old girl within that same week.

There was also a rumor that Professor Snape had been drafted to fight by the Dark Lord himself, which seemed a bit silly to Ron but he couldn't account for his Head of House's abrupt departure the day before and none of the teachers were talking. McGonagall had taken over in his place, and the Slytherin in him cringed at seeing a Gryffindor as the school overlord, even if she was a scary woman in her own right.

Potter still hadn't returned from France, and aside from a few odd suggestions that he might be involved in the fighting (which even the most gullible of them had a hard time swallowing) there wasn't much talk of him. Ron intended to take full advantage of his absence to continue practicing his charm on Hermione. She might act all frustrated and irritated with him in public, but he knew she secretly liked his company. If it weren't for the bloody Chastity spell he was quite certain they would have had more than a few snogging sessions in the broom closet by now. There had to be a way around it. He bet Bill would know.

He was contemplating writing his elder brother a letter about it when Natalie intruded on his corner of the Slytherin common room. She stopped in front of him and sneered and he smiled back nastily.

"Your mum's here."

His smile vanished, replaced by confusion.

"What do you mean my 'mum's here'? In the castle?"

"No, the 'here' that means she's in Istanbul," she said sarcastically. "Yes, in the castle, you dolt. She's in McGonagall's office now. You must be in some sort of trouble. The old crone sent me to get you."

He frowned. He couldn't think of anything he had done that would earn a special trip to the school from his mother, especially since she wasn't his legal guardian anymore despite their keeping in touch. An sense of unease settled in his gut, and he stood and walked out of the common room, ignoring Natalie and her 'you're welcome!'

He had been to McGonagall's office only twice, both times for detentions, which did nothing to endear the place to him. The fact that it was close to Gryffindor Tower and the area was usually teeming with the little jerks didn't help either. He tried to distract himself about the upcoming meeting, which couldn't be anything good, by imagining that he hexed every Gryffindor (and the odd Hufflepuff) he happened to come across. The exception being the few people he recognized from the Hogwart's Herald. He felt it was professional courtesy not to imagine turning your photographer into a gopher, and had nothing to do with liking or god forbid, respecting them.

"Ron?"

He turned around to see Ginny coming up behind him, a confused look on her face.

"You got called too?" she asked.

"...I guess so. Mum tell you what this was all about?"

She shook her head. "I didn't even know she was coming. Do you think something's wrong?"

Yes.

"Dunno. Guess we'll find out."

They walked together to McGonagall's office. Inside, they found Fred, George, and Percy had already arrived and were studying Molly Weasley with worried expressions. Their mother was sickly pale, her

eyes red-rimmed. In one hand she clutched a handkerchief and in the other a folded piece of parchment with a broken official Court seal.

McGonagall sat behind her desk, her expression soft with sympathy and making Ron more nervous than he otherwise would have been. She wasn't known for her sentimentality. He jumped when Ginny closed the door behind them, and to cover his own nervous reaction he broke the silence first.

"Mum? What going on?"

She looked up at him, and he wished he hadn't said anything. He wished she wouldn't answer, and force on them what had left her a weeping mess. But wishing was futile. Wishing was for little children who still had mommies and daddies taking care of them to make them come true.

"It's your father..."

~ Author's note~

In the fifth HP movie, the Death Eaters transform themselves into smoky missiles and terrorized muggles and wizards alike. I thought this was a very cool concept, so I'm incorporating it here even though it wasn't described in canon. My theory is it some sort of self-transfiguration

Book V

Chapter 25: Converging Conflicts

By the next morning, Snape was in Warsaw with the Dark Lord and over five hundred Brass Culties and fifty-six Sentinels. Three were placed in his command, two Sentinels and a Cultie with emergency medical training. Neither Sentinel looked happy to be placed in the command of a civilian, but he had established early on that their feelings on the matter were irrelevant. The Pain Curse had helped reinforce the lesson. The cultie was thankfully more obedient if not any smarter.

He had his own subordinates well in hand, but what he hadn't factored on was Lestrage being at the embassy to greet them. Voldemort apparently hadn't been expecting her either.

"What are you doing here, Bella?" he demanded softly, as she approached, escorted by a cultie who had been assigned to watch her. The cultie happily left when the Dark Lord gestured, cringing pathetically as Lestrage glared at his retreating figure before returning it her master.

"What you have assigned me to do. My investigations have led me to believe that the..." she glanced at Snape distrustfully, "target is being kept in Germany. The ministry offices in Berlin should have records."

The Dark Lord frowned, but unfortunately he didn't caste a crucio on her like he had been doing to just about everyone else since yesterday. Snape tried to hide his disappointment.

"I see," Voldemort said, and then seemed to dismiss the matter in favor of ordering his men about. Before he could walk away from her though, she called back his attention.

"My lord, perhaps, since I must wait until Berlin is once again secured, I might be of use to you? An experienced soldier should not be wasted."

Snape glared at her. He suspected if she got her way she would make herself a nuisance to him at every opportunity. "Madam, you don't even know what is going on," he pointed out."

She smirked at him.

"Considering how quickly all of this is going down, I doubt anyone else does either."

Voldemort considered, glancing between the two rivals. He shook his head.

"Fine. You will replace Captain Nocentelli, have him debrief you, then report to the auditorium at 1100 hours."

"As you command, my lord," she said, saluting crisply and retreating, but not before throwing a smug look back at Snape. He pretended to ignore her, knowing that would be the greatest insult of all. He knew he would have to deal with her directly soon, but now was not the time.

Maybe if killing Harry proved unnecessary (in other words, he was already dead by some other means) he could try his poison on her. If he were lucky, the Dark Lord would be so distracted he wouldn't even notice.

~ Page Break~

Hermione hated the dungeons. She didn't tell anyone this, knowing it would offend both her brother and her godfather who called the place home, but she could never quite convince herself she was comfortable there. They were dark and creepy and chilly, and she had nightmares about getting lost in them. She was a Gryffindor though. She could brave the dim and sinister place when necessary.

Although, one could argue about how 'necessary' this particular trip really was. She didn't have potions today, and her brother was in class at the moment. She should have been in the library studying during this, her quiet period, but she had decided to check something out first.

Ronald Weasley hadn't shown up for dinner last night or breakfast that morning or even for Transfiguration. Professor McGonagall had said he wasn't feeling well, but when she went to the infirmary he wasn't there. When she asked Draco, he said he had gone to bed early last night and refused to get up that morning. Natalie piped in and said he had gotten into some sort of trouble and his mother had even been called in to chastise him.

Hermione knew that wasn't the case, but she had no intention of correcting the other girl. She didn't like the idea of Natalie having anything with which to torment Ron, especially not now. Not after what Ginny had cried onto her shoulder the night before.

Looking around briefly to make sure no one was there to see her, she whispered the password to the Slytherin dormitory and slipped inside. It was thankfully empty, everyone else either in classes or busy elsewhere. Cautiously, she made her way towards the boys' dormitory. She had visited her brother enough to know where it was and how to get passed the wards, although she was thankful her godfather was gone otherwise she doubted it would have escaped his notice.

The fire play burned green flames, providing a great deal of warmth but only a little light. The torches were turned low, casting the room in deep shadows and the silhouettes of snakes. She shivered. She didn't know how anyone could sleep in here comfortably.

"Ron? Are you here?"

"Mione?" came a groggy reply, and she could just make out movement behind one of the bed curtains. "Lumos domesticus."

The torches flared and the fireplace turned from green to a cheery orange, lighting the room to something that looked less like it had been pulled from the dark imagination of Beadle the Bard. Ron sat up in his bed, still dressed in his bed clothes and his hair looking a mad and unkempt as Harry's tended to. He gave her an irritated glare that was somewhat ruined by the enormous yawn that followed.

"What are you doing in here?"

She sat down at the foot of his bed. "I came to see you. Ginny told me what happened."

His eyes, darkly circled and puffy, widened in alarm. She hastened to reassure him.

"Don't worry, no one else knows. I promise. Everyone thinks you got chewed out by your mum. Natalie's doing, no doubt."

He seemed to relax a bit, and let out a deep sigh. He turned his sad brown eyes to her, and shook his head.

"You expect me to talk about it?"

"That's up to you. Whatever you want."

"Careful, luv, I might just take advantage," he joked, but it rang flat. His half-hearted smile died a pitiful death as he looked down at his hands resting in his lap. "My father's dead."

She reached out and placed her hand over his. They clenched into fists, but he didn't pull away. "I know."

"I knew... I knew he was dying, but I... I pretended... like it wasn't worth thinking about. My father died f-for-" his voice hitched and cracked, but he forced it out even as he felt it rip and tear at his throat. "Forgotten."

He continued to talk, stammering and choking on the words and the tears as he told her how the official cause of death was 'pneumonia', but that was just the cheap way of saying he grew too weak to live and no one tried to help. There would be no body to bury. Even dead, the prisoners of Azkaban were denied their dignity, and his remains would be sent to a medi-wizard university where some know nothing student was going to hack him into pieces and then toss him the incinerator like so much refuse.

Half way through and he was sobbing into her shoulder, feeling stupid and sick and grateful, but all he wanted was to feel numb and empty. She promised she would try help his father receive a proper burial and at the very least he would receive a proper ceremony. She didn't know how much of what she said reached him, but eventually the crying stopped and he merely leaned against her quietly and listened.

"I should go now," she said. "I have arithmancy in ten minutes. Will I see you at dinner?"

"Yeah," he said softly, hardly enthused, but it was something. "I just... gotta clean up a bit."

"Teabags are good for puffy eyes," she suggested.

"Any advice for hiding my freckles?" he teased, and it sounded little more genuine than his last attempt although still pretty weak. She smiled anyway and kissed his forehead, blushing as she pulled away.

"I'll talk to you later. Try to eat something, okay?"

"Yeah... thanks."

Her heart was hammering in her chest as she slipped soundlessly into the hallway. Belatedly, she straightened her rumpled clothes, and felt her blush deepen. Honestly! There hadn't been anything even remotely romantic about what had just happened. Aside from the bed and the holding and his sad, dark eyes... He had just lost his father for Merlin's sake! She had only been trying to comfort him, exactly as she had done for Ginny the night before. Nothing more, nothing less.

So thoroughly dedicated to convincing herself of this, she failed to take proper stock of her surroundings. If she had, she might have noticed the shadow that didn't quite fit sticking out from behind the suit of armor that she passed or the feeling of malicious triumph at the back of her neck. So she went on her way, completely unaware that Trudy Sabbat was plotting how to use what she had seen against her.

~ Page Break~

Harry thought perhaps he should have asked Carrigan exactly how far the lake was before he left him, but it was too late now. He had been running along the creek's edge for what could have been hours or even days, and still come across no lake. Eventually, he did hit the spring season though. A wet, muddy spring season that threatened to suck his shoes off his feet every time he took a step. He couldn't help but wonder if it wasn't one of Greyback's traps. He hadn't left any prints in the snow, so why was he sinking in the mud?

The low hanging clouds had descended even further, so that soon he was blind and forced to follow the creek's edge by sound alone and nearly fell into it several times and lost track of it more than once. In the fog, sometimes he heard sounds that were not the creek. Rustling sounds, like leaves being moved, but never a snapping twig or a thud or a splash from a mud puddle. It would have been simple to dismiss it as the wind moving leaves about, but one thing that hadn't changed in this strange place was the absence of wind (and night).

He was being followed. He was certain of that, but what ever it was remained far enough from him that the fog rendered it invisible.

Refusing to let it frighten him, he pressed on, running as fast as he safely could in the poor visibility. His body did not tire here, but he had discovered falling or running into a low hanging branch did hurt.

Gradually, the mud grew deeper and the fog grew denser. The haunting sound of loons echoed eerily and he knew he was getting closer to the lake. But the closer he came, the closer the other sounds became until at last he started to see shadows in the fog, sweeping in close then leaping away before he could get any really impression of their size or shape.

He had stopped several times, startled by the proximity of the potential attackers and their speed, but he always forced himself to continue, reminding himself that it wasn't real. Not really. Nothing more than a trick, a test. Nothing more. He told himself that over and over again, forcing himself to take one slippery step after another without pausing even when the phantoms darted in so close he thought he felt something brush against him.

He didn't stop walking, but he didn't stop flinching either.

~ Page Break~

"Commander! Commander Oblitz?!"

Oblitz paused on his way to tour the defenses on the western end of their camp, glancing inconspicuously at the young man frantically searching the crowd for him. It was not an auror, much too young for that, but he did have an arm band identifying him a volunteer and he was clutching a messenger's bag tightly to his chest. Oblitz calculated the possibility of the enemy sending him a booby-trapped letter, found it was likely but also realized it was even more likely a legitimate and potentially important message from his allies.

"Over here," he called at last, drawing the boy's attention. The messenger quickly scurried over to him. He saluted clumsily and fumbled with his bag. "Slowly," the man ordered, and the other froze. Slowly he looked up.

"Sorry?"

"Move slowly."

The messenger looked dumbly at him for a moment, then turned back to his bag and with a bit more caution, opened his bag and pulled out a letter. Oblitz took it carefully at the very edge of the paper, glancing at the seal which was a pentagram, a generic and anonymous mark. The boy watched him nervously as he cast several spells on the paper, but aside from a few protection spells against moisture and spying it was completely clean.

He opened it. Inside was a short, half page letter with neither a greeting nor a signature. After reading the content, however, he could easily guess its source. He folded the letter and placed it in his pocket, removing a coin. He showed it to the boy but didn't immediately hand it to him.

"Who gave you this letter?"

The boy just shrugged. "The postmaster, sir. All my letter are given to me by the post master."

Oblitz figured as much, and toss the coin to the boy, who smiled his thanks before hurrying off. No doubt he had many other letters to deliver what with the owl post being suspended in Berlin. Owls were too easily intercepted. The chances were high that the postmaster wouldn't even remember where this particular letter had come from or if it hadn't simply 'appeared from nowhere'.

It wasn't important. What was important was that he believed in the contents of the letter. He needed to call all the aurors together and quickly so that they could make their preparations.

They only had a day and half to prepare for the Dark Lord's next attack.

~ Page Break~

"I'm going," Tonks stated, shoving the last of her gear into her traveling case. Dumbledore stood quietly in the doorway; his expression was sad, sympathetic, and pissing her off. Everything was pissing her off lately. The cute little townhouse in Lentz, the quaint little people with their stubborn dispositions, and especially how everyone was treating her like she was made of fine porcelain. She had no intention of cracking. She had things she needed to do. "If there's even a small chance that he's alive, I'm going to find him."

"My dear, even if he is alive and you were to go, you would only risk both your life and his. Voldemort is due to invade within a few days and Oblitz is no friend of the Order. Right now, if Viktor is indeed alive he has successfully managed to hide himself from the Dark Lord's forces. Should you go in search of him you risk exposing both of you to not only our enemies, but also to Oblitz himself who so far has no knowledge of Viktor's association with us."

Tonks closed her eyes and clenched her fists. Merlin, she hated this. All of this. The not knowing, the knowing and not being able to doing anything, the ability to do something and deciding it was against the

'greater good'. It had seemed so clear in the beginning what she would have to sacrifice in order to protect the world. Love, a family of her own, a career, a home... all of it she had willingly thrown away in pursuit of a cause she felt was worth more than herself.

But she hadn't counted on losing her own honor along the way or the loss of those she felt were worth more than the cause itself. Viktor had been the best of them. Oh, Dumbledore was a great wizard and a genius, but Viktor had been a great man... for the brief time he'd had been a man. He had a bright future; a future that could change the world for the better, but he was gone now and all for nothing. Despite what she had told Dumbledore, she did not truly believe he was alive, but he deserved more than what he had been given. If nothing else, she hoped to take his body home to his family.

"What do you want me to do? What do you want?" she hissed through her gritted teeth. "I can't...I won't just forget him."

A firm hand rested on her shoulder, belying the fragility of the wizard's age. Despite her resentment, he was a soothing, steadying presence.

"Of course not. That is the last thing I would ever ask of you. But you mustn't remember Viktor as only your friend. He was also your comrade, your fellow idealist. Through his actions and his words he fought to preserve justice and freedom of nations, and he was willing to sacrifice his life to do so. He would not want you torn from that path out of grief or a sense of obligation. He was never that egocentric."

She gave a little half laugh, half snuffle and nodded.

"No, he never did think of himself much. He was always forgetting to eat or sleep or you know, be human."

"Just so. Now come downstairs and have some tea with me. There is still much to be done here in Lentz and I need your help."

She sighed and nodded. He was right. She couldn't just up and leave. With Viktor and Friedrichs gone, they were short on man power and needed her expertise to start organizing a defense here before the

war reached their doorstep. Lentz was only the beginning. Once the militia was up and running, they could begin recruiting and organizing additional forces across the nation and into the neighboring countries. Now was a critical time. Germany was likely lost, but there was the chance even it could be saved if allies were roused quickly enough.

It was what Viktor would have wanted.

She had to believe that.

~ Page Break~

Night had fallen in the faery realm and Fenrir had halted travel in favor of a full night's rest. Tomorrow they would arrive in Berlin, and he wanted his people well rested for the battle that was to come. They were still upon the rolling hills, with no cover and no shelter, but he had used magic to create campfires and to warn them if any danger approached.

Above him the stars were a shimmering blanket, so different from the odd speck of light he was used to seeing as a mortal, and around him his people were shifting shadows in the fire light. They were restless, saying very little but all of them thinking of the same thing.

Berlin.

"You're all going to die."

He glanced behind him at the raven, which was perched on a pile of clothes. It wasn't much of a roost, but enough to see over the surrounding tall grass. He turned back to the fire, considered poking at it to encourage it to burn but being a magical fire it would be a meaningless gesture.

"I didn't ask for your opinion."

"It's an observation. Not an opinion."

"Hn."

"Half your people don't even have weapons! It will be a slaughter."

"I have a plan."

"I hope it's better than your last one."

Fenrir ignored the remark.

"All you have to concern yourself with is getting us there, and getting your boy wizard safely out again. I will take care of me and mine."

"...Idiot."

The raven flew off, which was just fine with him. He didn't want the creature's company to begin with. They would be in Berlin the next evening, and then he would prove which of them was truly the fool in this game.

~ Page Break~

Katarina stared down at Viktor, lying in the coffin, arms crossed in a traditional position. Goethe had probably thought it funny. It wasn't often that one not of their kind slept in such a manner, even if the sleep itself was unnatural.

She rather thought it suited him. Even in the artificial guise of one dead, Viktor maintained a regal and dignified bearing. He had a strong chin and his brow was low, giving him a look of perpetual concentration even as the rest of his face was smooth in sleep. Slowly, she reached out to touch his cheek with her bare hand. His skin felt no warmer than her own until she ran an immodest thumb over his lips and felt a burst of warm breath against it.

"It would be such a waste..." she lamented, "if all Horace wanted was to prolong your suffering. You impressed me that night on the tower and again down in the tunnels. So brave. So resourceful. You were meant for things greater than being that child's plaything."

Gently, she brushed a few stray hairs from his forehead, and then pulled away. Her thoughts turned inward. Viktor would not be the only

one being wasted under Horace's unique brand of tyranny. With every passing day his arrogant, bullying nature was coming to the fore, provoking Katarina and her coven with his imperious demands of absolute privacy and absolute loyalty. She had stopped herself several times from simply snapping the wizard's scrawny little neck, and now she was starting to wonder if that was a good thing or not.

She had a truce with the Dark Lord, who had entrusted his own kin to her, but with she was beginning to think Britain's ruler didn't care one way or another if the boy lived or died here. He certainly hadn't thought to keep the boy safe or send others to ensure his safety. There had been no communication between them for nearly a week now as far as she knew, though perhaps the wards affected their psychic communication. She wasn't sure. Either way, if something ...unfortunate were to happen to Horace, well... who's to say what happened? They're in the middle of a war zone after all.

She looked back down at Viktor who slept on, oblivious. She smiled softly and leaned in to whisper softly in his ear.

"Do not worry yourself, my darling. I won't let that nasty little boy hurt you. I won't let him hurt either of us."

And then she moved lower, her mouth moving from the shell of his ear to the bare skin of his neck.

~ Page Break~

Fenrir woke them before dawn, had them eat the last of their rations and moved them hard for the rest of the day. The green hills turned to thickets and young woodland, thick with animals, common and faery bred alike, and Bobby was careful to keep them off the game trails. The raven was becoming increasingly nervous, fidgeting and looking back frequently as if contemplating turning them all back around.

He never did though, and just as the sun was starting to hang low they came upon a cave. It was carved out of a hillside, half hidden behind a grove of mulberry bushes, and looked like little more than an large animal den.

"This is the place. It will take you right into the middle of Berlin," the raven said, alighting on a small tree. "Now release Harry."

"Our agreement was for when we were in Berlin, not before. I'm not letting him go until I know this doesn't lead straight to Azkaban or Voldemort's office or hell as you previously threatened."

The raven's feathers puffed out in irritation, but nevertheless he flew straight for the cave, whisking past Fenrir as he did so and disappearing into the dark. The war god turned to the others gathering behind him.

"Anyone with a wand or a weapon follows directly behind me. Anyone without stay towards the back. Don't wander off and don't get distracted. This may be a trap."

Not waiting for their response (they could only reply in the affirmative to his commands anyway), he ducked into the cave. Inside, the cave hung low and its soft clay walls crumbled under the hand he used to guide himself along. He could neither see nor hear his guide, but it didn't matter. There was only direction to follow.

He cast a lighting spell and led the way.

He wasn't sure how long or how far they traveled in the underground. There was no sense of day or night and his own anxiety made his judgment of time questionable. Everything was absolutely silent. It quickly grew cold in the underground, and they stopped only once in order to put on their winter clothes.

What little Fenrir did know was that they were traveling downwards by the gradual yet persistent sloping of the ground, and the deeper they went the larger and stonier the cave became until it became a great cavern, and he had to weave around sparkling white stalactites and stalagmites reaching for each other.

Yet no matter how large or small or winding the cave became there was only ever two directions to travel, forwards and backwards. Backwards was never an option.

The caverns grew smaller, the stalactites and stalagmites disappeared, and their route started to slope upwards again. There was still no sign of their guide. Then, without warning, the rough limestone gave way to smooth brick that shook beneath his touch as the sound of a train passed over head, shaking loose bits of dust to rain down on them. He listened intently after it had passed.

In the distance he could hear a female voice, electronic and monotone, announcing something in German. He grinned. So they had made it after all. He ordered those few with wands to start casting Notice-Me-Not charms (although honestly he didn't know if even muggles could not notice two hundred something people dressed as if they had walked out of medieval battle re-enactment. It wasn't important. He lead them forward, until their one way tunnel split into several different directions and then he followed the one where he could hear the most people. It emptied out into a wide tunnel with several tracks laid across it. Across the tracks was a station house and a large platform, crowded with muggles going up or down escalators and through security gates. A good sign. The aurors would never set a trap in the middle of such a large crowd of muggles.

"Don't step on the rails," he warned the others, knowing they could be electrified. He had past experiences with muggle transportation, when the ministry made the usual travel methods unsafe. "And watch out for trains."

They crossed cautiously to the other side. The platform stood up to his chin and there were no stairs or ladders, so Fenrir used a little of his magic to jump up and startled a pair of old ladies when he landed in front of them. He grinned at them.

"Sorry, ladies."

"Be careful, young man," one said, distractedly, already starting to forget about him. "This isn't a football field."

He nodded and turned back to check on the others. They were working in twos and threes to help each other up and required little assistance, so he monitored the muggles closely to make sure the spells were working well enough. Most of the muggles were suitably

distracted by cell phones, video games, books, or private conversation that they barely noticed the new arrivals except to move as the platform became more and more crowded. Even security and the ticket takers were suitably distracted checking on those coming from outside that they didn't seem to notice they were being invaded from within. The few who seemed to notice something odd was happening were those standing alone without anything to pre-occupy them, which were few enough that Fenrir didn't feel particularly concerned.

When the last of his small army were finally gathered on the platform, Bobby finally decided to make his appearance, landing on top of a nearby trashcan.

"I've kept my end of the bargain, now keep yours," he demanded.

"First, tell me how to get to wizarding Berlin."

"No!" the raven snapped impatiently. "First, you release Harry and then I'll tell you."

Fenrir growled low. "Don't push me, you stupid pigeon."

"Don't push me, you rabid dog. We had a deal, and I've kept up my end. It is time you kept up yours. Unless promises only have meaning to wizards these days."

"Fine," he snarled so viciously, that several muggles standing nearby suddenly leapt away from him. He closed his eyes and more softly, he said, "Give me a minute. I have to-"

There was a sudden loud swooshing sound from somewhere on the left side of the platform. He knew that sound well. He spun around, drawing his sword in the same movement. Despite the sudden arrival of dozens of wizards at once, his gaze invariable found the Voldemort's first.

"Hello, Greyback," the Dark Lord greeted coolly. Fenrir flung his sword out, not at the wizard but at Bobby who just barely managed to dive to safety and landed clumsily on the edge of the platform.

"You tricked me!"

Now muggles were really starting to take notice, including security, but the Sentinels tossed out several spells to distract and confuse them again.

"No, he didn't," Voldemort said evenly. "There are only three entrance points from the faery realms directly into Berlin, and one of them is within the warded area. I had my spies plant a portkey at both available locations and waited for your unique brand of magic to activate them. Now then, if we were able to detect you here from Warsaw, I guarantee the German Aurors have as well. So if you wouldn't mind releasing Harry quickly-"

Another familiar wizarding sound suddenly filled the station house. A distinct popping noise.

"Ah shit," Bobby muttered. "It's too late."

There were shouts from the other side of the platform as several muggles were rudely jostled by men who had not been there only seconds before. Men, who it seemed, kept coming. The wizards who arrived stared horrified at the mass of people around them, whether because of the security risk they presented or the sheer potential for casualties or both was hard to tell.

"Hey! Where are your train passes?" a security officer shouted, even as more aurors continue to pop in from out of nothing.

"Watch it!"

"Move! You're blocking the elevator!"

Fenrir rolled his eyes. The Dark Lord just looked embarrassed for them, and contemplated slaughtering muggles just to get them into proper form. Fenrir, however, took the initiative. He turned to Lloyd who was carrying one of the two rifles they had and made a gesture towards him. Lloyd unslung his rifle, aimed, and fired. The fluorescent lights above the arriving aurors exploded, raining down sparks and

shards of glass. The muggles were faster to react than the aurors, letting out terrified screams and rushing for the exits.

The second shot hit an actual Auror, splattering those closest to him in blood and brain matter. After that, the muggles were nothing more than obstacles for the aiming of their own spells. Lloyd took the first hit, screaming and smoking as he was thrown from the platform. The second strike, Fenrir blocked with his sword, grinning like a lunatic. Behind him, Voldemort threw up a massive shield, buying his own men time to prepare their spells and protecting the werewolves as well. Several muggles were either thrown or smashed into the invisible wall, knocking them down and further terrifying those who hadn't yet escaped. Spells flashed and skidded off the shield, taking out several of the overhanging lights and darkening the platform. Muggle security had drawn their fire arms and shouted commands to lay down their weapons, but they had no definitive target and hadn't yet fired for fear of hitting the civilians.

"Release Harry this instant," Voldemort commanded, his tone cutting through the cacophony of voices warring in the echoing tunnels of the underground. Fenrir grinned back at him. He made a terrible sight, a child dressed all in black, blade in hand, sanity in question, and a promise of something worse.

"I've got a better idea."

Voldemort raised his wand to cast a binding spell and prevent whatever the mad creature had in mind, but his shield failed under the Auror's onslaught and he had to quickly adjust his aim to block the flurry of spells directed at him. His retaliating spell set the entire ceiling ablaze, exploding the remaining lights and electric cables as it blanketed outwards towards the Aurors before descending in blazing spears. The screaming now was from pain rather than panic, from those not quick enough to bring up their shields or apparate to safety.

It was a good attack, but it did nothing to move the fight in his favor. Out of the corner of his eye he saw three Culties fall to a curse, sinking into the liquefied floor until only their hands were visible and floor re-hardened, killing them instantly... hopefully. The Aurors were still arriving, and ready for the fight. One even apparated right in the

middle of Voldemort's men and managed to take out four more culties before Snape caught him from behind and slit his throat.

"My lord," Snape hissed in his ear, drawing his attention even as he tossed out a countercurse and a shield without speaking. "Potter's doing something to the others!"

The Dark Lord turned his attention, as much of it as he dared, back to Fenrir. The war god had stupidly turned his back to the enemy, the sword of Gryffindor flitting this way and that without looking to block and destroy the curses being flung at him. His other hand was held high in the air and over the other werewolves who had collapsed to the ground and were now writhing in agony as he chanted something that was lost in roar of battle. It took Voldemort a moment to realize what the war god was doing, and when he did he was momentarily stunned. Only Snape's presence beside him, kept him from losing an ear as a cutting curse drew a little too close.

They both fell to the floor, cutting the exposed skin of their hands faces on the glass covered floor. It was irrelevant. He was back on his feet, his strongest shielding spell thrown up to protect him so that he could continue to watch the dark miracle unfolding before him. Snape tried to get up as well, but Voldemort pushed him back down into the protection of his shield, forcing him to his knees. The potions master was confused for a moment, until he too saw what was transpiring before him.

Fenrir's army was getting back up.

Getting back up on four legs. On four long, hairy legs with two and half inch claws and a matching set of fangs.

"Oh my god," he heard Snape breath out.

Fenrir turn back to the aurors, eyes burning with gleeful insanity. With the hand he had used to cast his spell, he made a gesture towards the enemy. At once, over two hundred fully transformed werewolves leapt into the fray, running full speed and mad towards the aurors. A dozen were cut down before they could engage, but in the low confines of the tunnel, there was nowhere flee. The shields which

could be used to block spells were useless for fending off werewolves, who broke through them as if though they were nothing. They tore into the fringe of the group first, tearing witches and wizards from the group and within seconds rendering their prey into pieces before going for the next victim. Over a dozen German fighters were lost within half a minute.

"Defense spells only!" Voldemort shouted to his people, but he needn't have bothered. They had stopped firing on their own to watch in morbid horror. This was not the same fight they had befallen the Goddess colony. Here, there were no brooms to fight from. Here there was nowhere to retreat to. The aurors fought desperately, throwing out their most vicious attacks, killing werewolf after werewolf but there were too many and before another could be taken down they were overtaken.

And still Aurors just kept coming.

Separate from it all and yet a part of it as well, Fenrir laughed and laughed as if it were the most hilarious thing he had ever seen. Any other time, Voldemort might have joined in, but he really wanted to get Harry out of here. The war god was proving stupidly careless with his protégé's body, standing out in the open like that.

And then all of the Auror's disappeared.

A series of loud pops indicated their method of escape. The why of it wasn't immediately apparent. Well, unless it was simple self-preservation, of course. Their prey gone, the werewolves turned their attention towards Voldemort and his soldiers.

"Do you mind?" the Dark Lord muttered at Fenrir, who was smirking at him now.

"Not in the least." He wasn't amused. The war god gave a little pout. "Oh, fine. Be a spoil sport."

He waved the werewolves away, and they turned and contented themselves with feasting on the dead. Half a dozen culties broke

away from their group in order to vomit over the side of the platform. Voldemort released Snape and allowed him to climb back to his feet.

"This isn't the end of it," he told the others. "They'll regroup and come back. Keep your guard up."

Snape nodded in agreement, although he didn't look away from the monsters as he spoke.

"They'll collapse this tunnel. It's standard operating procedure. We need to get out now."

From above the sound of sirens could be heard, summoning more muggles to complicate an already messy situation.

"Retreat into the tunnel. There should be another platform a mile or two up the line," Voldemort ordered, then turned to Fenrir who was still chuckling softly to himself. "If your pets can behave themselves, I suggest you bring them along. I'll need to destroy the bodies before I leave."

Fenrir nodded, and with a little whistle drew his wolves' attention. They quickly padded towards him, some of them picking up small body parts to take with them and jumped from the platform. As soon as they were out of the way, Voldemort set the platform ablaze in brilliant green fire. The Culties flinched at the wave of heat drew towards them, and started retreating off the platform as well, albeit with a careful eye on the werewolves moving soundlessly in the darkness. Fenrir admired the blaze for a moment, stepping back slowly so that he might watch his enemies and his comrades alike be reduced to nothing more than ashes and cinders. Then he turned away, and made his way off the platform. As he did so, something gave him pause.

"What have we 'ere?"

Reaching down into the shadows at the platform's edge, he pulled something out of the darkness. Bobby remained stiff and motionless in the war god's hands, eyes wide and terrified. Fenrir grinned, but before he could do anything Voldemort snatched the raven from him.

"Hurry up," he snapped, storming passed him and into the tunnel. Fenrir glared, but followed after. They were hardly off the platform when it gave a horrid lurch and exploded from the floor upwards, smothering the green fire and burying whatever hadn't been turned to ash. Dirt and smoke blew into the tunnel in a fierce wind, and once it had passed it left everything in a choking fog.

"That wasn't me," Voldemort stated, if only to clarify that indeed, the fighting was far from over. He turned to Fenrir. "My protégé if you don't mind."

"You really want to wake him up now?" he laughed. "He'll freeze up, get himself killed."

"I will see to Mr. Potter's safety," Snape stated, daring him to contradict him. Fenrir didn't contradict him, but he didn't acknowledge him either. From up ahead one of the werewolves let out a piercing howl.

"Incoming," Fenrir warned.

~Page Break~

Book V

Chapter 26: Vengeance

The lake was near. Harry could hear the soft, eerie call of loons and the croak of frogs, and the sound of flowing water had slowly died. He could hear it, but he couldn't see it. The fog had swallowed his world in a damp white blanket, and he was forced to stumble through the thickening muck with his hands held out before him as if blind.

It did nothing to deter the shadow stalkers. Indeed, they only became more bold, flitting in closer and closer and then retreating shorter and shorter distances, until he felt wet fur brush against his outstretched hands. It was nerve-wracking, and though he managed to keep himself moving, he couldn't stop himself from shaking and flinching.

How close to the lake would they let him get before they attacked? Would they attack at all? Could they? He had no idea how vulnerable he was in this place or whether anything in it could truly hurt him. He hoped not. His wand and his sword were back with his body, and he had nothing to protect himself with.

A shadow stalker brushed against his hands again, and this time he could briefly feel a cold, wet nose. Another rushed in from behind, knocking into him and making him stumble. His arms came up to protect him against the fall, and the mud swallowed them until his nose was nearly touching the muck. Another attacker ran over him, a single claw foot striking him in the back as it went. He pushed himself back up and flung out his fist, felt it brush against more fur and the shadows retreated yet again.

He climbed to his feet and winced. His back hurt where he had been stepped on. Apparently, they could hurt him. Trembling, he simply stood there trying to decide what he should do. He had found that if he didn't move they didn't touch him, and as urgently as he needed to leave he needed a break for the sake of his own sanity.

Under the sounds of water fowl and amphibians he could now just barely make out the rhythmic hush of water lapping against stones. He couldn't have been more than a hundred feet away, probably less

than half of that, and yet the closer he got the more impossible it seemed. The mud was up to his knees now, and though he didn't tire he could barely move either, and... the things Greyback had sent were getting as desperate to stop him as he was to keep going.

He stood there and thought for a long moment, but no clever plans presented themselves. He took a deep breath, and surged forward again, stomping over the thickening mud as quickly as he could. The attack that followed was no surprise, except perhaps in its intensity.

A mouth filled with pointed teeth clamped onto his outstretched arm, pulling down and forward, back into the mud. He screamed in pain and fright, and struggled to rip his arm free but the teeth only sunk deeper until he was almost certain the bones would break. A second attacker leaped onto his back, pushing him forward so that his stomach and chest sunk into the mud, clawed feet digging into his back before another set of teeth clamped onto his shoulder. There was not enough air available for him to scream, with only one arm to support himself and the massive weight on his back he barely able to keep his head up high enough to gasp for air or risk suffocating.

"Aahh!!" he gasped, "Sto-ahhhh!!" Teeth grazed his collarbone, threatening to snap it. Harry felt lightheaded from the pain, but struggled to keep his senses. They were close enough now that he could see them. They were indeed wolfish creatures as he had suspected, but were not in the shape of true wolves or even werewolves. Their legs were extremely long and thin, more deer-like than canine, their claws almost talon like in their size and curve, and their fur had a nacreous sheen like the inside of a clam shell. Their head and body were completely wolf-like but for the eyes, black, empty, and unblinking.

They were horrible.

They were going to kill him.

What do I do? What do I do? he thought desperately, trying to think, between the desperate gasps for air and the excruciating pain. I don't have my sword! I don't have my wand! I don't have anything!

There was an audible snap and agony bloomed in his captive arm, pulling out another scream even as collarbone started to crack under the pressure of merciless teeth. I don't want to die! I'm sorry, I'm sorry! I should never have taken the Du'on nadi! It was stupid and selfish, I know! I know! But please don't kill me! Don't let anyone else die for my mistake! Please, please, someone help me!

The shadowstalker on his back released his shoulder, and for a blessed moment Harry thought it was over, that someone had answered his prayer, that he was free. Then the teeth returned, this time clamping firmly over the back of his neck.

Harry screamed.

~ Page Break~

The Aurors were more prepared for the second attack and on the offensive, driving heavily into the ranks of their enemies. Several of them now carried crossbows as well, laden with silver quarrels. Voldemort and Greyback's forces had lost their element of surprise, but they were far from outclassed. The werewolves, despite their bestial minds, were excellent group hunters, fast and clever. Those few Aurors who had experience dealing with them, had only ever dealt with them one at a time or from the safety of a broom, and had never seen their true potential unleashed while in a pack. They were fast and quiet when it suited them, infinitely strong and terrifying when it didn't. All of this, combined with Greyback's strict control and intelligence, made them a terrifying force to reckon with.

Voldemort's Culties were by no means on the same level as Aurors, but their rigid discipline and numbers supplemented their more skilled commanders, the Sentinels, Lestrage, Snape, and the Dark Lord himself. While the more powerful let loose their own mental repository of dark spells, the Culties supplied the protection and the distraction to allow them the time and space to do their worst.

"Frango vitrum!" Snape snarled, catching an Auror on the leg as he dove for cover. The leg instantly exploded into thousands of glassy shards, and the Auror screamed briefly, before a pair of werewolves caught up with him and silenced him forever.

"Hhmm... I've never seen that spell before," Greyback said off-handedly, before turning back to his werewolves and summoning them back towards the main group with a whistle. One werewolf limped slowly over to its god, causing Snape to cringe a few steps back from him, but only long enough for Greyback to pull out the silver quarrel that had hit its back leg. It yelped in pain as Greyback pulled it free, but lumbered along quickly enough on three legs. Around them, Culties tossed up shields and counterspells as Aurors hurled curses down the tunnels from somewhere up ahead in the darkness, illuminating the brick walls in a flashing rainbow of colors.

Voldemort, whose patience was starting to wear thin, glowered at Greyback. In one hand he held his wand, in the other the raven, confined to a small wire mesh cage. The raven had not moved the entire time, and anyone who thought to notice it assumed it had been stunned. Bobby certainly hadn't been spelled, as far as the Dark Lord knew, and was likely shocked more than anything. Despite all his traveling, the raven had been uniquely sheltered against the true horrors of the battlefield. Voldemort didn't spend much time thinking about it, or what he was going to do with the raven once this was all over, as he still needed to get Harry out of this mess first.

"The second attack should be occurring any moment now," Voldemort said to Greyback. "The Aurors will be forced to abandon the fight here to defend what remains of their city, and when that happens, you will leave that body."

Greyback glanced back at him, and smirked.

"Of course. No point sticking around if there's no one else left to kill."

Voldemort contemplating the possibility of killing Greyback in his god form, but ultimately decided it wasn't worth it*. He would find some other way of punishing him later. Maybe he'd eat Luna instead.

The sound of a train coming drew him from his thoughts of revenge to further down the tunnel. The underground was loud with shouting and screaming and small explosions, but nothing could dampen the ear-splitting screech of trains. Whatever traffic that was supposed to have

come down the main tunnel must have been rerouted once it had collapsed, and only now that the fighting was moving into other sectors were the trains truly becoming a risk. The train was far enough away that finding a spot to keep out of its way wouldn't be a problem, but confining their movement in the already confining tunnels was dangerous. The only consolation was that the Aurors were likewise confined.

"Cross to the other side of the tunnel. They won't dare fire on us while the train is passing," he commanded, and everyone moved to obey except the werewolves who were moving about the shadows in any which way they pleased, dodging quarrels and spells, exhausting their enemies' supplies and energy as they prepared their next big rush.

Greyback crossed the tunnel with the others, not so arrogant as to stand as the sole target of a hundred angry Aurors, but stopped when a howl pierced the air. It was not a howl of pain or a battle cry, but something else, something that brought an unholy light to his mismatched eyes. Bright white light appeared around the turn of the tunnel and a deafening blow from a horn filled the cavern. The spells stopped flying, just as Voldemort predicted, no one daring to risk derailing the train in such closed quarters. Greyback glanced briefly at Voldemort, then in the direction of the howling, now drowned out by the approaching train. The Dark Lord himself was distracted, calculating distance and time and his next offensive move, but Snape's responsibility was Harry and he hadn't forgotten it, not even in the middle of their fire fight.

"He's escaping!" Snape snarled, dashing after Greyback when he changed his direction towards the other side of the tunnel. Lestrangle spun around, and cast a stunner at Greyback, but either it didn't hit or had no effect because he didn't stop. Snape managed to get across the tracks, along with one of his underlings, but before either the Dark Lord or any of the other soldiers could follow. The train was already upon them, and they were forced to cower back against the walls, covering their ears and their heads as the sound rattled their brains inside their skulls.

After what seemed like minutes, though it could only have been a fraction of one, the train finally passed them and they brought up their wands to prepare for the next assault. It proved pointless. The Aurors were gone.

And so were Greyback and the werewolves.

~ Page Break~

Oblitz was furious. They had two days notice, two days! That should have been plenty of time to prepare for the second invasion, but they were getting humiliated out there! They had lost nearly seventy men already, while the enemies' casualties was less than half that! It was ridiculous, that should have to leave the command central to bail them out.

He had not been in the underground fighting, instead sending out the soldiers and taking intelligence on the battle as injured Aurors apparated back to base, and he knew it had gone very badly. To be fair to the fighters, there were several factors Oblitz hadn't prepared them for. One being that Voldemort himself would be there, a veritable army all his own but never a more valuable target, and the other was Potter and the werewolves... which honestly, he still wasn't sure he believed. He shuddered to think how it might be true, and if Britain didn't have two Dark Lords running around.

Then the second attack had started on the edge of their base, Culties on brooms sticks swept in for a surprise attack. There were not many, but with they were vicious and well armed. Oblitz killed two, before apparating to the tunnels to call the Auror's back. He knew the little Blitzkrieg was only the first strike to soften them up for the heavier fire power, and he needed his other soldiers there ready to face it.

They set up anti-apparation wards before they retreated, and hoped they would keep Voldemort and his people trapped in the underground long enough for him to defeat the enemy topside, before they joined the fray or made their own escape. The only problem with that of course, was they had to get out of range of the wards themselves before apparating to the battle grounds. Oblitz wasn't

familiar with the muggle tunnel system, but one of the Aurors knew a few places where it intersected with the wizarding underground.

They were running there now with only the Lighting spells to see by, and casting the walls in shining wetness and deep shadows. They moved as fast as they could carrying the wounded on their backs, hoping the passing train would buy them enough time to disappear. Oblitz wasn't counting on it, and as usual his pessimism proved correct.

They were half way to their destination when the first man screamed. He turned around just in time to see one of his Auror's dragged away into a side tunnel, where the screaming persisted for a few more seconds before ending in a choking, wet gurgle. Oblitz sent out a fire curse to incinerate the attackers, but the stream of molten fire merely illuminated the figures of nearly two dozen werewolves and one lone man before the flash of a sword caught the curse and shattered it into harmless little sparks and then darkness.

Laughter rumbled through the artificial cavern, echoing off the walls so what was only one sounded like dozens. Around him, Oblitz could smell the stink of fear wafting of the Aurors like a wave. It was no Dark Lord, but what they had glimpsed ever so briefly in the darkness was even worse. They were men and women who had been prepared to fight and die violently in the line of duty, but against dark wizards and witches. There was something innately more horrible, something primordially terrifying about the sort of death that was stalking them now.

"Oblitz," the laughing voice called, and for a moment the commander wasn't certain he had heard right. "Cameron Oblitz. I know you're there. We all know you're there. We've come a long way to find you."

Suddenly, the Aurors' fear was his own. They were here for him? There was no point questioning the why of the matter, he wasn't so deluded as not to understand their desire for vengeance, but the how was something he couldn't begin to guess at. No one had known. He had made absolutely sure of that.

He mentally shook himself. He couldn't afford to loose it down here. This was a war, there were more important things than his own sins coming back to haunt him. He shouted out orders to his people.

"Kuster! You're in charge now. Take everyone topside and meet up with Gersten if he's still alive."

"Sir!" she protested, her wand drawn and ready to fight to the death. He was glad of it, but if she was going to find death it wasn't going to be fighting for an old soldier like him. Berlin needed her strength, needed all of their strengths, and he had no intention of them losing their lives down here.

"Go! That's my final order."

"S-"

"Go, damn you, or I'll curse you myself!" he snarled, grabbing her by her cloak and all but throwing her down the tunnel. She stumbled, but straightened, gave him one last look of regret and ordered them forward. Oblitz didn't watch them go. He didn't dare turn away from the enemy, he could no longer see.

When at last the echoing footstep faded behind him, he stood in absolute silence, the floating orbs of light the only source of illumination. It was so utterly quiet that, if it weren't for the overwhelming feeling of malevolence directed at him, Oblitz might have been able to convince himself he was alone.

Then another wand lit, and the figure he had seen briefly stood some twenty feet away, and behind him the two dozen werewolves had multiplied to nearly a hundred, sitting obediently behind their master in tidy little rows, a bestial army of monsters.

Harry Potter stood smiling darkly at him; in one hand his wand, in the other a sword, and a black cloak hanging round his shoulders. There wasn't a trace of fear in his hooded eyes, no trace of sanity either, and if Oblitz had any doubts about a second Dark Lord they were gone now.

And then suddenly, the sword vanished.

~ Page Break~

Teeth closed around his neck, just as his fingers closed around steel. Harry didn't think, didn't have time or a clear enough head to think, to realize what exactly had appeared in his hand, but swung his free arm backward, clubbing rather than stabbing. The blade hit the shadowstalker awkwardly, the edge tilted so it slivered shallowly against the flesh rather than slicing deeply.

It was enough to startle the monster, though, and it released its prey and skittered out of range, its fellow hunter releasing the captive arm to disappear into the mists. Harry swung wildly at their retreating forms, even as his wounds screamed in agony to be stretched. He shouted and screamed into the nothingness, terror and hatred and anger bubbling out in mad frenzy. Trembling, he climbed to his feet, ignoring the pain and surged forward into the mist.

Sanity was slipping away from him, replaced instead by a primitive instinct to escape. He needed to get out of this place, not to save anyone or out of necessity, but for the simple need to survive. Predators surrounded him and there was shelter in sight, and even with the sword in his hand he felt no safer in this cursed place. The mud wouldn't let him run, would barely let him move at all, pulling his downward like a predator all its own. He struggled on, eyes wide and still seeing nothing but endless white, his chest heaving and stretching his torn skin and cracked bone.

The faintest of sounds, perhaps nothing more than an echo of his own frantically beating heart or the wet slurping of mud as he moved, blew timidly into his ear and sent him swinging around like a madman. The blade sliced through nothing but air and he swung back to his exposed side. He hit nothing. There probably had been nothing to hit. His cloak dragged in the muck, twisting up in his arms, and forcing him to struggle with it. Frustrated and terrified, he tore the cloak from his neck and tossed it aside, frantic to free himself like a rabbit in a snare. The next steps had him pulling free of his boots, leaving them stuck in the sucking mud. All the while, he searched blindly and swung pointlessly into the colorless abyss.

His paranoia slowed him, but eventually he found himself at the waters edge, cattails and pond grass shooting up around him, thick enough that he could finally walk without sinking into the earth. The water was icy cold, his first experience with temperature since he had entered this strange place, but he didn't care. He had to go, get away, to the center of the lake, deep enough to submerge himself.

He managed to get far enough in that the water reached mid thigh, and he was just beginning to hope he had moved beyond his attacker's reach when snapping and splashes from behind had him spinning around to meet the second attack. He caught the shadow stalker as it leaped for him, spearing it through the neck. It was dead before it fell, but the momentum kept it on its trajectory, smashing Harry in the chest and throwing him back into the frigid water. He struggled to right himself, but the weight of the dead held him down, pushing him deeper. One arm broken and other trapped between the body and his own, he floundered pathetically, struggling to raise his head the mere half foot to the water's surface.

He was feeling light-headed and convinced he was going to drown when his kicking leg was seized savagely in another pair of jaws and was carelessly dragged from beneath the shadow stalker's body and out of the water. His strength waning, he lost his grip on his sword, leaving it lodged its victim as he was pulled back to the muddy bank. Gasping for air and then screaming it out again, he kicked uselessly at the beast with his bare foot. It didn't even slow, dragging him further from the lake and into the mists to Merlin knew where. He dug his one good and heel into the mud, but there was nothing to hold onto and it slid easily beneath him.

More out of lack of options than any true plan on his part, he scooped up a wad of mud and hurled it. There was startled yelp, and his foot was released. He scrambled back towards the lake, hobbling and crawling, although all he wanted to do was lie down and sleep. Maybe if he didn't move it wouldn't attack?

Not something he thought he could bring himself to do, not when every instinct was screaming at him to run. He was back amidst the reeds, finding the dead shadow stalker and searching for his blade. It

was harder than it should have been to pull it free, his strength all but gone, so that he had to put his whole crippled body into it. He fell backwards into the water, just managing to keep his head above the water. He didn't bother to stand, he didn't know if he had enough strength left to do so. Instead, he stayed floating on his back, kicking weakly.

The sword rested across his chest, feeling like a lead weight trying to drag him down, but he dared not let it go. He swam what felt like hours. The icy waters numbed the pain in his limbs, but robbed him of his strength. With every passing moment, he felt his legs losing the struggle to move and his body sink lower and lower. He could no longer hear the loons and frogs, only the muted pounding of his heart as the water slipped over his ears. The adrenaline rush of his escape faded, and with it came the certainty that he was going to die here anyway.

A soft splashing drew his attention, and as weak as he was, he could do little else but stare into the mist as the splashing drew closer. As close to death as he was, he felt a resurgence of horror as the head of the shadow stalker glided through the water towards him, its mouth opened and panting, its teeth bared in a monstrous grin.

"No," he cried, his voice barely more than a whisper. "Not you. I won't be killed by you."

Decision made, he stopped kicking. His legs sank, just barely avoiding the teeth that attempted to snag one. After his legs, the rest of him quickly followed. An exhalation of breath and his head finally slipped beneath the surface. He kept his eyes open though, watching the black silhouette of the monster against the dark blue tint of the sky as he slipped deeper into the water. The creature dived for him he noted vaguely, but it was a slow and clumsy swimmer, meant for hunting on the muddy marshlands and shallow pools, and the sword in his hand was an anchor, quickly pulling him down into the cold darkness of the lake.

~ Page Break~

"You know, I gave the sight in my left eye to know your name," the boy purred in two dissonant voices. He had acknowledged the sword's disappearance with an irritated glare at his hand, then turned his attention back to his enemy. Oblitz suspected a trick, but he couldn't think of exactly how such a thing would work. The werewolves had remained seated as their master approached him, a small consolation to him as their master was frightening enough all his own. Oblitz had met Harold Potter before, and honestly he hadn't thought too much of him at the time. The boy's escape and rising political career had been curious, but not entirely sinister. He knew now he should have paid closer attention. "I sold it to a crone. Can't imagine what she intends to do with it, but I suppose in the end we both got what we wanted."

"I'm flattered you think me worth such effort," Oblitz sneered, all the while scanning his surroundings for the battle that was to come. "Although, I can't imagine what I in particular have done to earn such enmity."

Potter tilted his head a bit, his expression unwavering.

"You killed my wife and children."

Oblitz blinked at him. Had Potter just made some sort of joke? As punch lines went, that was pretty bad. Greyback chuckled darkly, acknowledging the look of confusion that flittered across the German wizard's face.

"Don't let this body fool you. Potter's gone off on a little vacation and I'm keeping house for him while he's away," he clarified. "The last time we saw each other in my true flesh I believe you had just disemboweled me."

Oblitz started. Greyback attacked, rushing for him. The wizard leaped back barely avoiding the knife blade that had appeared as suddenly as the sword had vanished. He stumbled and Greyback pressed his attack, but was knocked back by a boot to the chest. Rolling back, he landed in a crouch, ready for another strike.

But Oblitz was already fleeing down the tunnel, dousing his wand as he went. Greyback sneered in disgust. To have been killed by such a cowardly opponent was more than insulting. No matter, he would be unburdening himself on the little bastard soon enough. He ran after him, the army of werewolves rising up to follow and assist if necessary. He didn't light his wand, preferring to bespell his glasses rather than risk exposing himself to the wizard. The werewolves that followed needed no such consideration and could see easily as they pursued their quarry.

The man didn't go far, only far enough to put a little more space between them and grant him the space and time he needed to cast his spells.

"Castrostinatum!" he snarled, all previous hesitation gone. The spell glowed darkest red as it hurtled toward Greyback, who cast a simple protego and strengthened it with his own power. The magic smashed into each other, hissed like water thrown in boiling grease and dissolved each other.

"Expelliarmus!" Greyback countered, not expecting anything to come of it, but using the time Oblitz spent blocking it to further close the distance between them. He had no intention of ending this with magic. When he killed the wizard it was going to be with bare hands and bare teeth.

The elder wizard didn't bother blocking, instead casting castrostinatum again, letting it smash through the Disarming Charm and continue on to its target. Greyback didn't have time to block it, and dodged to the side instead. The curse missed him, but hit a werewolves not quick enough to get out of the way, and there was a hideous wail of pain. It only lasted a second or two before it stopped and the tunnel was filled with the reek of burnt fur and sulphuric acid.

Greyback growled. "I would have thought you had better aim. You seemed quite adept at hitting even the littlest child from atop your broom."

Oblitz turned and ran, trying for more distance again, but Harry's body, for all its weakness, was built for speed. He caught up with his

prey quickly, slashing at his back with his blade. It tore the fabric of the cloak, and the wizard spun around and smashed his fist into the side of his attacker's face. Greyback stumbled, lost his glasses, and righted himself. He swung his knife again, but the wizard caught it and tried to wrest it from his grip. Greyback smashed his forehead into his opponent's nose before he could succeed and grinned when he felt it break.

Yes, yes! This was the sort of fighting Greyback could really get into. Blood and bone, wits and wills, clashing in a heady mix of exhilaration, rage, and pain! Oblitz had stumbled, and the war god grabbed him by his thin, graying hair so he might smash his knee into his face and see what else he might be able to break. The wizard twisted in his grip, losing some hair and some flesh, but broke away long enough to shout out another curse at him.

"Exsanguis!"

They were too close for Greyback to move completely out of the way, and it caught him on the side as he tried to twist away. He kept twisting until he had spun around completely, bringing up his knife to sink into the wizard's unprotected back. The man cried out in agony and surprise, and with a sense of satisfied sadism, Greyback twisted the blade and then stepped away. Oblitz collapsed to his knees, alive but momentarily crippled by pain. The war god took the moment to assess his own injuries. There was no pain from the curse he had received or the resulting injury, but he had heard a disconcerting pop, and touching side revealed it was now gushing blood.

"Sanguis restrictus," he growled. The bleeding instantly stopped, but the countercurse was ironically more painful than the curse itself. He grunted, ignoring the pain as turned back to his prey to finish it. Continuing the fight any longer on this plane was likely to destroy this body, and that wasn't what he came for. He could continue his fun in the comfort of his own home. "I think we better wrap things up, don't you agree?"

Oblitz glared up at him hatefully, clutching stubbornly to the wand he likely couldn't even lift to use. Greyback let out a sharp whistle, and one of the werewolves that had been waiting patiently from the

shadows loped obediently to his side. The war god patted the beast affectionately, like a well-loved hunting dog and turned back to the wizard, who was eying them both with growing apprehension.

"I bet you think I'm going to kill you now," he said idly. "And admittedly, the idea is tempting, but you know, since I've become immortal I've come to appreciate lasting pleasure...and make no mistake I am taking great pleasure in killing you. If I were to kill you now... well, that would be it. You'd suffer for a while, then your body would just give out. You'd go to heaven or hell or whatever, and I would be left here rather unsatisfied. So I came up with this brilliant idea. I think even Voldemort will be quite impressed with it."

Greyback paused, giving the wizard enough time to ask what exactly his oh-so-brilliant plan was, but Oblitz wasn't going to play and remained stubbornly silent. Finally, the god continued without prompting.

"I'm going to turn you into a werewolf."

Oblitz still said nothing, but now it was from horror rather than stubbornness. Greyback was pleased, and went on.

"I'm going to have Amsel here bite you. And then, no matter what happens or how you die, your spirit will belong to the moon and to me. Once you slough his mortal meat bag you call a body, I'll drag you into my lair and tear you apart every day and night from here until eternity. Doesn't that sound like fun?"

He laughed at the wizard's expression and at his own gruesome imagination, laying down plans for punishment he would reap against his family's murderer. The laughter boiled out, laced with pain from his wounded side, but uncontrollable. It was over. It was so close to being over!

Caught up in his own twisted glee he didn't notice the wizard starting to chant voicelessly, mouth moving rapidly for one last spell. Oblitz had lived his life on his own terms, an ambitious and proud man seeking always to better himself by working to better his nation. He had fought against Grindelwald, against dark creatures, against

apathy and incompetence. He would have liked to stayed to fight one last war, to see his country and his people rise above the tyranny of yet another dark wizard, but it seemed he would have to be satisfied with what he had managed to accomplish so far and hope that he had tipped events far enough into Germany's favor to make a difference.

He had lived by his own terms, and if he were honest with himself he had always known he would meet a violent end, so dying on his own terms was possible even now. If he had to die, taking a dark wizard and a hundred werewolves with him seemed a good way to do so.

He was just finishing the last of the complicated incantation, when the insane laughter suddenly broke off into a choking gurgle. The dark wizard before him pitched over onto all fours, vomiting up water. Oblitz's first thought was that Potter had been hit with a drowning curse and someone had come to save him.

The second thought was that it was already too late.

His magic was already welling up inside, sliding out from his very core and expanding inside of his body in an ever increasing pressure. It burned, turning his blood into acid, his breath into fire, and flesh only so much dry kindling. Worse still was the emptiness that was left in the magic's place, a crushing emptiness, a hunger that knew no bounds. It was excruciating, physically and spiritually, and now it all seemed pointless as Potter floundered for air before him. The previously missing sword miraculously reappeared again, now glowing brighter than the strongest lumos..

The power swelled and with it the pain, and Oblitz thought for certain this would be it and in an instant it would all be over, but still it keep coming filling him like a balloon that should have burst long before. It was all so excruciatingly mind-numbing, he missed everything that happened after that.

The werewolves, waiting patiently with their bloodthirsty glares, burst out into long, tormented howls and shifted back into their naked human forms, released from the unnatural transformation and collapsed onto the cold, dirty floor and each other. Potter himself had finally stopped choking, and was now gasping desperately for air on

his hands and knees. Disoriented and blind, the young wizard flinched away from the rising magical power more out of instinct than anything else. He moved his wobbly legs beneath him and backed away, raising his sword to fend off the newest threat.

It was the likely the only thing that saved his life.

~ Page Break~

Snape kept his distance. He wasn't a coward, but he wasn't fool either and he had no intention of wading through veritable ocean of werewolves in an attempt to wrestle Potter... Greyback?... whoever into submission. Greyback was no friend of his, and while he might have refrained from letting his minions tear Voldemort's people to pieces, Snape doubted he would extend the effort to him alone.

He followed just far enough to follow the werewolves by sound, and kept well out of sight of them. They could probably smell him, but none had turned to investigate and as long as he didn't pose a visible threat they didn't seem interested. One of his Sentinels, the fool who had initially challenged his authority, was following close beside him, visibly shaken by the battle that had just happened and the one that might yet happen. Snape's only order to him was to be absolutely quiet and to watch for danger, and so far the man hadn't deviated from that task.

When their quarry finally stopped and engaged the enemy, Snape hung back and considered his options. There really wasn't much he could do. There were at least a hundred werewolves between him and Potter... Greyback...ugh... and his initial attempt to apparate ahead of them had failed, likely do to anti-apparation wards. With only one other wizard, any chances of fighting through would be impossible...well, maybe not impossible, but dangerous and with little chance of success.

Something had to be done though, and soon.

Greyback had recklessly engaged Oblitz, a master duelist, in a fight in Potter's body. This might be the situation in which Snape was relieved the necessity of killing the boy, but to do nothing while the

Dark Lord's protégé engaged in a life and death battle was enough to have him killed or worse, sent to Azkaban.

Harry had to die. That was a hard and, though he would never admit even under the threat of torture, tragic truth. One of hundreds he had seen play out before him over the years. Snape, however, didn't have to die (or worse), and that meant setting up the situation where it appeared he had done everything conceivable to protect the boy and yet failed. At least then, he would only be tortured briefly while the Dark Lord excised his rage, and then limp away with only a few extra scars and another lead bar of guilt weighing down his soul.

For that, everything had to be set up just so...

Then everything just fell apart. Greyback started to choke on something, the potion master's first thought being blood, and then the werewolves who had been ominously quiet until then, sudden burst out into pained howls and writhed on the floor. Within seconds, canine limbs began to shift into human ones, grotesquely misshapen in their transition.

"This is it! Let's grab Potter and get out of here!" the Sentinel hissed, and jumped out from their hiding spot. Snape let out a furious hiss and reached to pull the fool back, but an explosion of uncontrolled magic burst through the tunnel. His arm caught some of it, and flared with heat and pain as he stumbled further back behind the cover of the stone tunnel. The Sentinel, completely exposed, received the brunt of it. The potions master watched horrified as the other man stiffened, glowed blue for a scant few seconds, before his clothing and skin burned away like paper, leaving only the blackened tissue beneath it. He turned away, unwilling to watch the rest of it, fearing the man might somehow still be alive and aware of what was happening.

Instead, he looked at his own arm. His robes and dueling armor had been burned away, but he had managed to pull his arm back quickly enough that only the top of his hand and lower arm appeared to have second degree burns. There would be more scars he noted clinically, but the nerves at the tip of his fingers and palms were intact. Dueling and potions were not yet lost to him. Merlin, that had been close. If it

had been just half a second later, I would be... like Sentinel what's-his-name. His heart was pounding in his chest, deafening him. He closed his eyes tightly, reciting instructions for the healing balm he would need for his magically burnt skin, willing himself to be calm. 14oz of aloe vera, 3.6 oz of boomslang skin, underbelly would be best, half a drop of dragon's blood, 1.4 oz of silt from west bank of the Thames, at least thirty miles north of London...

The rising panic began to fade, enough for him to control his shaking hands. Enough for him to grip his wand firmly. The magical energy, although powerful and violent, faded quickly and he cautiously moved from his hiding spot. The sentinel was dead, a black smoldering heap on the ground, and he didn't waste time on him. He moved further into the tunnel until he came upon the werewolves. Many were dead, killed in the blast, but a surprisingly large number were still alive, weeping and wailing from pain and fear. They had all been low to the ground when the blast hit, partially protected by each other's bodies, so that now in their frail human forms some still managed to live with partial burns that Snape himself suffered from. He didn't linger long enough for a deeper assessment, but stepped around and over them to center of the attack.

Harry is dead, he told himself. There was no way he could have survived ground zero of such an attack.

His hand clenched around his wand. Harry was dead, and it was over now. The Sentinel was dead and the werewolves were incoherent. He would state that he had tried to intercede in the fighting, but there would have been no stopping the explosion. He had the injury on his arm, to prove he had tried to save the boy.

Harry is dead.

... 13 pieces of marsilea...no, it will be out of season. Subsititute ½ dandelion leaves and three drops of vinegar... white silk for the burial shroud and silver pieces from Ireland for the eyes... a pint of plum wine, heat slowly so the alcohol does evaporate too quickly...they will build the pyre on the tallest hill across from Hogwarts, the weather mages will make sure the sky is clear and windless so that everyone will see the smoke for miles... add the boomslang skin all at once,

then sprinkle silt in slowly, stir clockwise twice then counterclockwise twice, let sit for 23 minutes... Hermione would lay the white rose on his heart, Voldemort the Lotus crown, Snape would hide the Scarlet Pimpernel beneath his crossed hands and hope the boy somehow found a way to bring it to Lily...

"Uuhh...uugh..nnn...he..hel..nngh..." a voice begged somewhere, and by all accounts Snape should have dismissed it as one of the dozens of werewolves doing the exact same thing and continued his search through the charred bodies at the front of the pack for some clue that would distinguish Harry from the rest. But something about the voice, maybe it was the childish tenor or maybe it was the direction it came from, made him pause and turn behind him.

At first, there didn't seem to be anyone there. Part of the roof had come down due to the explosion, and a broken pipe was pouring a steady waterfall over a pile of rubble almost as tall as he was. Could someone be alive under there? Impossible.

"He..ahh..help!....HELP!"

There was no mistaking the voice now, not even with it so distorted with pain. He moved closer to the pile of broken bricks and mud, scanning it for some sort of opening from where Harry might be trapped inside, but it was solid. No one could be underneath and calling for help. He was a fool, hallucinating, the magical backlash was poisoning him-

"Agh...p-please..."

No, it wasn't from inside the pile. It was behind it. Quickly, and rather gracelessly, he scrambled and stumbled over and around the loose brick, scraping his hands and bruising his knees as he went. He was half way over when he came across another body half buried in the debris. A blackened skeleton leered up at him, loose bits of meat and hair clinging stubbornly to its skull. He very nearly buried his hand in its open mouth before he realized it was there, and reared back in disgust. He froze and stared at it for a long moment. That couldn't be...?

"Is-is some...s-someone... ah..ahh...help."

He turned around, and there was Harry, laying half buried in mud, his clothes almost burned away completely. Snape felt his heart leap into his throat when he saw almost the entire body was black.

"Lumos!"

The tunnel bloomed into light, and he squeezed his eyes shut as he willed away the Night Vision spell. When he opened his eyes again, expecting to see this horror in full color, he was infinitely relieved to see Harry's body wasn't as blackened with burns as he had first thought. Most of it was blood. Blood and mud and whatever filth he was currently buried in.

He moved in quickly, then to lean over him and stared into a pair of brilliant green eyes. Eyes that were wide with terror and agony, unshielded by his glasses.

"Pro-professor?"

Snape blinked. Harry wasn't dead. How the bloody hell was he not dead? Looking for some sort of clue, he spotted a sword handle gripped tightly in the boy's hand. The blade had shatter in the explosion, and what little remained of it was pitch black. The Sword of Gryffindor, he realized. It must have absorbed most of the magical explosion. It destroyed itself trying to protect its master.

He turned back Harry's face. "Yes. It's me."

"I-I d-died again," he stammered, his breath hitching. "I d-drowned. Did you s-save me, again?"

Drowned? What is he talking about? He must be delusional from the pain.

"Where are you hurt, Potter?" Because, clearly something wasn't right. The sword obviously hadn't stopped everything, and there was no telling what sort of injuries the boy had sustained before the explosion.

"E-everywhere..." he managed, and then gasped, "But my side...m-my s-side...hurts...most."

Snape wiped away some mud from the boy's naked side, and cringed when the hidden wound there spurt several ounces of blood all over his hand. Mentally cursing, he muttered a spell to help seal the wound and then tore his bag from his shoulders. He tore open a side pocket and pulled out a thick roll of cloth, and unrolled it to reveal nearly twenty potion vials secured safely inside. His hand immediately reached for the pear-shaped vial with the Blood Replenishing potion, only to pause.

Right beside the life-saving vial was another, innocuous little tube with a clear, colorless liquid inside with another purpose altogether. Snape stared at it, frozen.

What am I doing? Didn't I come here to end his life? To solidify a prophetic future for Britain and myself? He is dying already, by his own stupidity no doubt. How long will you continue this foolish game? How long will you continue to save him? Until his recklessness or his destiny destroys you both?

His hands were starting to shake again. No, no, he couldn't hesitate now. He didn't have much time. Voldemort couldn't be that far behind him. He reached for the clear vial.

Add 6 pints and 4 oz water, bring to a quick boil, do not stir...You have to stop shaking or you'll poison yourself first... for ten minutes and thirty-six seconds, then clockwise eight and a half rotations. Add shredded dandelions and wait for potion to turn pink...

He turned back to Harry, and froze again. It was a sudden and terrible realization that the boy looked far more like his mother than he had originally thought. The trademark Potter rats' nest for hair, was now smoothed back from the boy's face with wet mud, exposing a hairline identical to Lily's and a beauty mark in the upper right of his forehead just where she had had one. The eyes... they had always been Lily's eyes, but never had they been so wide and so vulnerable. She had never looked at him the way Harry was now, but he had

nightmares about it during the war when any day he expected to hear news of her being hunted down and murdered by Voldemort's Death Eaters... or tasked with the job himself.

"I...I'm glad you're here," Harry gasped out, the pain obviously getting worse with every passing moment.

"Shut up, Potter," he snapped, unscrewing the vial.

Lily's dead and gone, and you're a fool and louse to cling to her memory. You have a fiancé; sort of, a woman alive and probably in love with you, promising you more than Lily was ever willing to give. Her son is going to destroy you, just like she nearly did. Are you going to help things along? Stupid, masochistic fool!

...siphon excess fluid through cheese cloth, place remaining solid in cool glass mixing bowl. Add dragon's blood, folding gently until paste is a soft pastel orange, leave to set at room temperature overnight...

The vial hovered over Harry's open mouth. The boy's eyes were no longer wide, but starting to drift close. He was starting to fade, slowly and painfully. Still, somehow, he managed to focus on Snape.

"I don't want to die..."

Green eyes drifted shut.

No, no, no! You forgot the vinegar! It'll be too acidic and ruin the aloe extract! It's useless! All that planning and preparing and waiting was for absolutely nothing!

He threw the vial into the rubbish heap, heard it shatter, and knew its contents were diluting in the water and would soon become inert as they mixed with the chemicals in the brick. His hands were already plucking potions from his cloth. He moved behind the boy, propping his head onto his lap to keep it angled, pouring Blood Replenishing potion into his open mouth, and massaging his throat so that he would swallow rather than choke. Then concentrated stinging nettle extract to flush foreign magical energy, Berphilium's healing draught for internal hemorrhaging, Timmelson's Infection Fighting Draught

(because there was no way Harry wasn't catching something in this damnable sewer), and glucose dissolved in water (not a potion, and technically not magical in any way, but an excellent source of quick energy in a pinch nonetheless).

Harry's eyes still didn't open, but his color was slightly better. His breathing still sounded atrocious, and Snape remembered hearing him choking on something before the explosion. He had nothing for it. If he were bleeding into his lungs, the anti-hemorrhaging potion would stop it for a while, but could do nothing to expel what was already there...

He said he had drowned...maybe he hadn't been delusional when he said that after all.

Removing his cloak, he wrapped it around Harry, and pulled him up until the boy's back was pressed to his chest. He was uncomfortably heavy, but even still Snape could feel each rib beneath his fingers as he was re-positioning him. Shoving aside the questions that brought up, he concentrated instead on conserving his body heat and monitoring his heart rate and breathing while he waited for help to arrive. It couldn't be much longer.

But plenty of time to do the deed you set out for yourself. You fool, you've damned yourselves and who knows how many others. One day, Voldemort will figure it out and know that you betrayed him or Harry will make his move against the Dark Lord, and it will be chaos or civil war or both and all your damn fault! All for some stupid, mudblood who never gave a damn about you anyway!

Except of course, as he sat there in the filth, cradling the fifteen year old who had brought more stress and danger into his life than the Murauders and the first war combined, he knew it hadn't really been about Lily. For the last five years, it hadn't ever really been about Lily. For all the resemblances and reminders Harry may have brought about his mother, Snape could honestly say that his interactions with the troublesome Gryffindor had been almost exclusively between them and not him and ghosts of school days past. Their relationship, whatever it was, was exclusively their own.

He had saved Harry because... because... I am a god damned masochist addicted to stress and misery. *

"Idiot. You're going to owe me after this," he muttered to the unconscious form. "Don't you dare die on me now."

~ Page Break~

Voldemort sent half his troops to locate and dismantle the anti-apparation wards in the tunnels, while he and the rest went in search of Harry and the werewolves. They were not hard to find. They just had to follow the echoing screams. In his cage, Bobby finally started to stir, but said nothing as he shifted uneasily in his tiny prison.

Stumbling upon the naked mass of men and women writhing on the ground, while not the first time Voldemort had encountered such a thing, was rather worrisome. The Culties certainly didn't know what to do about it, aside from the medi-witches and wizards who immediately went to work sorting the injured from the dead. The Dark Lord let them dally. Harry wasn't amongst them, but he couldn't have been far. The most obvious place to look was underneath the debris that half blocked the tunnel. He stopped and stared at it for a long time, unsure if what he should even admit to the possibility that Harry might somehow, inconceivably, be dead.

"My Lord?" Bella said, drawing him from his distraction. He turned to her, and she flinched, but continued. "Should I have the men search the rubble or...?"

"May as well. We aren't going anywhere until the others take down the wards. Is Snape amongst the d-"

"Here!"

Voldemort spun around towards the debris and the sound of the shout. Several Culties immediately began scaling the brick to see the other side. One turned back and shouted.

"He's got Potter!"

The Dark Lord grinned in triumph. Why did he ever doubt Harry's ability to survive even the most-

"Medic! We need a medic over here!" the same cultie was suddenly shouting, and quickly scrambling to the other side. Three medics abandoned their position with the werewolves and rushed over the pile. Voldemort followed after them, arrived quick enough to see a flash of naked skin before the medics and Culties swarmed around and hid him from view. He didn't dare get any closer and distract them from their task until he knew it was safe to do so. He could see nothing, but they narrated well enough.

"Shit, he's practically hypothermic. Someone get me some Pepper-up!" a medi-witch shouted. Snape was quick to countermand the order.

"No. I had to give him anti-hemorrhaging potion. It'll become toxic if they're mixed together. Heat some blankets and wrap him in them."

"Harry? Harry? Can you hear me? Squeeze my fingers if you can... nothing."

"He's filthy! Who knows what's getting into his wounds. Start cleaning him off so I we can see what we're doing! Lavo corpus!"

"What other potions have you given him?"

The Dark Lord listened with growing concern as Snape rambled off a rather daunting list.

"Where's his wand?" one of the Culties asked.

"Check what's left of his right sleeve, otherwise it's gone."

Nothing else was said for a few seconds excepted warming and diagnostic spells, until the same Cultie spoke again.

"Ha! Found it! Lucky devil."

"Do shut up. What do you got?"

"Water in the lungs for one, but that's better than blood. He's definitely going to get pneumonia, no matter what we do at this point. Six fractured ribs. He's going to need a hospital soon just to keep breathing properly. How about you?"

"Minor fractures along both the upper and lower vertebra. No more sudden movements. I don't want something to chip off that close to his spinal chord. Some internal hemorrhaging, but I can't tell how bad because of the potion."

"He was bleeding extensively from the side," Snape clarified. "He would have bled out before I got to him if it weren't for the mud."

"The burns are pretty bad below his knees. Thank Merlin for quality boots or he wouldn't even have legs right now. We can still probably save them."

"How's his temperature?"

"Just below normal range, and dropping!"

"Alright, everyone we've done what we can here. Cover him up and get him secured! Tutus corpus leviosa!"

Voldemort watched mutely, as they finally moved away far enough for him to see Harry clearly. They had wrapped him in a thick, white blanket strapped securely around him with black buckles, hiding the worst of the damage. As if in mockery to everything he had just overheard, the boy's face was smooth and untouched, though far too pale. Under some sort of levitation charm, he hovered, stiff as a board. It all reminded the Dark Lord uncomfortably of funeral pyres. He watched numbly as his people carefully hovered his wounded protégé over the debris to the others.

"Um...my L-lord?"

Slowly, he turned his head to the young Cultie who had been among the melee. He was holding out a wand to him, and it took Voldemort a moment to recognize it as Harry's. Suddenly furious, he snatched it

out of the fool's hand. It was slightly blackened, but nothing a gentle sanding wouldn't undo. It would still needed to be checked for structural integrity. It wouldn't do to hand a seemingly undamaged wand back to its master only to have it explode in his face the first time he tried a spell. If his protégé ever touched the wand again.

What have they done to you, Harry?

He turned away from the startled soldier, and returned to the other side of the debris. Harry had been moved safely out of the way, under the diligent care of Snape and a medi-witch, while the others began working on the werewolves again. He felt another irrational wave of anger at them for neglecting their prince, but forced himself to squash it. They had done what they could for him here. He needed a hospital; equipment, surgeons, an apothecary... He needed out of these damned tunnels.

As if fate had heard his thoughts, a Cultie came running up the tunnel, shouting not to curse him as he rounded a corner. The wizard blinked stupidly at the scene before him, before shaking his head, and running up to the Dark Lord and saluting.

"My Lord, the wards have been destroyed. Captains Worthington and Gaona await your commands."

Voldemort started at him for a moment, processing what had been said, looked to Harry on the verge of death, and came knew exactly what he was going to do.

"I want twenty men to start transferring the wounded out of here. Apparate them to our infirmary in Warsaw. Professor Snape will transfer Harry is to the Pitié-Salpêtrière Hospital du Sorcellerie* in Paris under an alias as soon as he is stable enough, and have her Majesty Queen Ophelia informed of the circumstances."

"Yes, sir...er... what are the circumstances precisely?"

The Dark Lord narrowed his eyes at him. "That is for Professor Snape to decide. He has experience in such matters. As for everyone

else... I haven't quite satiated my thirst for blood this day. We're going topside. Inform the others I will be there shortly. That is all."

The Cultie saluted and hurried off as quickly as he had arrived. Lestrage, who had been lingering close since they had arrived, stepped forward to say something but he walked passed her without listening and made his way over to Harry and Snape. The potions master looked over to him briefly as he approached, and then quickly back to his ward. His fingers were pressed to the boy's throat, measuring his pulse, while his eyes focuses on the unsteady rise and fall his chest. The medi-witch was busy filling out a medical form, cataloging his injuries and treatment thus far for the next set of medical wizards, and he ignored her.

"How is he?"

"I am fairly certain he will live," Snape said, evenly, without looking at him. It was just as well. Voldemort wasn't looking at him either. He had reached out and gentle touched Harry's cheek. It was too cold, too still.

It made him inexplicably angrier.

Pushing aside a wet lock of hair from his ear, he leaned in to whisper.

"I give you my word, Harry, they are going to pay dearly for this."

If he heard him, the Gryffindor gave no indication, not even an eyelash fluttered. Snape, however, stiffened noticeably. Voldemort glanced up at him darkly before straightening.

"What happened exactly?"

"I am not entirely sure, honestly. He... Greyback found and cornered Oblitz of all people, said something about... sacrificing his eye to find him. And then... he dueled him, if that's what you want to call it. I didn't see most of it. I was trying to find a way to cut him off while my man followed from behind. I managed to get ahead of him, but then there was the explosion. I received minor injuries trying to reach him, but I was already too late."

He made a gesture with his arm, revealing the burns without removing his fingers from Harry's pulse. Somewhere behind them, Lestrangle snorted. Voldemort nearly turned around and snapped her neck.

"It must have been a... what do you call it? A exhalation furibundus de magi ex corpus*."

Snape frowned, but didn't look up. "My Lord... I was not aware of that being anything other than an urban myth."

"No myth... just a well maintained secret. Now isn't the time to discuss it," he said, then gave the man his instructions.

Snape, through all of this, did not look at him, and if it were under any other circumstances, Voldemort would have been extremely suspicious of his evasive behavior. Under these circumstances, however, all he cared about was the man's nod of acknowledgment. With one last glance at his protégé, he turned to order his soldiers into formation and quickly stalked away to meet up with the rest of his battalion.

~ Page Breaks~

Tom moved quickly passed a small squadron of soldiers, not even bothering to hide. They glanced at his familiar Cultie uniform and then didn't bother again. He smiled grimly, amused at the effectiveness of simply transfiguring his clothes and wondered how long it would take anyone to notice the ruse. He had no intention of testing it now, and continued back towards the hotel.

Chaos had broken out on the other side of the barrier, and whatever the wards were meant to keep out, it wasn't chaos. Voldemort had launched his second attack on Berlin, determined to retake the entirety of the city and secure his position there. Civilians still alive within the barrier were panicking, running from their hovels in search of more secure places to hide while still others rallied their courage to resist the second onslaught. There had been several attacks on soldiers caught unawares and vulnerable outposts. Few still had

wands and made do with antique weaponry and Molotov cocktails, setting dorms and eateries ablaze and cutting down anyone who ran out in a panic. Or at least trying to. The Culties were soldiers, and once alerted to resistance, they handled matters with their usual brutal efficiency, before moving on to more important things, primarily the fighting going on outside their self-made prison. They were organizing to join the fight, ready to bring barrier down on a moment's notice.

Chaos, it seemed, had created yet another opportunity.

When the barrier came down, either during the battle or afterwards, he would slip away and think of another plan. The vampires had proven more useless than he had thought, lacking discipline or any true conviction. For all their age and power, they were nothing more than children who wanted to play at being monsters.

He would have to deal with them before he left, wiping away the evidence of his attempted subterfuge. He could not risk Katarina going to the Dark Lord and demanding the terms of a contract that didn't exist or allow her to speak of what had truly sparked the fires of war.

Besides, Viktor was there, and he needed a new body. McGunny, despite having retreated to the depths of his mind to cower in horror and fear, had worn out his usefulness. He had gotten safely out of Britain, but now Britain had followed him and he couldn't risk being found. Snape would have informed the Dark Lord of his existence, as much as he knew anyway, and there was no telling if his older counterpart and fit things together yet.

Viktor... Viktor was a target in and of himself, but he was a target with allies and those allies were well established and powerful. Or they at least had the potential to be. He hadn't had time to delve deep in the young wizard's mind, but hadn't needed to. Dumbledore and his resistance (ha!) were at the forefront of his thoughts, moving to gather information and power now that the Dark Lord had shown his hand and the fear of his spreading tyranny would galvanize others into action.

He would infiltrate them, and use the information he gathered to make his move against the Dark Lord and the Dark Lord's enemies all at once. And fucking kill that self-righteous old goat, Dumbledore in the meantime.

Slipping into the secret side entrance, he entered the hotel and headed for Viktor's room. He needed to be quick. There was no telling when or for how long the barrier would be down. He needed to block the entrance to the underground tunnels, kill Viktor's soul (he wasn't making the same mistake of cohabiting again), take over his body, and set the hotel ablaze. With no tunnels to escape to, the vampires and McGunny would be dealt with by fire and sun.

He made it as far as the hotel lobby, when he sensed something wrong. There was music coming from the parlor, an old viola wailing out some Wagnerian Opera. No one should have been up, and certainly no one would have left it on. He paused. He couldn't ignore it. If someone was still up, they might warn Katarina. It was best if he dealt with them now and then went about his plan.

Strolling leisurely to the door, he maintained a cool and collected air, ensuring no one would guess at his murderous plot. He knocked politely at the parlor door, then slid it open... and froze.

The entire clan had crowded into the parlor, sitting in the chairs and sofas, or standing nearby. They were dressed in their better finery, handsome frock coats and ruffled satin skirts, looking for all the world like a picture of a Victorian cocktail party. A muggle picture, based on the all encompassing stillness. They stared at him, their expression varying from smug to unreadable. Katarina was of the former party, lounging on the loveseat in creamy white, looking ready for a wedding.

He did a quick calculation on how fast he could close the door, lock it, and set the hotel on fire and how long it would take them to reach the door and/or break it down. The odds were not in his favor.

"Having a party, are we?" he asked. Flight was no longer an option, and he hoped he would be able to bluff before he was forced to fight.

"Why yes," Katarina said, amiably, "A celebration of sorts."

He knew a lure when he heard one, but for now there was no point in refusing to nibble. He sighed, ever so slightly, but enough for her to catch his apparent boredom.

"Ah, how delightful. May I inquire as to the special occasion?"

Her smile grew ever so slightly, and he knew his little nibble had just sprung the trap.

"Our family, you see. It's grown today. Viktor, why don't you come out and say hello to Cousin Horace?"

Tom's bored façade dropped as from the back of the crowd, Viktor stood up from the piano and moved around to the center of the parlor. He was dressed as the others, in a black frock coat and maroon vest, a cane in one hand and top hat in the other. As gentlemanly as he was dressed, the bloodlusty hatred in his eyes was pure barbarian. He said nothing, and Katarina swatted him playfully on the hip.

"No need to be so shy and sulky. You and Horace go way back. After all," she said pleasantly, her eyes lighting with the same suppressed rage of her new progeny. "You told us so many interesting stories about him."

This is the last time I work with vampires, he decided, and threw out a curse. Viktor dodged, and snarled like a beast, but Katarina was already on the attack. She caught him by the neck and hurled him at the nearby stairs, smashing the banister into splintering pieces, before gravity sent him tumbling down the steps again. He groaned in pain and tried to right himself, but she grabbed him again, this time by the back of his robe, and threw him into the hotel counter. A quick flick of his wand and an unspoken spell turned the wood and marble furniture to the consistency of tofu, cushioning his fall even as he prepared his next attack.

Katarina refused to allow him the opportunity. She rushed him again, kicking his wand out of his hand before backhanding across the lobby floor. He groaned in pain, and she smirked, stalking him at more leisurely pace now that he had been disarmed. Her children gathered

just outside the parlor door to watch, Viktor at the front of them, displaying a level of innate dominance that made her feel like the proud new mother that she was. She would give the little con artist to him for his first meal. It seemed poetically appropriate to her somehow.

"Oh, Horace, you played a good game. You had me going there for a while, but you over played your hand. You were just too damn cocky, convinced I would never figure out that you didn't even hold any cards. Now I have to kill you just to save face."

She sighed sadly.

"Goodbye, Horace. It was fun while it lasted."

She removed her silk gloves, baring her wickedly sharp claws. He would be Viktor's first kill, but that didn't mean she wasn't going to soften him up a little first. Then he laughed, painfully, turning slowly to bare his bloody teeth in a macabre grin and she frowned, confused.

"You stupid cow," he chuckled. "Always one step behind. Always missing that one vital piece of knowledge, even now."

She cocked an inquisitive brow, not buying his bluff for a moment. She would never believe a thing he said again. But she would play a long for a little while longer, if only for the excuse to start breaking his fingers.

"Really?" she said, mockingly, her eyes wide and fluttery. "Then why don't you tell me, oh wise and powerful wizard, sir? Oh, pretty please... before I tear your head off your body..."

His smile didn't waiver.

"One word, luv. 'Splinching'."

She only had time enough to blink once in confusion, and then he disappeared with sudden 'pop'. Instantly, she heard a second pop behind her and spun around to strike him, but he already had her by

the arm and apparated a second time, this time bring her along for the ride.

Most of her.

He left her head behind, and it fell out of the empty air, hitting the marble floor of the lobby with a sickening crack, and rolling a few scant inches before coming to rest on its side, wide eyes staring sightlessly at the lobby doors.

He apparated with the rest of her body to the other side of the room to where his wand had landed, feeling her already beginning to dissolve into ash beneath his hands. He shoved her desiccating corpse at the gathering of stunned and horrified vampires. A vampires caught it and screamed as it crumbled to pieces all over her. He threw one last triumphant smirk at Viktor, who stared back coldly, before apparating again to the outside of the hotel.

Once outside, he fell gasping, his magic and body strained passed reasonable levels. Apparating within anti-apparition wards was possible, despite what everyone said, but anything over twenty feet was likely to kill you. As this wasn't even his body, he wasn't overly concerned. He laughed darkly. Things just weren't going as planned these days.

"Incendio."

It was a simple spell that required little magic to do, but once it got started it could turn into a real monster. Within moments the front door was a blaze, and spreading inside.

At least, I'm not the only one having a bad day, he thought ruefully, and climbed to his feet. He had best get out of the area before a Cultie came along to investi-

"Hold it right there!"

Tom froze. You have got to be kidding me!

Somewhere, in the back of his mind, he thought he heard McGunny giggle but he was probably just imagining it.

"What are you doing? You're supposed to be at the frontlines with everyone else!" the soldier snarled a heavy Scottish accent. Tom didn't immediately turn. No one had given him a second glance while in uniform, but if they had looked harder he doubted he could fool anyone for long. "You trying to dodge the fight, you little snot? Name and rank, soldier?"

"Ah, Private...Jones..." he said, and flinched at how obviously fake that sounded. "I was just-"

"Where's your boots, soldier?"

Tom looked down, and realized he hadn't bothered to transfigure his shoes into the standard military boots. Damn it.

One of the windows exploded, showering glass onto the street. From inside, there came a terrified shriek.

"Bloody hell! Who's in there?!" the soldier shouted. "Goddamn, saboteur! Thought we would be too stupid to figure it out what you was up to? Caedo corpus!"

Tom tried to leap out of the way, but he was already exhausted, and caught the Cutting curse in the back. There was a moment of weightlessness, and then saw his body fall forward onto the pavement, the back of his clothes shredded and soaked with blood. Irritated, he turned to his would-be murderer. The Cultie was nothing impressive; young, blond hair cropped close to the skull, squinty little eyes, and a cleanly shaven face that made the loose flesh of his sagging jowls all the more pronounced. The only even slightly redeeming feature about the man, it seemed was that his insignia ranked him a step or two above a private.

As the man swaggered closer to inspect his kill, Tom thought to himself, I can work with this.

~ Page Break~

Viktor walked beside Goethe through the tunnels, leading the remainder of the once proud clan deeper into the underground. The survivors were a solemn and tearful lot, the loss of their mistress and their home so suddenly and so violently had shaken them and all of them feared the future. All except Goethe, who maintained his detached sort of amusement over the discord he had just been witness to, and Viktor, who had only been dead for less than a day and felt a keen distaste for his own existence already and no urge to mourn the one who had given it to him.

"You are Master, now," Goethe said quietly, after they had walked a ways.

"I am no master," Viktor contradicted without looking at him.

"You are the only master here."

"You are a master."

"Ha. Maybe, but I am no leader. You are both. It is providence that you came to us when you did."

"Providence does not exist for the damned."

"All depends to what god you pray. Mistress Katarina was a good master, she looked after us in unlife and she looks after us still in undeath. They all would have died if you had not been there."

"You led the way."

"But it is not me they followed. I am no leader. They hate me."

"I hate you."

"Ha."

"I hate them too."

"You are Master. They are what you make of them. Make them into something you do not hate."

They said nothing more, the elder vampire allowing his new master to absorb what had been said and to decide for himself what he would do. Viktor, on his part, felt the wheels in his brain that had ground to a halt at his death slowly begin to turn again. He was a vampire. He was a goddamn vampire because Horace McGunny was a psychotic manipulator bent on war and Mistress Katarina had impulse control issues.

And he to make matters even more fantastic, he was a Master Vampire. The one in a hundred odd vampire who for one reason or another retained enough of their personality and will to control other vampires.

Despite what Goethe had said, there was no providence in him being there. These men and women were now reliant on a leader who knew nothing about them or their world or their needs. How many would die before he figured it out? Did he even care if they did?

He hated them. It absolutely loathed them, but they were his.

Now, he just had to figure out what to do with them.

~ Page Break~

"Lie still. You were badly injured," a gentle voice said softly.

"Mom," he called softly, staring up at the soft cream and brown blur haloed in white. His throat was dry and his lips cracked.

"Ssshhh... I'm sorry, your mother is here, but don't worry. You're safe now. You are in a hospital. I'm Nurse Williams and I'll be taking care of you. You'll see your mother soon, I promise. Here, drink this."

A straw touched his chapped lips and he latched onto it, suckling greedily at the cold, slightly sweet liquid. When at last he was satiated, she pulled it away and spoke again.

"You were found unconscious in the war zone. Do you remember what happened?"

He tried to recall, but all that came were hazy memories of fear and pain.

"No."

"Do you remember your name?"

He thought for a long moment, and the first name that came to mind was Tom, but that wasn't right. Tom... that had to be someone he knew, not who he was. His name...his name was...

"Horace. My name's Horace."

~ Author's Notes~

Voldemort's pack name is 'God Eater', and that isn't just a symbolic reference. He really can, and has, eaten gods. Only minor ones, but enough to make his body almost indestructible. That's how he survived so easily after the Quidditch stands collapsed on him in Book III. Anyway, one of the problems with eating gods is you inherit their powers, but also their responsibilities. Voldemort honestly doesn't want to be responsible for the werewolves.

This is Snape Speak for 'I can't imagine the world without him.'

Pitié-Salpêtrière Hospital is a real teaching hospital in Paris, France. I couldn't think of a French sounding hospital that sounded very impressive so I stole this one and attached the French word for wizardry onto it. In my story, it is supposedly the best hospital in the wizarding world (think Mayo Clinic for you Americans out there), so naturally, Voldemort will take advantage of the Queen's hospitality to have Harry sent there for treatment.

Basically, this is latin for 'a furious exhalation of magic from the body'. Oblitz essentially made himself into a magical bomb.

And holy mackerel, there was a lot of fighting in this chapter. I don't think anyone except Viktor didn't get into a fight! Which pretty much means, the next chapter is going to be nothing but drama. Except that there was a bit of drama going on with Snape and his whole inner conflict thingy, so next chapter will have at least one fight. Just to keep things balanced.

Book V

Chapter 27: Epilogue pt 1

Harry opened his eyes and immediately knew he was in a hospital. Even without his glasses, he could make out the familiar pale blue walls he associated with St. Mungo's and the distance echo of shoes on clean linoleum and the squeak of gurney wheels. He blinked once, twice, and tried to gather his thoughts, but his memories were all as vague and dark as half forgotten nightmares.

"You're awake."

"Professor?" That single word sent him into a coughing fit, and a wave of pain washed over him in a chain reaction. His back and his legs were the worst, simultaneously burning and broken, and he squeezed his eyes shut as he waited to ride out the pain.

"Do not move. You have only been out of surgery for less than an hour," his guardian informed him, and moved to stand at his side. "Drink this."

A straw touched his lips and he drank from it quickly and deeply. A sickly sweet and sour liquid, not unlike over-sweetened lemonade, coated his tongue. It did nothing to ease his incredible thirst, but the pain dulled to something close to tolerable. Snape muttered something, and slowly his bed bent and allowed him to sit up. Breathing immediately became easier, but he couldn't help but grimace as he jostled his aching body. His glasses were slipped into place.

Sitting up, he could see himself better and it wasn't a particularly pleasing sight. His legs and feet were wrapped in white bandages, and each lay in a silver cage and was held in place by a two dozen or so slender rods. He shuddered as he realized those rods weren't resting on his skin, but piercing deep into, possibly down to the very bone. Snape caught his revolted look.

"Yes, they are quite hideous, but necessary. The surgeons had to remove several shattered bones in your feet and ankles. Those rods

are holding everything else in the right place while they're being re-grown. They'll remove them later today."

Harry shuddered again, wondering where those little pieces of him had ended up. Would they give them back to him as a war memento, like shrapnel taken out of a wound? He hoped not.

His hands were red, tender, and stiff. He flexed his fingers and found they all worked properly, but were as sore as the rest of him. Turning up his palms, he saw the right had been branded black, not unlike the handprint scarring his chest. At first glance, it looked like nothing but three parallel lines that started and stopped at different points across his palm. He had seen something like it before though. It was a rune, but one he didn't immediately recognize. He lifted it up to show Snape.

"That is all that is left of the Sword of Gryffindor. It was destroyed during the fight and left you that little farewell gift. Be certain I will be giving you my own thoughts on the destruction of that particular piece of Hogwarts' property when you are better," he said blandly, and Harry had a feeling he would be up to armpits in beetle eyes before the end of the semester.

He grieved the loss of the sword for a moment, remembering how it had saved his life so many times in the past and served him as no other sword possibly could. He hoped he had done it justice, but it seemed unlikely and such an unequivocal waste.

"You were stabbed in the side as well," the professor continued, nonchalantly. "One and one-third inches wide and three and half inches deep. It nicked a kidney and part of your large intestines. Easy enough to fix, but not before sepsis had taken hold. They had to completely drain and replace your blood- not that there was much left of it in your body anyway. That will throw off your magic for several weeks."

Harry fingered his side, feeling the slight tenderness through his blue hospital gown. There would be another scar, he knew. Hopefully it would be normal looking. He was starting to look like a giant page of doodles.

"You had several fractures in your ribs, spine, and of course your legs and feet. They have been repaired, but will be tender for another week or so. If you feel any sudden numbness in your extremities, that's normal but inform someone if it persists for more than ten minutes at a time. Inflammation around the spine can be tricky to treat."

"Yes, sir," he wheezed, and grimaced. His chest hurt, and breathing was still difficult.

"You also have bacterial pneumonia. It is one of the few maladies modern potions has not been able to treat effectively*. They're giving you some sort of muggle medicine," he explained, sneering a bit at the last bit, then he got thoughtful. "I've heard of a few drowning curses, but never one that fills the lungs with lake water. Can you recall the spell?"

"No, it wasn't a spell...it was..."

...overwhelming cold, unable to breathe as water filled his lungs, the darkness... dying... and then air and the struggle to get it inside of him, fear, light, heat... and explosion... and pain... oh, Merlin the pain... and dying... dying all over again...

"Potter! Potter!" Snape was shouting, his hands on his shoulders, trying to anchor him, bring him back to himself, but he couldn't breathe. He was coughing and gasping, but there wasn't anything but water and the agony in his body as he struggled against it. Snape was shouting again, but it wasn't at him. "NURSE! NURSE! GET A MEDI-WIZARD!"

The potions master pulled away, but his hands were immediately replaced by a dozen others, holding him down and pulling open his clothes and his eye lids, gibbering at each other in something other than English.

"What 'appened?" a medi-witch asked Snape.

"I don't know. He woke up and I gave him half a bottle of Pain Relieving potion, then started explaining what happened... then he started choking."

There was more gibberish spoken between them, a moment of hesitation, and then they nodded. By then, Harry was starting to black out, and they were forced to slide a small tube down his throat to get the potions into him. They were professionals though, the best in their field, and within less than a minute their patient started to relax and his breathing normalized (as much as the pneumonia would allow at any rate). Harry was once again unconscious.

Snape stared down at him, horrified. He had thought the worst was over, that the touch and go fight for his life in the tunnels had secured victory from death. But this had been a close call, he could feel it, and he didn't even know why it happened.

"What happened?" he demanded, as the half dozen medi-witches and wizards began performing the more mundane tasks of checking his vitals and marking their records. The medi-witch who had asked him the exact same question, led him from the room and in to the hall.

"E panicked... it is common after a traumatic experience. 'E..." she struggled for the right word, but seemed to settle for a more mundane phrase, "... thought 'e could not breathe. Ze pneumonia made it worse. We will add Calming Draught to 'is prescriptions and monitor 'im closely. Please wait 'ere while we make sure 'e is stable."

She left him in the hallway, his thoughts reeling as he tried to process what had happened. He shouldn't be that surprised. The experience had been a bad one, among an endless list of bad ones, and certainly him leaping in demanding the details the moment he was awake hadn't helped things. Frankly, it was a stupid mistake on his part.

Dammit to hell! Could he do nothing right? Had he ever been this incompetent, wishy-washy, sentimental fool before? Maybe, when he was still just a schoolboy, but Merlin why did he have to choose now to start it up again? Matters were spiraling out of hand, and he was making them worse... but what could he do? He had made a decision and backed out of it at the crucial point. What now?

He couldn't go to the Dark Lord that much was obvious. As much as he despised the thought of Harry destroying everything that had been built, he knew he could never consign him to the dark imagination of Lord Voldemort. The man had done (and still did) unspeakable things to his enemies, the overt and the perceived alike and for a child of prophecy, the end could never be as simple and clean as an Avada Kedavra. Even before he had changed sides, he had wanted to avoid that fate for Harry.

The secret couldn't remain forever. The prophecy would, perhaps already was, playing itself out and the Dark Lord would start to guess.

Then what?

Play dumb? Try and protect the boy? To what end?

He stood in the doorway of the hospital room, watching the medical staff as they hovered over his unconscious charge. Harry looked so fragile, so mortal and breakable. A lie, if ever there was one. Nothing and no one could destroy the boy, not really. No one except the Dark Lord of course.

And there lay the crux of the problem right there.

That might be his destiny.

~ Page Break~

Draco stormed down the halls of Hogwarts, his murderous expression sending any in his path scurrying out of the way. He had been searching the school for the last half hour, and with every minute lost he was only getting angrier and angrier. How could Weasley do this to him? Hadn't he looked after him since first year? Hadn't he offered him a leg up on numerous occasions?

And this was how he thanked him? Going behind his back with his sister and... and...

Ugh, he couldn't even think it! It was too infuriating. But Ronald Weasley always had been an infuriating little bastard from the start. For being a poor, practically parentless little waif living off the charity of his foster parents, he had been unforgivably arrogant. Weasley had snubbed his generous offers more than once, always going off on his own, never taking anyone's advice, and he had only become worse as he had gotten older. Frankly, he didn't understand how Hermione could stand working with him for the paper, let alone being alone in a room with him...

Argh! He was thinking about it again!

But he couldn't not think about it. Not after what that Sabbat girl had said... not after she had told him under an Honesty Charm no less. The idea of his pretty, smart, sweetly naïve little sister sneaking off to the dungeons to... with Ron of all people! He couldn't stand it. The little bastard would ruin her.

She had such a bright future ahead of her. Admittance to the finest university in Britain, an ambitious Court career, and a marriage to a handsome, rich, pureblood who would treat her like the princess she was. It would all go to pot with a little nobody like Weasley clinging to her, dragging her down and sullyng her reputation. Merlin, if Sabbat hadn't told him first, this could easily have gotten out of hand.

There was still time to salvage the situation however. He just had to calm himself down first, and then...

He finally spotted Ron by the stairs leading up to the transfiguration classroom, looking sour and self-absorbed. He wasn't alone either. Hermione was walking with him, her expression sympathetic. The red head muttered something, and she put a hand on his shoulder and that's when Draco walked down to meet them, and promptly punched Weasley in the face.

Hermione let out a surprised cry. Ron stumbled backwards and landed on his back, his wand coming out instantly even as his other hand went to his nose.

"You keep your filthy hands away from my sister, you third class piece of trash," Draco snarled.

"Draco!" his sister snapped, too horrified and shocked to say anything else.

Ron looked down at his hand, a trickle of blood smeared across his fingers and then up at the Malfoy heir. Draco couldn't read his expression. If he had been able to, he might have been able to dodge.

"Pertundo!"

The Punching Hex sent Draco flying backwards into a suit of armor, knocking it over, filling the entire hall with a deafening racket. Hermione shouted at them.

"What are you doing? Both of you stop! Stop!"

But neither of them was listening to her. They stumbled to their feet, Ron bleeding and Draco with a nasty bruise forming over his left eye. They glared hatefully at each other, their wands raised. The only thing keeping their curses from flying was Hermione standing stubbornly between them.

"WHAT IS THE MEANING OF THIS?"

They all turned at once to the new comer and paled. McGonagall stormed towards them, looking more than ready to curse them both into next Tuesday.

~ Page Break~

Berlin had fallen, and while that brought a grim sort of satisfaction to the Dark Lord it did not keep him on the field of glory for a minute longer than was necessary. He left his men to clean up the pockets of resistance that clung to the city and secure their hold there, and made his way back to Paris. The Pitié-Salpêtrière Hospital du Sorcellerie loomed like a cathedral over the wizarding city. Gargoyles stalked the roof and ledges, hunting the shadows and hidden nooks for pigeons, rats, lethifolds and spectrecats*. Its high arching windows

and stones blackened from centuries of accumulated soot and age cloaked the hospital in a perpetual gloom that persisted even in the warm sunlight.

He made quite the figure, black robes torn and frayed from curses, his handsome face splashed with blood, crimson eyes gleaming. Certainly, no one stood in his way as he made his way up the marble stairs and entered.

The inside was considerably cheerier than the exterior, artfully decorated in Renaissance murals of French countryside and other neutral subject matter. He made a cursory glance around the main lobby, but there was nothing to threaten him here. He kept his wand in his hand, however. He had been in battle for hours, and while this wasn't the first time, he would not feel comfortable relinquishing his wand until he was certain he was alone.

"Sir! Are you alright?" a terrified young nurse at the reception desk asked in French. "How have you been injured? I'll call a medi-wi-"

"No," he snapped impatiently, cutting her off. "I am not injured. I am here to see someone else. He would have arrived early this afternoon."

She blinked owlishly, looking him up and down and still not sure what to make of him. "Ah... are you a relative?"

He just looked at her.

"Eep... I'll just go and get my supervisor."

"You do that."

She scurried off and a minute later an older nurse appeared, scowling like an English bulldog. She too gave him a once over, and if possible scowled deeper.

"You are Lord Voldemort?" she accused. He lifted a brow at her.

"I am."

"We have your 'young man'. He is resting in critical care for now, and not receiving visitors."

He wasn't going to argue with her, but since cursing her wasn't a reasonable option (although it was definitely tempting) he evaded.

"Then I will speak to his guardian. He should still be here."

The Head Nurse clearly wasn't happy, but knew she had been thwarted. She turned on her heels and led him up an open stairwell to the third story, and down a long corridor. The walls were painted sky blue, and painted birds flew about every which way, flitting into open doorways and then out again. The walls were lined with ugly green chairs, several of which were occupied by worried looking individuals who didn't so much as glance up as the blood soaked man passed them.. At the farthest end of the corridor, away from the common masses, stood Snape talking with a medi-witch. The potions master seemed to sense his approach, and suddenly turned in his direction. He nodded to the medi-witch and went to meet his master.

"His condition?" Voldemort demanded at once.

"Stable. He woke briefly two hours ago, but had to be sedated again. He should be fit for transfer to St. Mungo's in two or three days."

They both turned and stared pointedly at the head nurse, who huffed and stalked off.

"Good... that's...good. That will give me time to set up the cover story. He can't be implicated as being responsible for any of this. No one would understand," he muttered, beginning to pace anxiously. "They would think he had gone mad."

"He might have at this point," Snape said candidly, earning him a glare that could peel paint. "I don't mean that jokingly. As I said before, Mr. Potter woke up earlier, and had to be sedated. He had some sort of panic attack. Not really surprising under the circumstances. The medi-wizards* are suggesting a full psychological evaluation once he is strong enough."

"I'm sure they are. Nothing like a shrink to make up things to treat when the real medi-wizards run out," he sneered, the bitterness behind it perhaps more telling than he had intended. "Considering the things he has been through, do you think anyone wouldn't believe he suffered from hallucinations? Delusions? Paranoia? He would be committed within an hour."

"We cannot simply ignore the possibility that he won't bounce back as quickly as he has in the past either," Snape said, trying to keep his tone patient. "Until we know how this latest event has affected him, I believe he should be kept out of the public eye. Perhaps even outside of Hogwarts."

"I had no intention of throwing him into the public arena the moment he woke up," the Dark Lord said impatiently, moving towards the half open door he could now see at the end of the hall. "But they do need reassurances that he is alright."

Snape followed, not daring to attempt to stop him, but not entirely trusting him either. Voldemort pushed the door open further.

Harry was still unconscious, although he looked far from peaceful. His expression was pinched in pain and anxiety, his entire body flinching at nothing and sweating heavily. He suspected the ghastly contraptions binding up his legs was the primary culprit, but from what little he had gleaned from the medical team in the tunnels they might also be the only thing keeping the boy's legs attached to his body.

Moving closer to the bed, he could hear Harry's labored struggle for air, a faint rattling sound whenever he exhaled. He reached out to remove a sweaty lock from his forehead, but stopped himself when he realized his hands were still covered in blood.

"He's feverish," he said instead, irritated that the medical staff could miss something so obvious and treatable. Snape explained.

"He's still under treatment for sepsis. They don't dare overwhelm his kidneys with too many potions yet."

"Mmm..."

Suddenly, Harry turned his head towards them and opened his eyes, startling them both. He stared at them, unfocused and half-lidded, somewhere between sleep and waking.

"I don't want to sleep..." he wheezed, barely audible, "We keep dying there. I don't want to die anymore. I don't want anyone else to die there either."

Snape suppressed a shudder, looking away from his unnerving, glassy gaze. Voldemort merely leaned in closer.

"Don't be afraid," he said gently. "I will not let Death take you. I have conquered Him many times. I am His master. He will not touch you. Do you trust me?"

Harry stared at him, through him, for a long time before answering.

"I shouldn't. God knows I shouldn't, but I do."

The Dark Lord smiled. He bent over to whisper something in his ear, too soft for Snape to hear, and Harry's eyes slowly closed again as he fell back into a deep sleep. His expression smoothed, his body relaxed, and even his breathing seemed to become a little easier.

He straightened himself and turned to Snape.

"In a few days, I will allow a select few reporters see him."

Snape said nothing, glaring at some spot on the wall.

"But only see him. He should be well enough for others to know he will live, but still sickly enough to enrage the public over his condition. As far as they will know, he was kidnapped out of France and rescued in Berlin by myself and the army, but not before being interrogated and tortured by the German Aurors. They will be forbidden from asking him directly what occurred in Berlin."

Black eyes slid back to crimson, assessing this newest manipulation for weaknesses.

"It won't hold up for long. There were too many witnesses. There's no guarantee Potter will even go along with it."

"His cooperation isn't necessary. He'll be out of the public eye for some time, and I doubt he has any clear memory of what happened to contradict my claim with. No one will believe the Germans, the tale is simply too outlandish, and whatever slips through our own ranks will be written off as war trauma or blatant rumor-mongering. Within a few months, no one will even think twice about it."

"His friends will figure it out."

"They are irrelevant."

Snape conceded that to the Dark Lord this was certainly true. School children played no part in the political landscape Voldemort inhabited, excepts perhaps as props or examples, and this secret, which held no definitive proof one way or another, required the sort of credibility teenagers just did not have. However, for Harry and perhaps even Snape, the truth could make life at Hogwarts quite uncomfortable. The students were still reeling from Harry's saving the werewolf girl, Luna, and news that he could control werewolves was unlikely to sit well with many of them. Harry's likable personality wasn't going to stave off fear for much longer, not even among those of his own inner circle. This could cause unforeseen problems that he, as the boy's guardian and Headmaster would be expected to deal with.

Maybe that was a good thing, for him at least. It would increase his ward's reliance on him, which had been waning over the last two years, and allow Snape to keep better track of him. On the other hand, it would further complicate an already complicated situation.

He would have to find a way around the oncoming stigma, or though it if it was unavoidable. Harry could not be relied upon to act in his own best interest.

"I'd like some time to prepare the school for his return just the same."

"He is already behind in his schooling."

"He will require tutors regardless of when he returns at this point, and perhaps it would be in his best interest to receive a private education that will take into consideration his...special circumstances... until he has caught up with his peers and recovered from his ordeal."

Voldemort seemed to consider. He turned to stare at Harry thoughtfully.

"Yes, that is likely the best course of action. It will certainly be more convenient for assessing his progress. We'll need to find a suitable guardian while you're at Hogwarts."

Snape nodded, displaying none of the relief he felt. The Dark Lord's stubbornness could be dangerously inconvenient sometimes. If he played his hand right, however, things might turn out tolerably well.

"I know just the person."

~ Page Break~

"Lt. Stratus."

It took a moment for Tom to remember that was his name now, but when he did he quickly jumped to his feet to salute Major Leeds. The typical military dignity was compromised somewhat as he had been in the middle of cleaning and repairing his uniform when the woman had marched into the barracks. She smirked, no doubt amused to have come in while he was only in his shirt and boxers. .

"At ease, Lieutenant."

He relaxed somewhat into parade rest, and turned to her more directly. It was difficult to retain the blank expression he had been forced to adhere to for the last two days. Lt. Luther Stratus had not been a particularly bright or well liked soldier it seemed, and Tom's normal cleverness and charm would have been distinctly out of character for him amongst his squadron. It was not in his habit to act

the dumb brute, however, and he had no intention of starting now. His withdrawn behavior was shrugged off as battle fatigue.

He had, after all, gone to great lengths to demonstrate his battle prowess in the field and his new body hadn't walked away completely unscathed. If the major was here for the reason he hoped, then it would prove worth the effort and the pain.

"Col. Abelard was quite impressed with your performance yesterday," she said idly, clearly not sharing the colonel's opinion. She probably had not been there when he had killed three Auror's at once with a particularly nasty curse, and saved said colonel's incompetent ass. He certainly didn't look like much at the moment, he was sure. She handed him an envelope. "He's recommending you for an accommodation and promoting you to captain within one of his units. You are to report to me tomorrow at 8:13 sharp. That is all."

With that she turned on her heel and walked away without a second glance at him.

"Yes, Major. Thank you, sir," he said stoically, although inside he was laughing like a madman. Too easy. Things were starting to go his way. Not that it really mattered. Things always went well in the beginning. It was the final stages where everything got bollixed up. From now on he would have to move extremely carefully. No more rash decisions, no more relying on third parties. It was up to him and him alone, and that's just the way he preferred it.

~ Page Break~

The hospital staff let Horace get out of bed to walk around the day after he was admitted, but refused to release him from the third floor. This was probably just as well, because despite feeling much better than he had when he woke up he still couldn't remember how he had gotten to Germany or much of anything since his seventh year. He had a vague memory of graduating, but not of what had happened after that. Had he joined the Culties? He couldn't imagine why he would do such a thing. Nothing about military service appealed to him, and he couldn't ever remember entertaining such an idea while in school.

Something had to have happened to put his plans for college on hold. Maybe some financial burden at home prevented his folks from sending him, and he had joined the Culties to help get payment for it. Maybe he had stupidly thought the best way to write the story of the battles was to participate in them, and he forewent his education in favor of experience. It could be any number of things, and unfortunately answers were not quickly forthcoming.

The hospital was full to brimming with the injured and dead, and there was little time for anyone there to spend unraveling the mystery that was him. They had found him in uniform on the street, but who ever had injured him had stripped off his insignia and identifiers, probably for future subterfuge. Without them it was impossible to find his records quickly. There had been inquiries sent to locate his squadron, but so far no one had responded. He doubted the troops had anymore time to spare in the field than the medi-wizards and witches did in the hospital. No one wanted him wandering around looking for answers either, what with his memory loss, and he truthfully wouldn't have a clue on where to start.

So he was left there to wait until things calmed down or he remembered on his own, and find ways to entertain himself in the meantime. This wasn't difficult at all. The third floor was a recovery ward, and it was full of bedridden soldiers willing to spend an hour or two recounting their experience on the battlefield for a bit of company. The nurses had been more than happy to give him some paper and a quill, if it kept him quiet and out of their way for a while.

Horace, on his part, felt like he had died and gone to historiographer's heaven. The stories he gathered over the course of the day could easily make his career as a writer. They were fantastical and painful, terrifying and triumphant, heartbreaking and infuriating. There were tales of cruelty, viciousness, and fear; and tales of bravery, sacrifice, and compassion.

There were tales of the Dark Lord himself leading his men into battle; which he could scarcely believe.

There were also tales of Harry leading werewolves into battle; which he didn't believe. Or at the very least, hoped were not true. The young soldier who had lost a good portion of his face and his entire squad fighting in the tunnels had whispered such dreadful things; things he could not bring himself to accept as anything other than the delusions of a man whose trauma had left him without his sanity.

Harry could not have done the things that man had said. Last time he remembered seeing the boy had been at Hogwarts and he had been struggling to hold himself together from one day to the next. He was one of the greatest people Horace had ever known, but also one of the most fragile. It was impossible for him to have done... those things.

Impossible.

~ Page Break~

Lucius stalked into the Headmistresses office, seething with anger and frustration. He did not dignify his rampant emotions, however, with any form of acknowledgment. He did not glare or scowl or slam the door behind him. Nevertheless, the moment he entered, several of the occupants flinched or shrank back into their chairs.

Draco, he was satisfied to note, was one of them. Professor McGonagall, unfortunately, was not. She stared at him coolly and gestured to the chair that had been left open for him as if he were the errant child. He stifled his indignation. His wife was giving him the subtlest of looks to not start something now, while simultaneously directing her disapproval towards her son.

On the other side of her was Hermione, witness to the debacle. He rather hoped her sense of loyalty to the one she called brother would keep her from blathering something incriminating. A mudblood couldn't be expected to understand the superiority of loyalty over honesty, however, so he hoped the fear of his presence would do the job.

Beside her was yet another embarrassment to wizarding kind in the form of the youngest Weasley son, who was regarding him with cool

loathing that had been slapped across his face ever since they had first met. Maybe it was stuck that way. Maybe he just needed to have someone come along and smack that look right off again.

He would be the first to volunteer if that were the case.

A man and a woman whom he had never seen before sat beside the boy, looking unremarkable in their grey clothes and similarly grey looks. The woman wore a light blue-grey dress and pinned up her black hair in a bun, and her partner wore a dark grey suit and had a thick, neatly-trimmed mustache. They looked so much alike that Lucius suspected they were cousins, which might explain why they had resorted to adopting the little Weasley mutant.

It obviously wasn't out of love. They weren't even acknowledging each other.

"Now that we're all here," McGonagall began, "We can get this matter sorted. According to several witnesses, the altercation began when young Mr. Malfoy walked up to Mr. Weasley and punched him in the face. Mr. Weasley retaliated with a Punching Hex. Miss Granger managed to hold off any further conflict until I arrived and separated them. What I-"

"Excuse me," the grey man interrupted softly. "I don't mean to be rude, but why exactly were we called if Ronald did not start the fight? This school boy tussle hardly seems worth drawing all us away from our busy schedule."

Lucius agreed with him. Or rather, he agreed that he should not have been called away. Not now when he should have been overseeing the Court in the Dark Lord's absence. Obviously, no one was seriously hurt. A letter and several detentions seemed perfectly in order.

Weasley said absolutely nothing, merely turned his glaring from Malfoy Sr. to McGonagall's ink well.

"Mr. Brandier, I understand your frustration. However, the situation is not that simple. Mr. Weasley drew his wand on Mr. Malfoy, who was

admittedly in the wrong but who had not drawn his wand. This school has very strict rules regarding magic in the halls, particularly when used to attack another student. If he had used his magic to merely defend himself, then this wouldn't be an issue. As things stand, he is in as much risk of being suspended as Mr. Malfoy."

"Suspended!" Narcissa protested. "Surely not for so petty a matter!"

McGonagall glared at the other woman, who tried valiantly to glare back for a moment but ultimately had to look away.

"Randomly punching classmates is not a petty matter, Mrs. Malfoy. Particularly, when those classmates share a dorm room I have no supervision over, and their Head of House is in another country. I do not want to suspend them, but unless I can be reasonably assured this will never happen again, I won't have any choice."

Lucius sighed in annoyance. The chances of Draco being suspended were nil, as his wife maintained her position on Hogwarts' board of directors and he himself would never allow such a stain on the Malfoy name, but the woman was right. Draco couldn't go around randomly punching people. It was entirely unrefined.

"So what do you want us to do about it?" he asked drolly.

"I want you to have your son explain to me why an intelligent young man with such a refined upbringing-" and there wasn't just a little sarcasm in that statement "-did such an uncouth and brutish thing. He seems to believe me unworthy of such an explanation."

Draco looked distinctly uncomfortable as all eyes turned to him. He didn't speak, however, and Lucius had already wasted enough time there already.

"Explain yourself, Draco," he commanded.

The Malfoy heir glanced fearfully at his father, then his mother, begging her silently for support. She wouldn't give it, however. Not if it meant defying her husband in front of all these people. She understood loyalty very well.

He turned to Hermione, but what salvation could she possibly offer? She merely stared at him pityingly and confused.

"Draco... just spit it out. We can fix this, but you need to tell them what's wrong first," she begged. Her promise of absolution, however, left him looking more anguished than ever.

"I...I can't..." he struggled.

"If this is because I sold Blaise some girl's lacey knickers and said they were your sister's, I swear they were just a transfigured sock." Ron blurted out impatiently.

Instantly, everyone's attention turned to him, a majority gapping at him in a mix of alarm and indignation. Including, Draco, who managed to catch himself before anyone else noticed he was as surprised as everyone else.

"You did what?" Hermione shouted, horrified and humiliated. Ron just sort of shrugged.

"I needed the money for Christmas shopping."

"Oh, my God," Mrs. Brandier moaned.

"You mean to tell me," Lucius began, the anger he had been struggling to control slowly slipping out. "You punched this little fool in public to defend her honor?"

Draco, very slowly, nodded. His father sneered.

"Why the hell even bother?"

Hermione jumped from her chair and whirled on him, her face contorted with absolute hatred and her eyes brimming with tears.

"Drop dead!"

Magic smashed into him, throwing him backwards from his chair and in an undignified heap on the floor. His wife let out a startled cry and rushed to his side. The hit left him dazed and his body tingling. He was vaguely aware of Hermione slamming the door as she rushed out of the office, and someone rushed after her.

As the confusion subsided, his wife and Mr. Brandier helped him to his feet and back into his chair. McGonagall had not moved from her spot to help him or stop Hermione, and though her expression was bland he had a feeling she had derived some sort of pleasure from that embarrassment. Draco was staring stupidly at him from his chair, which meant it was that atrocious little Weasley boy who had gone after her. They could have each other.

"That little-"

"Now, now, Mr. Malfoy, we can't blame Ms. Granger for a little accidental magic. Given the circumstances, it was rather impolitic comment on your part," McGonagall chided, then changed the subject. "Well, now that that matter is cleared up, I don't believe young Mr. Malfoy has any reason to continue pursuing a vendetta against Mr. Weasley, and there is no reason to pursue a suspension. They will both be sharing several detentions together, and nothing rebuilds a friendship like mutual suffering. I hope you all have a good day."

Lucius would have set her on fire, he really would have, but his head was still spinning and Narcissa, all three of her, were already herding him out the door. He would make her suffer later. Her and that ungrateful little trollop leading his son to such stupidity. He should have known from the beginning that Hermione was somehow involved. Ever since he had brought her home, Draco had been unnaturally smitten with her. He had chalked it up to loneliness at the time, and overlooked it as something he would grow out of when he entered Hogwarts, but away from the manor where Lucius could curb any outrageous behavior the girl was now fostering ridiculous notions of chivalry and impulsiveness.

And she had hit him! Her own foster father. A pureblood wizard! He had pulled her out of that orphanage and given her a beautiful home

and beautiful clothing and the best education money could buy, and this is how she repaid him? With a 'drop dead' and an honest attempt to do just that!

It was intolerable.

Unforgivable.

She had to be taught a lesson.

As soon as he could stop himself from weaving back and forth like a drunken fool, he would set about doing just that.

Back in her office, McGonagall sighed heavily. Draco remained where his parents had unknowingly abandoned him, looking lost and utterly confused. She did not envy him. She did not have any particular fondness for Draco, but she could sympathize with him. It had to be confusing and painful to watch his family insult and attack one another right in front him, and believing he had somehow instigated it.

"Mr. Weasley is a very good friend, Draco," she said, startling him from his stupor. He looked confused. She clarified. "He lied. He knew that for what ever reason you attacked him, you could not say, and he lied so that you would not have to."

He swallowed thickly. "Please don't... don't make me say it."

"I would not dishonor Mr. Weasley's sacrifice by doing so... it was obviously important enough to you that you were ready to defy your own father to keep it," she said, although truthfully she just didn't want to have to put up with Lucius' bigotries. How Snape tolerated him was beyond her. "However, I will require you to make amends. What ever it is that happened, I am certain it is not worth ruining a friendship and sparking a feud over."

Draco snorted. "He's not my friend. We've never really... I don't know. I always got this feeling that he resented me."

She smiled knowingly. "It's not your friendship or lack there of that I was referring to."

~ Page Break~

"Hermione! Wait! For Merlin's sake will you just listen to me for a second!" Ron shouted after her, running to catch up before she reached Gryffindor Tower. She kept going, her body stiff with anger. He didn't dare touch her, not after she had thrown Malfoy Sr. halfway across the room.

"I didn't sell your knickers to Blaise," he said, once he managed to get close enough that he wouldn't be shouting that particular tidbit down the hall.

"Of course not," she hissed, not even turning to look at him, "It was just a sock. Not that he knows that. Who gives a damn that you've just sold my reputation and my dignity with a lie. I'm just a mudblood after all. I don't have anything to proud about to begin-"

"I didn't sell him a sock," he snapped, interrupting her. She paused. "I didn't sell him anything. I lied. I made it all up. I haven't a bloody clue why your brother punched me. Maybe he's on the rag or something."

She turned to look at him, frowning uncertainly.

"You didn't...?"

"Of course not," he said. "If I wouldn't curse a girl I don't even like, you think I'd do something like that to you? Christ, even if I wasn't head-over-heels in love with you, you're the only friend I've got."

She stared at him, her eyes wide and slowly pooling with tears. The anger and shame were retreating, leaving her shaken and uncertain. He took her hand in his and kissed it.

"I'm sorry."

She sniffed once, wiped the tears from the edge of her eyes, and that was the end of it. When she spoke again she was back to her usual pragmatic self.

"Why did you... why that lie? Why lie for Draco at all?"

He shrugged. "It was the only thing I could think of that sounded halfway believable. Besides, I don't think what I said was that far off from the truth."

"What?"

"It had to have something to do with you. If I'd done something to him personally, he could have waited until the right moment. It's not like he hasn't dealt with that sort of thing before. But you...I don't know... It's a big brother thing. Something about protecting little sisters drives us nuts."

She frowned.

"So you lied to protect me, not Draco?"

He frowned back at her.

"I'm not in love with your brother."

"That's... strangely sweet... in a weird, dishonorable sort of way."

He grinned at her. "Enjoy it while it lasts. Sweet ain't really my thing."

~ Page Break~

Ira was still sleeping when someone knocked on the door, startling her awake. The room was dull gray with the light of the pre-dawn slipping through the half open curtains, and her heartbeat raced, aware as she had ever been that she was completely alone in Snape's cottage. It didn't bother her during the day, and she actually quite enjoyed the quiet solitude, but at night...and right now.

Well, she was a little alarmed that the knock hadn't come from her front door, but rather her bedroom door.

"Who is it?" she asked cautiously.

"It's me," Snape's familiar baritone came, and she immediately relaxed. "I am sorry to wake you, but there's something I need to talk to you about and I haven't much time."

"I...yes, alright..."

"Get dressed first. I'll make us some tea."

She blushed a bit, feeling silly at her nervousness. It wasn't as if she hadn't stayed in the cottage with Snape before, although admittedly Harry had always been there and she had been up and about before either of them most days. She dressed quickly and tidied herself into something presentable, not bothering to tie up her hair and hoped for the best.

Entering the kitchen, she found Snape staring at the tea kettle on the stove, lost in thought. He was still dressed in his traveling robes, a black wool cloak draped over his shoulders and heavy boots caked in mud. He did not look hurt but he did not look well either, his eyes shadowed from exhaustion and unhealthy tint to his already pale skin. Unease bloomed in her stomach at the sight of him. The letter he had sent had said he was going to retrieve Harry from some sort of trouble, and Harry was no where in sight.

"Severus?"

He looked back at her and smiled tiredly, loosening some of her fear.

"I am sorry to have to wake you so early, but I wanted to speak with you before visiting hours. It's going to be a circus today."

There was something a bit... forced about the lightness in his voice. Perhaps because he had never attempted such a tone with her before. The kettle began to hiss and whistle, and he pulled it from the stove to the kitchen table where the tea pot was already prepared. The scent of the tea wafted through the kitchen as the hot water hit it. She settled into a chair and he took the one across from her. She never took her eyes off of him.

"Severus... are you alright?"

He blinked at her, then nodded. When he spoke again, it was in his naturally dark drawl she preferred.

"I am fine. Just a little tired. It has been a long three days."

Merlin, had he really only been gone three days?

"And Harry," she asked cautiously, almost afraid to ask. "Did you find him?"

"I did."

The way he said it, she couldn't find any relief in that statement. Did that mean Harry was dead? She couldn't bring herself to prod him for answers he obviously was reluctant to recount, nor could she simply abandon the topic on such an awkward note. While she tried to think of what to say next, he poured them each a cup of tea. It was very dark, almost black, and he sipped the hot brew and grimaced. Then took another sip and answered the unspoken.

"He'll live. It was...is...very bad, but he will live."

"What happened?"

"...I don't want to lie to you, Ira, but I can't tell you everything. I will simply say that he was attacked by a very powerful wizard, and that it is nothing short of a miracle he didn't lose a limb let alone his life."

"I'm sorry, Severus," she said, because despite his neutral tone this obviously was very hard on the man. He wouldn't say it out right, that wasn't the sort of man he was, but the fact that he wasn't ranting about his ward's reckless stupidity and attempting to drink some truly awful tea said a lot all its own.

"Thank you, but it's not your pity I came for," he said, falling deeper behind his wall of hard practicality. "I need to ask a very big favor of you."

"Okay."

"Potter... will live. He will likely make a full recovery, in fact, but not any time soon. I'll need to have him pulled from school for a while as he recuperates, and then perhaps a little longer so that he can catch up in his studies."

She nodded, not quite sure where this was leading.

"I have two choices here. I can either have him held in a long term health facility or I can keep him here under the supervision of a responsible adult."

"You want me to watch after Harry? Severus, I'm a scholar not a medi-witch."

"There will be a medi-witch or wizard on call to monitor his health and to assist if something should go wrong. I will not ask you to look after him while he is bedridden, but once he recovers some mobility...? I believe his recovery would be helped along by familiar surroundings and a friend's company. Tutors will be employed to help him with his studies."

She thought about it for a moment, but really there was very little thought necessary. Harry was indeed a friend, and even if he weren't, he was someone she greatly admired for his kindness and his patriotism. Besides, this was the first time she had ever felt she could be of use to Severus, and the first time he had ever volunteered his trust to her.

"I understand. I would be happy to," and then she smiled, a slight flush painting her cheeks as she added, "It would be good practice for taking care of my own children."

"Thank you. I'm relieved..." he paused. "Children?"

She nodded, fighting off a grin. It was completely inappropriate, given the circumstances, but she had to tell him. She needed to tell him so badly. "I got the results back from Jacobi."

And he just stared at her, as if she had grown a second head, and to her own exasperation she realized he had completely forgotten that she had had her appointment yesterday. She rolled her eyes and took a sip of her tea, grimaced and put it back down again. He was still just staring at her, so she decided to tease him a bit.

"So are you going to make an honest woman out of me, or are you intending to have an illicit affair Harry's nanny?"

He scowled at her, and really that was much better.

"Of course not. You've just caught me off guard. I am not sure if I'm supposed to propose to you right now or pretend to ignore that revelation in order to propose under more...romantic," he cringed, "...circumstances at a later date."

She was laughing at him now, her own happiness helplessly bubbling out of her.

"Well, since I know you're going to do it either way I don't mind waiting. Did you have a particular day in mind? I'll be sure to wear something pretty."

He rolled his eyes.

"You're an incorrigible woman. Just for that, I will propose to you now in a completely unromantic way. Marry me?"

"No."

"What? What do you mean 'no'?"

"Not unless you kiss me first."

He glared at her, and tried to determine if she was serious. He didn't think so. This entire situation was ridiculous. He felt happy for Christ's sake. This was not the time to feel happy. It was completely inappropriate, like a fart joke at funeral.

But she was waiting expectantly, laughing smile never faltering, her head slightly tilted forward. So he did it. He startled her by jumping to his feet, pulling her into his arms, and kissing her. It was as unexpectedly stunning as their first kiss. More so, as he pressed her entire body to his, taking in her scent, her heat, and that untapped well of passion he had barely glimpsed.

She tasted of mint toothpaste and tea, smelled like rosemary, and felt like salvation. He had taken several women to bed in his life; women who sold their bodies for money and those that sold their bodies for favors, but he had never possessed one like he did Ira. Lily... she could have been his, had a moment of injured pride not ruined everything, and Vesper had been a near thing, but even she had never made him feel wanted the way Ira did.

Even now he could feel her melting into his hold, giving herself to him completely, and he wanted nothing more than to take it. It would be beautiful. He knew it would. All the confusion and violence and ugliness of his world would fade away for one glorious hour in her arms...

He broke the kiss first.

"I..." he panted, struggling to catch his breath. "I better go before I spoil the wedding night*. Your ring is in my writing desk, middle drawer. The password is 'precarious endeavors'."

Ira merely made a soft sound that could have been a moan or a sigh. He pulled away. She sagged visibly as he withdrew.

"Was that a 'yes'?" he queried. She blinked at him.

"I... yes."

"Then we will talk more when I return...three days at the most," he promised, and kissed her gently on the forehead. "Until then, start planning. I would rather not delay our...union... any longer than necessary."

And with that, he swept out the door into the morning chill. He had hardly made it to the gate when he heard Ira's hysterical laughter from inside the house. No doubt she would be running through the house like a giddy little school girl preparing for her first date for the rest of the day, and making plans for her very own little dream wedding. Normally, such a thought would only be entertained to intentionally induce vomiting, but somehow he found himself smiling for the first time in weeks.

~ Page Break~

It took a long time for Harry to realize for certain that he was awake. He had stared a long time at the painted birds flitting across the walls and ceiling, his memories elusive and his thoughts numb. It wasn't until he realized that if he were dreaming he wouldn't believe he was that he finally determined that he was in fact a wake. It took him even longer to realize that he was in a hospital.

He didn't remember why, and honestly he didn't feel like he would want to know.

At some point a nurse came in and checked him over, talking at him cheerily, but he couldn't understand a word she said. He didn't know if she wasn't speaking English or if he simply couldn't understand her. She gave him a bitter tasting potion, and his mind cleared a little but still he couldn't understand her. When she left, he tried to piece together where he was and what had happened.

He knew he was in a hospital and that he hurt very badly. There were some memories of before, places and words and pain that had been so overwhelming before were now like a once familiar song whose lyrics he couldn't recall and whose tune was broken and out of order.

"You're awake."

He turned to see Snape standing in the door, dressed in his usual teaching robes and carrying a satchel. The professor looked as if he hadn't gotten enough sleep, and yet there was an energized feeling to him. His magic was humming, brushing against Harry's skin like

phantom insects. He looked down at his arms and legs, but aside from the bandaged there was nothing there.

"Perhaps I spoke too soon," the man mused, stepping into the room. He grabbed a chair from the corner and moved it beside the bed. "What do you remember? The calming drought may be affecting your memory."

Harry swallowed thickly, his mouth and his brain feeling cottony.

"I...I was lost...somewhere..."he wheezed, then frowned, not liking choice of words or how hard it was to force them out. His breathing was already starting to become labored. "There was a lake and... monsters...they meant to kill me, but I drowned myself..."

Harry ducked his head, knowing he sounded ridiculous, but Snape merely looked thoughtful.

"You did have lake water in your lungs. I had assumed it was a curse, but perhaps it was something a little more... unorthodox. You were under possession by the late Fenrir Greyback, and frankly I have very little experience with the metaphysical's affects on the physical. Do you remember what happened after you drowned?"

Harry frowned. "I got blown up."

Snape smirked, inappropriately amused. "Yes, you were having a rather bad day."

"How did I... what happened to me? I don't know what happened while I was... elsewhere."

This sobered the man a bit and he leaned back in his chair, considering his explanation.

"I am not entirely sure either. I was not called in until after you had disappeared from the werewolf colony at Volges-Wulf. You and some two-hundred and fifty werewolves had just up and disappeared. No one knew what happened to you or where you had gone. Lord Voldemort himself came to investigate."

Harry's breathing worsened. It was starting to hurt now. Some of what Snape said sounded vaguely familiar, but he could not recall the Dark Lord ever making an appearance. He was not someone you could easily forget.

"He found you, or rather he found Fenrir in your body. I was not there for the confrontation, but I believe he determined the spirit's intentions to lead the werewolves into battle against the Aurors in Berlin. Fenrir escaped with most of his little army and disappeared for three days. When he finally showed up again Berlin, Voldemort was ready for him, as were the German Aurors. There was a great deal of fighting, the details of which are too macabre for a retelling and eventually you did, in fact, get 'blown up'. On the brighter side, if such a thing exists, Britain has retaken all of Berlin and the southern half of the state of Brandenburg."

Harry said nothing for a long moment, trying to process what he had been told. He knew he should be feeling something. These were all events he had participated in, in some capacity, and yet he felt nothing. It was as if he was sitting through another lecture in History of Magic.

"Did a lot of people die?" he asked. He knew that was important, even if it didn't feel that way at the moment.

Snape shrugged. "A couple hundred, yes. It was a battle after all. At least seventy-five werewolves died, although they must have killed more than twice that number."

Harry nodded absently, momentarily distracted as he tried to recall who had been with him. There had been Beartooth and Ashskin and the Furloin brothers and Riven and... who had been the others again? He couldn't recall the werewolves at the colony, except that they had been eager to meet him. No feeling accompanied the memories, and he frowned in confusion.

"I feel...weird," he muttered.

"That is just the calming draughts you're on. You had a panic attack when you first woke up. Do you remember that?"

He didn't remember that, but Snape's words triggered other memories. Panic attacks. He had been terrified of having them for months now. Of someone seeing him broken and vulnerable, even if it was only for a few minutes. No one knew about it except Horace McGunny and ... Jane. Jane had given him something to help calm him during the werewolf funeral, and he had accidentally swallowed it and been possessed by Fenrir. Then she had given him some more to take with him and he had... oh god... he had...

"This is all my fault."

"Probably," Snape agreed. "I wouldn't mind an explanation, however."

So Harry told him everything. He told him about his first panic attack, then the second, and their increasing frequency. He told him about attempting to hide it from everyone, about the slip up at the werewolf funeral, about Du'on nadi and his misunderstanding its purpose, and ultimately his foolish continuation of using it and the disastrous results. The more he spoke, the darker Snape's expression became.

When at last, Harry told all there was to tell, he stopped in order to catch his breath. He wasn't afraid. The calming draught assured that sort of feeling was nearly impossible, but he did wonder if he would have said anything if he'd had more control over himself. His guardian closed his eyes and rubbed his temples, a sign that a headache was surely descending on him.

"You're mad at me, aren't you?" Harry asked.

"Yes."

"It is all my fault then, isn't it?"

"No."

"...then why are you mad at me?"

Snape removed his hand from his forehead, and looked directly at the boy. For all that he had said he was angry, he certainly didn't look it. He looked tired and frustrated, but nothing so fierce as to be angry.

"I am mad because it took a near death experience and a medical grade concentration of potion for you to trust me with something that you should have been able to tell me about when it first happened. Why didn't you tell me?"

Harry looked down, the first inkling of emotion beginning to squirm to the surface. Shame.

"I was scared. I was afraid what would happen if people thought I was going crazy. I thought I could...I thought it would go away on its own or...I don't know. I could cure myself. But all this other stuff was happening and there just wasn't any time to figure out how so I just...took the Du'on nadi, even when I knew it was wrong... even though I... It was wrong. It was so wrong and people died because of it."

Snape closed his eyes, again and took a deep breath. He had lied. He wasn't angry. He should be. He should be furious, scolding the boy mercilessly and planning out a long and painful penitence. He should... but he couldn't. It would be simultaneously hypocritical and pointlessly devastating to take out on the boy what to most would have been little more than temporarily self-destructive and embarrassing, and hang the responsibilities of war.

"I would have kept it a secret," he said, instead.

"Sure...you wouldn't think twice about letting the crazy kid wander around unsupervised, hang out with your godchildren, or... brew Blood-replenishing potion... nothing at all worrisome there with all the knives and caustic chemicals and-"

Snape held up his hand to silence him.

"Panic attacks are a far cry from a psychotic break. I assure you I can tell the difference."

"You would have told...him."

The man conceded the point with a tilt of the head.

"He can't... I can't let him know."

"Why not? He has done a great deal for you. This is such a small thing-"

"No, no it's not. It's a weakness and not one I think he could forgive. He can't exploit this."

That was a far more insightful assessment of the Dark Lord's character than Snape had thought Harry was capable of. It also wasn't correct. Snape knew Voldemort could forgive his vulnerability, because it was one that could be treated and then forgotten. And because it was Harry. When had his master held anything against him for long?

Snape suddenly wondered how long that magnanimity would last if he ever discovered that Harry quite possibly was destined to kill him. Perhaps it was better that the Dark Lord didn't know this particular weakness.

"Very well. I won't tell him."

The boy's eyes widen, a spark of life coming through his potion dulled eyes.

"On certain conditions," he continued, hardening his expression. If he could not bring himself to kill this obstinate child, then at the very least he would exercise some level of supervision. He may yet be able to circumvent destiny or at the very least delay it. "You will meet with me at least once a week in private to speak; during which time you will tell me anything that is bothering you. Be it another anxiety attack or the sniffles. You live under extraordinary conditions, and I took for granted your resilience in dealing with them. I will not make that mistake again."

Harry looked uncertain, and Snape didn't blame him. What Snape was asking of him required a level of trust they had not yet achieved, and even he wasn't certain he deserved or wanted it. He needed it, however. For both their sakes.

"I want your word, Potter."

The boy flinched and looked down at his red, blistered hands.

"...okay."

~ Page Break~

Lestrangle waded through the small lake of papers and scrolls that filled the Ministry of Magic's Foreign Affairs Division, cursing God and Fortune for the disaster area she found herself in. With Berlin now stabilized under British occupation, she had found her use on the battlefield ended and was obliged to continue with the investigation that had brought her there in the first place.

Somewhere in the large open chamber was the file for Horace McGunny, of that she was certain. If she was ever going to find it was a matter of far less certainty. The building had not been burned like many of the other Ministry offices, but that didn't mean it hadn't suffered damage. The records room in which she was currently searching had been the site of a skirmish that had left the place in ruin with papers bursting from their respective cabinets and nooks to flood floor up to her knees. The magical filing spells had not been renewed and the mess had been left as it lay.

She didn't even know where to start.

To add insult to aggravation, not only was she left looking for the proverbial needle in a haystack, she was also on pet-sitting duty. Held securely in a gilded cage with more protection spells on it than a Gringotts' vault, hunched the raven given to her to protect until such time as the Dark Lord requested it back. It had been picked up during the battle in the underground, but why exactly she couldn't even begin to guess. It was a familiar, she surmised, but whose she didn't know nor why it would be important to her master.

At the moment, it was sitting quietly and sulking. She glared resentfully at it.

"I don't know what your problem is. I'm the one who has to clean up this mess."

The raven twisted its head around to stare at her, and she got the distinct impression it was glaring at her. Which was impossible of course. It was just a stupid bir-

"Sister, you don't know the meaning of the word 'mess'."

Down the hall, several young Culties busily cleaning out offices for reuse were startled from their various tasks by a terrified shriek.

~Page Break~

"Hermione, how many times do I have to say it? I'm sorry!" Draco whined, following after his sister. He had finally gotten the opportunity to explain what had really happened, and rather than appreciating his brotherly concern she gotten even more angry with him. How was he supposed to know Sabbat was a lying skank with a grudge?

"You don't even know what you're apologizing for!" Hermione snapped over her shoulder, but didn't slow down as she made her way to the library.

"Um... because I believed Sabbat?"

He couldn't see her face, but the way she moved her head told him she had just rolled her eyes.

"No, Draco. That's not why I'm angry. I'm angry because my own brother assumed Sabbat was right, instead of respecting me enough to just come and ask me what happened." Finally she stopped and whirled around to face him, and he flinched away. "God, do you have any idea how humiliated I feel right now? First, you go an act like an utter buffoon punching Ron in the middle of the hall, then I get

dragged into McGonagall's office and... ARGH! I could strangle Lucius right now! And Ron's stupid lie and...just..."

She threw up her hands in disgust and spun on her heels back towards Gryffindor Tower, and Draco ran after her.

"I'm sorry! I really am! I don't know what I was thinking. I was going to ask for an explanation first, but then I saw you both together and I just...I lost it! I'm sorry. I never would have done it if I'd know you'd get dragged into it. And to be fair, Ron came up with that ridiculous cover story all on his own."

She spun around, pointing an accusing finger at him. He barely managed to avoid losing an eye.

"He wouldn't have had to lie if you hadn't started trouble in the first place. You owe him an apology and a thank you for digging you out of trouble."

Draco grimaced at the mere notion. Apologize to Weasley? He'd rather eat glass. Besides, he wasn't entirely convinced that this wasn't still somehow the other boy's fault. Hermione still hadn't told him why she had gone down to visit Ron in the first place, and said that if he wanted to know he would have to ask the boy himself. He'd rather eat glass and dung beetles.

She read his expression as easily as she read everything else, and began to turn away again but Draco was spared the back of her head by an unexpected interloper.

"Granger! Granger!" Collin Creevy called out, scurrying down the hall towards them. His camera, which was normally attached to his hand like an extra limb had been replaced by a newspaper which he was waving wildly. "Have you heard?"

Draco instantly forgotten, she turned her attention to the photographer and the paper he practically punched her in the face with. It didn't take a moment to figure out what had him so excited. Plastered across the front page of the Daily Prophet in oversized

letters was the announcement: DARK LORD RESCUES HAROLD POTTER AND RE-TAKES BERLIN!

Instantly, she snatched the paper and started to read. Her eyes widened in horror.

"Oh Merlin..."

Author's Notes:

No, potions can't fix EVERYTHING. Even some things that muggle medicine can. I've seen no evidence that wizarding kind is particularly superior to muggles in any way outside of magic. For some, that's more than enough. Although, really we don't get to see a lot of the wizarding world in Canon either when you stop to think about it.

A spectrecat is completely made up animal, based off the old wives tale that if you let a cat sleep in the cradle of a new born, it will steal their breath and kill them. My spectrecats really do that, except they do it to anyone too weak to fend them off. They look just like regular cats except they're white and can squeeze themselves through tiny spaces to get inside homes or in this case, hospitals, not unlike lethifolds. Gargoyles in the wizarding world, serve the very real purpose of fending off evil spirits and beings like lethifolds and spectrecats. The pigeons and rats just supplement their diet.

The one think I don't really like about the terms medi-witch and medi-wizard is trying to pick the plural form when both genders are represented. It's rather chauvinist, but I'm adopting the term medi-wizards when referring to a group of them, but be aware that there is a mix.

It occurs to me that the wizarding world seems to despise simplified timing or amounts. Look at their monetary system for one thing, and then in canon the meeting time is never at the top or bottom of the hour but some strange interim.

Despite Snape's many dubious character traits, he has a rather romanticized idea about marriage and family. He might not find anything wrong with buying a hooker (so long as he's not married or

affianced to anyone), but he would never consider having sex with Ira before their wedding night. He would view it as demeaning to her, and lower her respectability. Afterwards they'll probably go at it like bunnies. Assuming I don't have her killed or some how break off their wedding.

Next chapter is coming soon! REALLY soon. I'm just ironing out the kinks.

Book V

Chapter 28: Epilogue pt2

The morning after his potion-induced confession with Snape, Harry's thoughts and memories had reappeared and organized themselves. He still had no memory of what Fenrir had done in his body while he was locked in the spirit realm, but Snape had given him a vague sort of idea. There had been no real details, and honestly he didn't want any. People had died, some had even been killed using his magic, and that wasn't something he could calmly accept.

Much of what he could remember he wished he didn't. The fight with the monsters in the spirit realm and his subsequent drowning, and escaping that only to be nearly killed in a magical explosion (one that's mere memory made his entire body throb with remembered pain) did nothing to ease the panic he could feel lingering just beneath the surface.

It made him feel weak and scared, which only made him angry at himself and depressed about his situation. The hospital staff was kind and attentive, and Snape proved to be rather enjoyable company when he put his mind to it, but he felt supremely homesick. It seemed like forever since he had last seen Hermione and his friends, and danced the slow and simple routine of student life. He missed his bed and the soft snores of his dorm mates at night, the breakfast discussions, the love-hate relationship with his classes and the resulting homework that inevitably followed, the endless maze of hallways and their little surprises, the quiet sanctity of the library, the challenge of dueling club... He wanted to go back to it, back to where it was safe and beautiful and simple.

But he couldn't go back. Not yet. For the time being, he couldn't even walk himself twenty feet to the bathroom. His injuries were all on the mend, and aside from persistent pneumonia and chronic weakness, there was little physically wrong with him. Nevertheless, three days in bed and the potions made to heal his flesh had both resulted in a stiffening of his muscles to the point where everything was cramping terribly. His legs and his side in particular were proving to be nearly unbearable.

His medi-wizards had scheduled him for a session in the physical therapy pool. Snape used the time to go off and run some errands, leaving Harry in the capable hands of his nurses who helped him change into hospital issued blue swimming suit (not unlike those one piece outfits one saw muggles wearing in the 1800s) and loaded him into a wheelchair. Everything had been going well and he had been looking forward to easing his stiff body into warm water until he actually got to his destination.

"Wait..." he said, as his physical therapist, a powerfully built man with skin so dark it was almost purple, began to wheel him towards the therapy pool. The pool was nothing like the few muggle swimming pools he had been to in his childhood. Those had all been rectangular, painted blue, and stank of chlorine. A wizarding pool, or at least the therapy pool, was nothing like those. For one, it was oval, for another it was painted black. From his vantage point, Harry could see glowing white lines that highlighted where the wheelchair ramp and the stairs were and marked how deep it all actually went.

He felt a shiver run through him just looking at it. Those dark waters lay placid and seemingly harmless like so many other still waters that had risen up to drown him. The Chambers of Secrets, the Hogwarts Lake, the spirit realm... all of them had tried to take his life... some of them had arguably succeeded.

The idea of simply rolling his chair into the water, when his own body could barely move to obey him, suddenly seemed a terribly stupid idea.

"Is something wrong?" the medi-wizard asked, his accent heavy with South African bass. Harry felt like an idiot. Why hadn't he thought about this before they had gone through all the trouble of bringing him down here?

"I...Is it safe?"

Which was also a terribly stupid question. Obviously it was safe or it wouldn't be in a hospital! It seemed the medi-wizards had missed the traumatic head injury that had left him a daft wanker.

"Are you afraid of water?" the wizard asked, looking down at Harry knowingly. He had ten years of experience with patients and knew the signs of anxiety well.

"I didn't use to be," he said sullenly.

"We won't go in far. Just enough so the water comes up to your waist. I'll take you out the second you tell me too. Yes?"

"..."

"Werewolves, dragons, basilisks, Aurors," came a voice from the entrance and they both turned sharply towards it. Harry grimaced as he pulled a muscle in his side. Voldemort strode in, dressed in business robes and looking very out of place. The medi-wizard stiffened, and Harry didn't blame him. He was feeling a little thrown by the Dark Lord's appearance as well. "Mad assassins, kidnappers, fairies, and well, me and you decide your greatest nemesis is water? Really Harry, I'm disappointed in you."

There was a touch of humor in the dark wizard's voice that allowed Harry to relax a little.

"Did I ever tell you about the times I drowned?" he asked. "All three of them?"

Voldemort cocked his head curiously at that, and the medi-wizard swung his attention back to him. The Dark Lord turned to address the other wizard.

"Would you mind giving some time alone?"

"I'm not really allowed-" the man protested. Harry put a hand on his arm to regain his attention.

"It's alright," he assured him, and gestured for him to make his escape while he still could. The medi-wizard reluctantly nodded, and left with one last suspicious glance at Voldemort.

"You're looking a lot better."

Harry knew he looked like crap, but he was right in that he probably did look better than the last time the man had seen him.

"You look exactly the same. To what do I owe the privilege of your company?"

"Oh, none of that, Harry. We shan't stand on formality. I simply came to see you."

"I suppose the press is just outside the door?"

"As a matter of fact, they are. Feel free to keep them waiting as long as you like. How do you feel?"

Harry shrugged, and then grimaced.

"Like all my muscles have turned to wood."

"No muscle relaxants?"

"Not with the calming draughts."

Voldemort nodded and began wheeling him towards the pool. Harry jerked in surprise and struggled to climb out of it.

"Relax; I have no intention of drowning you."

He wasn't so convinced, and finally managed to hobble to his feet and stumble away. He gritted his teeth. Merlin, it hurt! He didn't get far, before the Dark Lord caught him and scooped him up into his arms as if he were nothing more than a small child.

"What are you doing?" Harry shouted as Voldemort proceeded to wade into the pool, fully clothed. He started to panic, breathing becoming more difficult by the second as he struggled to lift himself higher in the man's grasp.

"Ssshhh...be still. I'm here. I have ssstolen you from the jaws of death more than once, remember?" he hissed in parseltongue, and with it the sensation of the Dark Lord's magic. Harry immediately felt himself go limp, sinking into it, felt it cradle him in coils that could crush a man. Without realizing it, he had closed his eyes, and when he opened them again, he found himself floating in the pool with his head carefully held in Voldemort's hands. He blinked up at man's amused red eyes.

"Better?"

"Cheater."

"And completely unrepentant. Are you ssstill afraid?"

"Don't let me go."

"Never."

Harry shivered at the layers of meaning behind that simple word, despite the warmth of the water. The pain in his body was starting to retreat, replaced with slowly pervading languor. As long as he kept looking up, he did not have to see the black pool and with Voldemort holding him aloft he was able to forget for a moment how utterly vulnerable he was.

"Tell me what you sssaw when Greyback took your body. You told Sssnape that you had no memory of what he did, which meanss he musst have ssent you sssomewhere."

Harry wondered why the man wanted to know. Simple curiosity? Did it matter? He didn't dare lie in his current position. So he told him about the spirit realm, about the silence and the seasons that changed according to distance, about the creek and the lake, and about the mist and the monsters. He told him about the guide he had met, but not his name and the Dark Lord did not bother to ask. He did look rather thoughtful though. Once Harry had finished, he spoke again."

"I have read of ssuch placcss, but I have never ssseen mine. It may be that I do not have one. Quite fasscinating, really."

"What do you mean, 'seen yoursss'? You have your own limbo?"

Voldemort smirked.

"Maybe. Mosst humansss do. The particular realm you walked in wasss your own private sssoul ssspace. Everyone'ss isss different. Everything in it iss sssymbolic, from the sssky to the lake to your guide. They all had personal meaningsss to you. Like a dream."

Harry frowned.

"The monstersss..."

"Greyback'ssss. Hisss possession of your body gave him enough accesss to your sssoul to plant trapsss."

Then what about Carrigan, Harry wondered. He couldn't imagine the man being a trap or one of Greyback's creations. Could he have been a figment of Harry's imagination? A 'symbol', as the Dark Lord said? If that were the case why a man he had never even met? And how had he known those things about Bobby and places Harry had never heard of? Or were those things even true or the ramblings of a meaningless dream? The druid had seemed so real though...

There were two ways to find out the truth. The first was to ask Voldemort then and there. Harry couldn't bring himself to do that. Carrigan had been the man's mentor at the very least, and was likely a sore spot that he didn't want to start prodding recklessly. The second way was to ask Bobby, who was no where to be found but would inevitably show up eventually.

And what would it mean if it truly was nothing more than a symbol and not the dead man's spirit? What would that symbol represent? Why something more intimately intertwined with Voldemort's past than his own? How would the spirit have gotten into his 'soul space' if what his mentor said was true?

"It'sss time to get out," the Dark Lord said, pulling him from his thoughts. "You're ssstarting to prune."

Harry blinked, then nodded. Slowly, he dropped his legs and placed them underneath him. He stood and found the water only reached his naval. His legs still ached and felt very weak, but it was no longer the complete agony of before and he was able to walk easily. Voldemort escorted him up the ramp and out of the pool, holding onto Harry's arm just in case.

Once out of the pool, the Dark Lord dried them both with a simple spell and Harry sat down heavily in his wheelchair, feeling exhausted.

"What happened to Greyback?" Harry found himself asking. "After I kicked him out of my body, I mean?"

"Hard to say. Likely, he went back to his own god realm. I haven't had the time to confront him yet, but I guarantee you I will not let this matter slide."

Harry nodded, but he looked disturbed.

"Something bothering you?"

"...what if he tries to possess me again?"

Voldemort started at him. Apparently, the possibility hadn't occurred to him.

~ Page Break~

For the two days of Greyback's descent into the mortal plane, Blackbone struggled to maintain his sanity as his pack and his beta fell under the sway of the war god. Commanded by some unheard voice, the werewolves set about the motions of battle preparation, stockpiling weapons and building new ones, gathering supplies for travel, and building fortifications around their homes. Blackbone had stood aside and let it happen while he tried to sort out the impulses of the roaming god from his own. The only others who were not completely lost to the compulsions were the shamans, Luna, and

Jane and they would not help him, either from inability or unwillingness.

When Greyback's presence suddenly vanished, and the werewolves came back to themselves, Blackbone's confusion turned to rage. Those in his clan quelled in fear as he swept through the village and systematically destroyed their two days work and then some, striking down any who protested or were not quick enough to get out of his way. The werewolves fled from him and into the forest to wait out his anger, until only Slivermoon dared to linger close out of a sense of loyalty and his own guilt for having been as weak-willed as the rest when his Alpha had needed his support.

Three more days passed, during which Blackbone shifted between blinding, destructive rages and dark silences so profound, they seemed to swallow the entire forest. At the end of those three days, the full moon finally rose and the emotions that had waged war in him were finally lifted up and dispersed in the heat and freedom of transformation.

Waking the next morning on the frost laden earth, he had finally felt calm and ready to do what needed to be done. He washed and dressed, roused his beta from the base of a tree, and started his search for the rest of his pack. It was on this morning, that Voldemort finally sent him an emissary, no doubt hoping the post full moon lethargy would keep the alpha from reacting badly to the news he was to receive.

The emissary was a young court politician of low birth, but slithering up the political ladder with the help of his poison-honey tongue. He played the sympathetic and humble messenger to the fullest as he related the tale of Harry's kidnapping and the werewolf led mission to rescue him. The story was thick with praise for both the werewolf warriors and Harry's bravery and with false remorse for those who had died or been injured in the effort.

Blackbone made the emissary bite a hot poker and literally threw the man off his lands, threatening to tear out the tongue of the next liar to grace his presence. Then he had gone to find Jane.

"Do you mean to kill me, Blackbone?" she asked as he entered the burial grounds. She was sitting on one of the marble stones that marked the graves of their recently buried family. Luna was curled up beside her, her head in the other girl's lap, naked but for the fur skin Jane had wrapped around her shoulders. Blackbone glared at the goddess-possessed child. If she thought either the location or Luna's presence would prevent what was to come, she was sorely mistaken.

"Remy, take Luna back to the village and put her to bed with the others."

His beta hesitated for a moment, trying to gauge both his alpha's mood and intentions, but nothing came. The rage was gone, but while that made Blackbone less dangerous to those around him, it also made him less predictable. All he could do was what he was commanded and have faith in his friend. He gathered up Luna in her blanket, and physically lifted her. She squirmed and whined in protest, but she was weak from the transformation and from lack of food. He did not know if she had eaten at all in the three days since Greyback's disappearance. While the Head Alpha had raged at the world, she had retreated from it, and even now Silvermoon had no idea what she thought or felt about what had happened over the last week.

He suspected she knew far more about what was going on than he did. She was a shaman's apprentice, but more importantly she was the closest thing the goddess had to a friend.

Blackbone watched as his second took the girl away. Luna had always seemed a mysterious, albeit strangely charming creature to him, but at the moment he didn't know if he could stand to be in her presence without doing something he would forever regret. She was Greyback's daughter. She had loved the monster in life and in death and was also the companion of Rhiannon's daughter in whatever form she took, and that was enough to make him hate her, but she had also loved and comforted Harry when he had been unable to. If she knew half of what he himself had pieced together after the emissary's arrival, and certainly Jane would have told her some of it, what state of grief was she herself in? The one she had loved most in her short life had been murdered only a month ago, and the one who had helped her through that dark time had nearly been killed himself.

by the spirit of that loved one. If she hadn't been mad already, she might very well be now.

He would figure out what to do about her later. For now, he had bigger fish to fry. Turning back to Jane, he stalked towards her and knocked from her perch and onto the ground with the back of his hand. She scrambled away from him and stumbled to her feet. She stared at him with wide-eyed wonder at his audacity. Or his madness.

"You dare...?"

It was a true question, and not an accusation. No werewolf had ever dared to strike her. Not even Greyback, who was the epitome of audacious violence. She was Rhiannon's daughter and the direct link between the Goddess and her children, and either out of respect or fear no one had ever dared threaten her except those wizards too ignorant to realize who or what she was.

He merely glowered at her, making no further move towards her. The one strike would be enough to convince her he was capable of what he was about to threaten.

"I could ask you the same question, little goddess," he growled. "You would dare to betray your allegiance to me and your brethren for the favor of a monster?"

She just stared at him, confused, but unwilling to show it.

"I couldn't figure it out at first," he said, pacing between the stones of the graves. "I mean how could Greyback have come to this plane. I am no shaman, but even I know you have to invite a god here, before they can have a direct influence, present company excluded of course*. Now, I know I didn't include any shamans with the warriors that were sent, so how?"

He was starting to circle her now, and although she didn't move or stiffen, her eyes followed his every movement cautiously.

"And then lo and behold I receive a message from the Dark Lord's people and it all just snaps into place. Harry was in France when

Greyback descended. Harry just so happens to be an honorary shaman. But of course, he wouldn't have invited Greyback. Not willingly. Not knowingly. But he had done it once before... with a little help bit of help from...you."

"I did not-"

"You did. Did you think you were being subtle? You gave Harry the Du'on nadi during the funeral on the pretense of calming him, when you had any number of other herbs available with that same purpose. Did you know it would work on him or was that just an experiment? He's not really a werewolf and there was no telling if he could be a shaman or not, so you had to test it somehow. Am I wrong?"

She said nothing. He continued.

"Then you gave him his own private stash just before he left. Did you warn him what it was really for first? Or just let him assume? Doesn't matter anyway. The situation had already been set up for him to have need of it, whether he understood what it was for or not."

"I warned him," she said. "I explained exactly what it was for."

"But not why you gave it to him in the first place."

She fell silent again.

"I never realized what a manipulative little wench you really were until now."

"Mind your tongue, mortal," she growled, the feral nature of her birthright flitting over her features for just a moment before settling once again for cool indifference. "You have already overstepped your bounds. Grief will only excuse so much. Anger considerably less than that."

He sprung for her, and she leaped away, but he caught her by the arm. She snarled and lunged for him, snapping and clawing at him. She was stronger than she looked. Her divine status gave her strength even in her frail mortal body. It was still nothing compared to his

strength, which came through his own natural strength and the innate magic he had inherited upon his ascension to the position of Head Alpha.

He caught her by the back of her neck and forced her to her knees, bending her over the nearest headstone. Struggling viciously, she fought to free herself, but he held her down with ease and sneered at her disdainfully.

"You have betrayed me, little god. You have betrayed your brethren. You have lied and plotted and allied yourself outside of the packs. For any of these things I am well in my rights to destroy you."

"My contract was with Greyback! I dared not violate it! I would disappear forever!" she screamed.

"Your contract is with the Head Alpha, which happens to be me in case it escaped your notice you stupid girl. Those bodies you possess are only made available to you through my blessing now, not Greyback's. And I have to say I am very tempted to take that blessing and leave you to dissolve back into whatever abysmal darkness that spawned you."

"NO! Please don't!"

Now there was real fear in her for the first time. Her eyes were wide and she trembled beneath him, like a frightened rabbit. He felt a sudden stab of guilt for causing it, for turning the once proud figure into a pathetic little child begging for her life. Then he remembered the hundred odd dead and the cruel exploitation of his godson that may have utterly ruined him and his pity vanished. He tossed her aside.

"I don't know what Greyback promised you, and I don't care. It ends now. I spare your life here, but do not think I will soon forget your treason. I recommend you find a way in which to make amends with me and hope that I don't change my mind in the meantime."

He left her huddled and frightened by Greyback's altar, feeling simultaneously powerful and angry. The power had an obvious

source. He had stood up to a goddess, regardless of how minor, and indirectly a war god as well. Whether he would get away with it for long, would take time to discern but he was not afraid. His cause was righteous. Rhiannon would favor him in this.

The anger was harder to pin down. Briefly, it was directed at Harry for foolishly abusing the Du'on nadi and causing him so much anguish, but soon enough it had been directed back towards himself and to Voldemort and Greyback and Jane. They had all been so cruel in their selfishness, unloading burden after burden onto the shoulders of a child. If James had been there, the alpha was certain his old friend would have despised him for what he had done to his son.

The backlash was what he deserved. Over a hundred werewolves under his rule were now dead, victims of a god's machinations, while Voldemort gloried in a victory none of his people would benefit from. His own godson a hair's breadth from absolute destruction and wounded in ways he still did not yet know. All of it his fault. It was his decision to release the warriors of his pack to Voldemort's army and place his godson in the vulnerable position that would take him far from the safety of Britain, leniency with Jane that allowed her to manipulate matters into Greyback's favor, and his lack of foresight had allowed his people to fall under the war god's control.

Never again.

He was Head Alpha. As far as the werewolves were concerned he was a living god, and the only authority greater than his own was that of Rhiannon, whose hand could not be felt in these dark happenings. It was his responsibility to make sure nothing like this ever happened again. He would not fail a second time.

~ Page Break~

A week after Lestrage first entered the records room, it was considerably cleaner than it had been and the witch herself was considerably more frustrated. She had set up a desk for herself where she could sit and sort through some of the potential papers, but nothing useful had made itself known.

The raven was there too, sleeping or watching her in a bored manner. He hadn't said anything since that first day, and no matter what she did or threatened he did nothing more than caw or ruffled his feathers at her again. She was beginning to think she had imagined it or someone had simply played a prank on her, but she could never quite convince herself one way or the other.

"Madam Lestrangle?"

She glanced up from a stack of papers to the young Cultie lingering in the doorway. He fidgeted nervously, before stepping inside, and marching to her desk. He gave her a crisp salute.

"Yes?" she asked boredly.

"Madam Lestrangle, I've been sent from the intelligence office. You submitted an inquiry for one 'Horace McGunny', is this correct?"

She sat up straight in her chair, and tried to hide the eagerness in her voice.

"You have something?"

"We have a location."

Ten minutes later, Lestrangle was storming the military hospital, leaving the messenger to watch over the raven as she went to claim her prize. People gave her a wide berth, her less than sane smile clearing the way in a manner her reputation could not.

She found her target on the third floor, chatting with a young nurse. He was exactly as she remembered him, the few times she had seen him at Hogwarts. Mostly. He was dressed in hospital clothes and needed a hair cut, but he also had a quill and clipboard in hand and appeared to be interviewing the nurse rather than flirting with her. No doubt he was gathering secrets to sell to the enemy.

Some sixth sense must have alerted him to the danger, because suddenly McGunny stiffened and then turned. He blinked in confusion.

"Headmistress-"

"Stupefy."

~ Page Break~

Voldemort stared down at Horace McGunny. Horace McGunny in turn hung limply in the Dark Lord's hands while his eyes rolled around in his sockets. The man dropped him in disgust, turning away as he collapsed on the Persian rug. Lestrangle watched with growing unease as he abandoned the query she had spent the last couple of months of her life trying to track down. His cage hanging in the bird stand beside the Dark Lord's desk, the raven watched without so much as blinking.

"Useless," the man muttered, stalking back behind his desk and throwing himself into his chair. His agitation was obvious, but then he had been agitated since his return from the continent. His people may have proven victorious, but it had been a sloppy victory at best and he was left organizing the clean up from Bristol.

The stabilizing of Berlin was a minor matter. His commanders knew what they had to do on that front; but now he was left placating Poland who was greedy for a take in the struggle they had lent their extremely minor assistance in, dealing with Blackbone who had sent back his messenger after torturing him for lying, smoothing over ruffled feathers from the Queen's court, and playing up the whole debacle in the media. He still hadn't figured exactly what he was going to do about Harry yet.

The capture of McGunny, and possibly his horcrux, should have been good news but at the moment it felt like just another mess he had to deal with on top of everything else. To make matters just that much more obnoxious, it seemed Tom had already escaped and his former host had no memories that might help in tracking him down. He almost would have preferred Lestrangle found nothing, so that he could forget about the little menace for a little while longer.

"Take him to St. Ghianna's and have him committed for the memory loss under an assumed name, with you as his legal guardian. I want

the best medi-wizards in the field working on him and enough security to guard the Queen of France. No mistakes."

"Yes, my lord," she said dutifully, trying to hide her unhappiness. She had hoped to be reassigned now that her mission was complete to something more... well, more than babysitting.

"You have done well, Bella," the Dark Lord offered graciously, sensing her disappointment. "And you will be rewarded for your efforts, but right now I have more pressing matters to concern myself with. You may leave the raven, and I'll leave the rest of the matter to you."

He left her looking mollified, took Bobby with him, and stepped over the incoherent boy to exit his office. A dozen or so office workers, security personnel, and personal assistance dithered in the waiting room in preparation for his arrival. As soon as they spotted him, they descended on him.

"Here's your speech. You'll want to go over it on the way to the ceremony. I thought it was good, but Tabitha insisted it was hoaky. There's another version at the bottom if you-"

"I really don't like holding it outside. You already proved what a huge liability that sort of thing is in Ber-"

"The ceremony should be relatively brief, but you'll want to stay around for photo ops and PR for another hour or so. Afterwards, you have been invited to a luncheon with The House of Lord's Dueling School, which would be an excellent opportunity to-"

"What is this ceremony again?" he asked absently. He had been to six different ceremonies in the last week already and they were starting to run together.

"Military accommodations, my Lord. You're handing out metals to soldiers who displayed exemplary combat skill during in Berlin."

"Ah, well that's not so bad," he said absently, already skimming through the speech, which was hoaky but just the sort of thing the

media would eat up. He listened with half an ear as he made his way down to the garage, gradually loosening the hangers on as he passed through increasingly high levels of security. Before he left the building he handed Bobby off to one of his assistants with instructions to have him released in the new aviary that had been built in the last week. He had commissioned its creation almost immediately upon his return, knowing he could not keep the raven caged for much longer without something. He still wasn't entirely sure what he was going to do with him, but he couldn't bring himself to simply release.

For one thing, he honestly didn't trust the bird.

For another, he had been Carrigan's. It seemed only right that he should inherit him.

He took the car to the ceremony, despite the migraine it caused his security officer, and used the time to sort through his next moves. He would need to speak with Blackbone in person soon, and judging by what he had done to his emissary it was not going to be pleasant. He still had no idea how much the other knew about what had really happened in France and Germany, but he suspected it was far more than was convenient. Harry was supposed to arrive back in France that day, and he debated with himself whether allowing Blackbone to visit his still weak and confused godson first would make things better or worse and ultimately decided against it. He would let Poland's minister wait for another two weeks just to let him know exactly who held the power in this relationship. If the man wanted to speak with him, he could cross into his territory, and attempt to make demands. Queen Ophelia was a different matter, and he wanted to prolong their good relations for as long as possible. He would write her tonight, and make plans to visit her briefly before the holidays. It would not do to allow her passion towards him to cool. Tom... he didn't even what to think about what the little devil was up to at the moment.

What he was going to do about the Solstice and Harry's dilemma with future possession were somewhat more complicated matters. He had not had time to decide on the nature of the ritual he wished to perform, but including his protégé might not be possible in his weakened condition. Attempting to subvert any future attempts at possession of the boy would severely weaken him in the pagan arts and deafen

him to the will and gifts of the gods he worshipped, but leaving him as an Imago, a puppet to any deity who wished to wear his skin, was not an option either. How he had come to be in such a state required an investigation he didn't have the time to conduct.

If he weren't such a consummate multitasker, the crowd might have realized how distracted he was as he made his speech, spouting the usual rhetoric about patriotism and pride and nobility. He was still calculating the time it would take to visit his private library in Stratford for a particularly interesting book on possession as he was attaching medals to the eight witches and wizards who were being honored for the sake of good publicity if not their own merits in battle, when he felt a strange chill ran up his spine and he stopped abruptly.

His focus suddenly shifted back to the moment, and the soldier standing directly in front of him. His name tag read Stratus and his insignia marked him as a lieutenant. He appeared completely unremarkable, even a little on the pudgy side, and staring resolutely ahead at nothing like the others before him. Voldemort blinked and the odd feeling was gone again, perhaps never having been there in the first place, and he moved on to the next soldier.

He never saw the faint relaxation of Stratus' shoulders that signaled a well controlled sigh of relief or if he did it was quickly dismissed as the usual nervousness people experienced under his direct scrutiny. An hour later, the Dark Lord would not recall the moment of hesitation or the name of the man who had caused it, and Tom would be celebrating his small victory with an expensive bottle of brandy and a female Lieutenant fresh out of basic.

~ Page Break~

Hermione, Draco, Natalie, Clyde, Ginny, Fred, and George sat in their desk in the Dark Arts and Defense classroom, staring mutely at Snape who was regarding them all with a cool, assessing glare.

"Do you understand what I have told you?" he asked, finally. For their own sakes he certainly hoped they did. He had gathered together Harry's inner circle, or at least what he believed to be the boy's inner circle, and relayed to them as much as he dared about what had truly

happened to their friend. His own, specially edited version of had happened in any event.

The simplified version was that Harry had been tricked by a werewolf and ended up possessed by a demon that had him doing incredibly dark magic that eventually resulted in him being horribly injured. He had subtly emphasized the werewolves' responsibility in any wrong doing and Harry's status as unwilling victim (which involved relating far more graphic details of his injuries than was strictly tactful or necessary) in the matter, and hoped for the best.

The best being that they would be even more loyal and faithful to their friend, and perhaps start turning him away from his affection towards the canid monsters. He was more hopeful of the first than the second, but he would take what he could get. Clyde was the first to break the silence with a rather perplexed statement.

"Well that's just...weird."

Draco nodded. "Yeah, that kind of sums it up for me too."

Natalie and Hermione just shared a look and rolled their eyes. Boys. Although, privately they were a little weirded out themselves.

"I for one," George said, looking pointedly at the older wizard. "Would just like to thank Professor Snape for sharing the creepiest story time ever. I am sure we'll all be haunted by it for years to come. But I do have to ask... why exactly are you telling us this?"

Snape had been prepared this question and answered easily.

"So you won't go asking Mr. Potter about it. You are his friends. You'll ask questions about things that seem to bother him, and he'll feel obligated to answer you. For his sake, I would rather you did not put him under that sort of strain. This event has been unusually traumatic for him. It would be best if he were not forced to relive the experience over and over again."

"What about the other students?" Hermione asked. "You're not going to tell them any of this, are you? What about the teachers?"

"I will inform Professor McGonagall, because it is her right to know as his Head of House, but no one else. This is, in fact, a government secret, and there will be severe consequences if you should share this information irresponsibly. Besides, like I said, you are Mr. Potter's friends. I expect you all to exercise a level of... sensitivity that can not be expected of your peers."

"And to look out for him, right?"

Snape tilted his head in acknowledgment. It certainly wouldn't hurt things if he had allies on the student level, particularly ones as resourceful as the Weasley Twins, keeping the other students from intentionally or unintentionally stressing Harry. His primary objective, however, was to make sure they didn't turn away from him or on him.

"This thing that happened to him... it couldn't happen again could it?" Draco asked cautiously, because even though he considered himself Harry's friend and ally, he also believed in self preservation. Hermione shot him an irritated look.

"It is extremely unlikely. Like I said, he was tricked into taking a special potion by a werewolf. He would not make the same mistake again, and the Dark Lord has taken additional steps that I cannot reveal to you in order to make sure he will never be vulnerable in that way again. He is perfectly safe... or at least as safe as he ever was."

Draco shrugged. "Okay, whatever. It's just another bit of Potter weirdness then."

"We will have to make a suitable sacrifice to honor our Lord Chaos," George whispered to his brother. "I say we turn the Charms hallway into a swamp."

"Sounds good to me. Excuse us, professor! We just remembered we have something important we forgot to do."

"As long as it doesn't involve the dungeons, I do not care."

The twins' departure signaled the end of their brief meeting and everyone got up to take their leave. Snape would keep his eye on them for the remaining week before holidays to gauge their reaction to what he had told them. It would be best if he ironed out any misgivings they had before Harry returned.

"Hermione, if you would stay for a few more minutes. There is something I wish to speak to you about in private."

She paused on her way out of the classroom, glancing surreptitiously at the others as they filed out. He moved a chair to the other side of his desk, and summoned a pot of tea from the kitchens with a snap of his fingers. Sitting down in the provided seat, she fiddled with her teacup anxiously.

"If you're worried about how I'll react to Harry's... accident, you shouldn't be. He's still my best fri-

"I assure you, my dear, out of everyone you are the one I am least worried about turning their back on Mr. Potter. Your loyalty to each other has proven itself time and again. I wish to talk to you about your decision to remain in the castle during the holidays."

She looked away. This wasn't something she wished to talk to him about. It was a private matter, as far as she was concerned, and while she knew he meant well it didn't mean she wanted him trying to involve himself. She knew he would side with Lucius if he did.

"You are certain you wish to remain here?" Snape said idly, and took a sip of tea. Across the table Hermione, turned her teacup around in her hand over and over again, staring at the dark liquid making little whirlpools in her cup. "Allowing this quiet antagonism between you and Lucius will only worsen the situation in the long run."

"I don't see how letting him continue to belittle my existence will benefit anyone but Lucius in the long run. I'm sick of pretending that I deserve it."

Snape conceded the point. While he lacked both the power and the inclination to against his old friend, he wasn't blind to the injustices

that had been leveled at his goddaughter. She was a remarkable girl who had brought much happiness to her foster brother and mother, and could have been a source of pride to her foster father as well if he had let her.

He had a memory of her when she was six, still timid and clinging close to Draco or Narcissa whenever in the presence of strangers. He had dropped by Malfoy Manor on an errand, and left waiting in the hall when he happened to pass the study where Draco and Hermione were both being tutored in geography. The instructor was having them name the European countries and all of their capitals. Draco had managed to eleven. When it was Hermione's turn she had named all of them. Every single one. Then went on to name all the countries and capitals of Asia, the Middle East, and good portion of Africa. Snape had been rather impressed, but when he mentioned it to Lucius, his friend had simply muttered that she wasn't much to look at so she had make up for it somehow.

"He will not be present for the most part. Matters in Germany will keep him from home more often than not. There is no point in snubbing Draco and Narcissa."

"Narcissa is too busy exploiting Lucius' status in every store in upper London to miss me and Draco... I think I have plenty of reasons to snub him at the moment."

"He has already apologized," Snape pointed out, and while that wasn't necessarily a reason to forgive the embarrassment he had caused her, he did not like to see them at odds. They were such a complimentary pair it seemed a shame to have them fighting over such a tedious matter.

"He hasn't apologized to Ron."

He barely refrained from rolling his eyes. Ronald Weasley, while he had his uses, was not the sort of boy worth turning on your brother over. There was really no telling where exactly his loyalty lay or in what directions it would take him. For all his Slytherin cunning and ruthlessness, the boy was governed by his emotions more than anything else and that Gryffindor quality was going to lead him into

trouble one of these days. He only hoped she would realize this before he dragged her into his problems.

"I am sure Mr. Weasley is terribly disappointed," he said, sardonically.

It was quite well known that the youngest Weasley son was intolerably smug over having created a rift between the otherwise inseparable siblings, and if he was feeling the strain between him and his dorm mate he wasn't showing it.

"That's not the point. Can we please change the subject? I'm not going to change my mind. I'm staying at Hogwarts for the holidays," she said, setting down her tea. "Do you think I might be able to visit Harry during the holiday? He must be terribly lonely out there on his own."

"I assure you, he is in good hands. In any event, I have no intention of indulging your teenage rebellion against Lucius. I can't afford to be that openly bias. Besides, Harry will be busy catching up on his studies. He has a long way to go if he wants to start the second semester at the same time as everyone else."

She nods, but her disappointment is obvious. Despite the assurances in his letters that he is alright, she can't help but be worried about him. There is a melancholy tone to his writing, and she knows whatever really happened in Berlin took a toll on him spiritually as well as physically.

"Fine," she mutters, and just to be vindictive she adds. "I'll just have to find ways to amuse myself with Ron over the holidays."

She hid her satisfied grin her teacup at his disapproving glower.

~Page Break~

"Good morning, young master!" Vicky greeted, as she opened the door to Harry's bedroom carrying a breakfast tray. He made an unhappy groan and pulled his blankets over his head.

"Ugh... can't we put this off until lunch?" he muttered. On her perch, Elsbeth gave an irritate hoot in agreement. "It's not like there's anything for me to do once I wake up."

The maid grinned and set the breakfast tray aside for a moment, before sitting herself at the foot of his bed.

"That's not true. You've got to eat for one thing, and a bath would probably do you some good, plus your potions, and then I have you down for a massage. You still have a ton of homework to get through before tomorrow, so you'll want to get started, and-"

"Ugh... stop, stop... you're just depressing me."

"Oh! And hear I just thought you were sulking."

"Hn."

"Did I mention it was snowing?"

"..."

He peeked out from his blankets at her, and she marched herself over to the window and threw open the curtains. He flinched at the sudden influx of light, but soon enough his eyes adjusted and he grabbed his glasses from the nightstand. Against the gray sky he could see the flakes fall, fat and feathery, just like you always hoped to snow to be. He sat up and stared.

"Pretty, isn't it?" she said. "It's supposed to come down like this all day. You should make some sketches when you have the chance."

"Hmm..."

She set the breakfast tray in front of him; eggs, toast, apple slices, and orange juice. Just the thing a magical invalid needed. He dutifully took a bite of an apple piece, and she slipped out of his room again to help Ira do whatever it was she was doing.

It had been three and a half weeks since he left the hospital, and while he was thankful to be in the company of good friends, he couldn't help feeling rather melancholy. Ira and Vicky were wonderful women, like the sort of cousins or aunts he had always wanted growing up, but Ira was somewhat distracted with planning the wedding (which he could not wrap his head around six days out of the week) and Vicky was constantly trying to make him see the bright side of everything. He wasn't quite ready to put forth the necessary enthusiasm in order to really relate with them again.

He was tired, his magic was just starting to stabilize and strengthen after the blood loss he had suffered, his body ached and itched if he had nothing to distract himself, the final remnants of his pneumonia persisted keeping him from the outdoors, and nights were filled with nightmares of drowning and monsters. There was too little for him to do to take his mind off of the events of last couple of months even with the tutoring sessions and his caretaker's company. He often found himself sitting alone and thinking, remembering things about his childhood before magic and wondering how it had all lead to... what ever this was. There was blood on his hands and fear in his heart and his head was filled to bursting with questions and ideas and speculations.

He had never felt so lost in his entire life.

A startled shout and crash from downstairs shook him from his brooding, and he was out of bed and hurrying down the steps at something close to his old speed. He skidded through the kitchen door, wand in hand, and ready to fight but it proved unnecessary. He let out an exasperated sigh.

"Honestly, my Lord, would it kill you to knock? I know, technically, you own the entire country and everything in it, but as a gesture of courtesy?"

Voldemort's smile was anything but apologetic as he flicked his wand, fixing the broken teapot and vanishing the mess. Ira was just starting to recover her frazzled nerves. She still was not yet used to the Ruler of Wizarding Britain's abrupt visits to the cottage at completely random times without so much a knock on the door to warn them,

only to have him leave anywhere from ten minutes to ten hours later. This was his fourth unannounced visit, and she was seriously considering putting wards on the door to have anyone who didn't knock sent straight for a muggle landfill or the Atlantic Ocean or Severus' dungeons. Vicky on the other hand had simply curtsied politely and went on as usual, practically whistling as she continued to shuck peas for dinner.

"Force of habit. Sorry if I'm interrupting anything."

He glanced at Ira, the 'Lady of the House' at it were, who shook her head and forced a smile. Harry quickly drew back his attention before he started terrorizing the poor woman.

"What brings you by?"

"You can't guess?" the Voldemort asked, honestly looking surprised. "Don't you know what today is?"

"Dictatorship Appreciation Day?"

The Dark Lord sighed, and led Harry out of the kitchen for some privacy.

"It's December 21st."

"Okay," the Gryffindor agreed, waiting for the other shoe to drop. "Are we plotting to assassinate Santa and take over Christmas? I don't think we would be very popular after- Oh! Oh crap, I completely forgot."

Winter solstice. Today was the winter solstice. How could he have forgotten?

"Never mind," the Dark Lord dismissed, heading up the stairs. "My plans for you today are not related to the solstice itself, but since we've established something of a tradition..."

That was true. They had spent the last three solstices in each other's company. They marked the most incredible moments of his life, and

there was something surreal that they should be made with Voldemort, proverbial King of the Britain. Thinking about for too long often left Harry feeling strangely dizzy.

"I appreciate that, my Lord. I know you're really busy. How are things in Germany?"

The man looked around his room curiously, like he always did when found himself there. Harry frankly didn't understand his interest. It was a simple enough room. White walls, wooden floor, an iron frame bed with a blue and green checkered comforter, his school trunk at the foot, a wooden table piled with study material, a bookshelf with books and the little trinkets he had collected over the years, and a few sketches stuck to the wall. Elsbeth cocked her head at him curiously then settled back and fell asleep again. His breakfast tray was still on the bed, barely touched.

Voldemort helped himself to an apple slice.

"Well enough, with Germany itself. Dumbledore has made his reappearance and taken over the organization of the resistance. Our forward advance has been halted for the time being, but we are solidly entrenched now. If I can convince the Polish minister to commit some troops to the effort I am certain we'll be able to make another advancement, but frankly I am more concerned with preventing any alliances between Dumbledore and Germany's neighbors."

"Sounds complicated," Harry said, suddenly distracted at the mention of Dumbledore. His own feelings towards the man were contradictory and confusing, but the thought that Viktor may have died for him was more than a little sickening.

"Nothing you need to worry yourself about. How are your studies?"

"Ira thinks I'm ready to go back to school after the holidays. She's going to talk to Snape about it when he shows up. I really need to get out of this house."

"The estrogen level becoming too much?"

Harry rolled his eyes. "I like Ira and Victoria just fine, but Hogwarts... Hogwarts is home."

"Hhmm... just so," he agreed, running his finger along the bindings of some old textbooks. Then he turned his attention to his protégé, his expression sharpening. "Take your shirt off."

The Gryffindor just stared at him. Voldemort sighed.

"I really don't have a lot of time today. I have sacrificial offerings that need to be taken care of before I return to the office, and this is going to take up at least an hour all its own so if you don't mind..."

Harry rolled his eyes, and took off his pajamas shirt. It wasn't as if the man hadn't seen him starkers already. "Leave the door cracked, I don't want the ladies getting any weird ideas about what we're doing."

"Spoilsport. Lay down on the bed, face up."

While he did as he was told, the Dark Lord removed a clay jar from him robes and took a paintbrush from his desk.

"What are we doing exactly?"

"I found a way to prevent you from being possessed by anything or anyone against your will. It's a very old technique founded in Japan. I managed to get in contact with a sect of Shinto priest who were willing to send me the necessary items to perform the spell. I expect you to write them a very appreciative thank you letter."

Harry didn't know what a Shinto priest was, but if Voldemort was in willing to deal with them they must have been pagans of some sort. People still believed in lots of gods in Asian countries didn't they?

"What do I have to do?"

"Just lay there. They have performed most of the necessary rituals themselves already. Pull your pants down a little; I have to paint this over your entire stomach."

He did so, feeling increasingly awkward. The Dark Lord shook the jar a few times to remix the contents and then uncorked it. A strange scent wafted through the room, smelling strongly of unfamiliar bitter herbs and sulfur. Carefully, the man started to paint across his stomach. It felt cold and tingly, and not entirely pleasant. Harry hoped whatever it looked like wouldn't become a tattoo like the other marks. He was going to run out of available skin if things kept up like this.

"So... what does this spell do exactly?"

"There is a common belief within several Asian cultures that the soul resides not in the heart or the head, but in the stomach or rather the lower abdomen. Certain studies in Western wizardry support this theory. According to Shintoism and based on Hindu teachings, the spirit must first anchor itself in the Manipura, the solar plexus chakra in the stomach and then travel up the body until it reaches the Sahasrara, the crown chakra in the brain. There are reports of spirits lying dormant within the Manipura for decades without their host knowing before they decide to manifest themselves. Additionally, some possessions will instead travel down to the Svadhisthana, the sacral chakra in order to perform Immaculate Conception."

"Like the virgin Mary?"

"To name one. In the East, it is not unheard of for women to suddenly give birth to gods or for men to sire demons by the same mechanism. The nature and manipulation of chakra is a vast and complicated study."

"So what are you doing to me? Messing around with my... Manipura?"

"If I were to 'mess around' with it, you'd likely die horribly. No, I am simply putting a seal over it to prevent anything from anchoring itself. When you wish to deactivate the seal, you'll need to... cut yourself."

Harry lifted his head to look at him like he was mad.

"Why would I want to deactivate it? That's... why would I want to be possessed?"

Voldemort gave him a look that said he was being unusually daft.

"Not all possessions involve taking over the body like Greyback did. Much of it is less invasive. The solstice rituals we performed are one example. When you accept the blessing of a god it is the same thing. It all starts in the Manipura and radiates through the chakra points until it is released into the rest of the body."

He thought on that for long time as the Dark Lord continued his mysterious drawings. The bitter smell was starting to fade, but his stomach tingled and was starting to feel incredibly empty while rest of his body felt increasingly heavy.

"Hey...I feel weird."

"The spell absorbs a lot of magical energy. You should sleep."

"No...I want to see it first."

"I am almost done."

Harry drifted, his thoughts growing dull. He certainly hadn't thought his day would turn out like this. In a weird way, it was comforting to know life would throw in a few magical surprises that didn't nearly kill him or anyone else.

"Hey..."

"Yes," the Dark Lord said distractedly.

"Thanks for coming... and the mani-thingy spell. You're kinda cool when you're not scaring the shit out of me."

There was an amused snort, but no further comment as the man continued working. Harry tried to stay awake for a little longer, but no matter how long he waited it seemed there was still more to do until eventually he drifted off.

When he awoke, two days later, there were no sign of any seals on his stomach and he felt no different than he did any other day. He was convinced it had all been a strange dream until he went down to breakfast and found Snape sitting at the table. The professor glanced up at him from his newspaper, and slid a book across the table towards him. The title read Introduction to the Basic Principles of Chakra and their Many Uses by Siddhartha Sandi, translation by Ursula Norbleet.

"Our Lord thought you might be interested in that... after you catch up on your homework."

~ Page Break~

Robert reached for his coffee cup, then stopped when he remembered it was empty and had been for the last hour. He debated the merits of breaking his work stride to make another pot. Normally, Kyle would take care of these things. Coffee, lunch, invoices, phone calls... little things that otherwise swallowed the time he needed to handle the legal aspect of his business.

Kyle wasn't here thought. Kyle was in the country with the girls, no doubt cursing him for not being there with them. He had promised after all. What he hadn't factored on was that the war effort would prove so utterly inconvenient for due process. London had always been the center of legal matters in England. It held a majority of the court offices, particularly those that dealt with civil suites, which were his specialty. Or it had until the last two months. Legislation had been passed to begin decentralizing the various court offices from London to four other cities, which wouldn't have been so bad if the price of using the floo network hadn't tripled as a result and the time it took to have a court document processed hadn't just quadrupled. The Court spokesperson assured everyone that things would be back to normal by late spring, and that it was a necessary step to insuring the stability of Britain's government. This was all likely true (especially if the mess in Germany were to serve as an example), but it also meant Robert was stuck waiting around in London to finish up cases that should have been done a month ago.

All the while the double mortgage he was paying, the steady rise in prices within the city, and the back log of invoices were quickly putting him into debt. He needed an assistant, which he couldn't afford without another client, a well to do client not living in London preferably, and he couldn't get anymore clients without an assistant handling the advertisement that he didn't have any idea about. Kyle could have done it all with the ease that he did everything else, but there was no way he was bringing him or the girls back to London. Germany was still reeling from its enormous loss, but once it recovered there was doubt on where it would strike first.

So here he was, over worked, broke, and alone in a little flat that could get blown up at any minute. He decided to make himself another pot of coffee.

Just as he was making his way to the kitchen, a knock sounded at the door. He sighed. No doubt it was Mrs. Rutherford wondering why he hadn't called her back yet about her bill. He mentally steeled himself for the inevitable shouting, straightened himself out a bit in the hall mirror, and answered the door.

It was not Mrs. Rutherford.

"Are you Robert Reicher?" Lucius Malfoy, the picture of aristocratic pride in his full military uniform, asked without really asking.

"I...yes, I am he," he managed, more than a little stunned. Quickly, he snapped himself out of it, and stood aside. "Please come in, General Malfoy."

The man seemed pleased that he knew him on sight and used the proper title, but then how many people wouldn't know him? His face appeared in the papers at least every other day. The question was, why was he here?

"Mr. Reicher, I find I am in need of a lawyer."

~ Page Break~

Harry started his journey back to Hogwarts with a level of enthusiasm he hadn't realized he was even capable of anymore. The mob of reporters waiting for him on Platform 9 ¾ had done little to dampen his mood. The mob of students waiting for him on the train... well, actually fairly enjoyable.

"LORD CHAOS LIVES! ALL HAIL CHAOS!" George cheered down the passenger car, while Fred was busy trying to shake his hand off his arm. To Harry's embarrassment several other students shouted out a Hurray! and burst out into laughter.

"It's great to see you again, Harry," Fred said, swinging an arm over the boy's shoulder. "The school just hasn't been the same without you. Although, leading the invasion into Germany was pretty awesome. According to the Tattler you blew up the underground."

The younger Gryffindor hoped they were joking, because that was little bit too close to the truth for his own peace of mind. Snape had told him in advance that while most of the student body believed he was captured and badly injured during the rescue, his friends had been made aware of the more sordid details.

"No, that was Voldemort... I think. I don't really remember all that well. Critically wounded and all that," he said as lightly as he could manage. They seemed to sense his discomfort on the subject though and steered things away from it.

"Well, you look great. Did you get the package we sent you?"

"Was it a package that every time you opened it there was another package in it? For like... thirty tries?"

"Yeah."

"Snape wanted me to let you know in advance that you're spending Saturday mucking the owlry. You do know he has to check all my packages before he hands them off to me, don't you?"

They grinned at each other. "It must have slipped our minds. Hey, don't forget about the business venture we discussed before you left.

Even with the holidays ended we'll still have a lot of customers to satisfy."

He had forgotten about it, honestly. His black market smuggling operation to and from Hogwarts hadn't been at the forefront of his attention, and right now he didn't know if he would be sent out of the school often enough for it to work any more, but he was willing to try. It still sounded like a lot of fun.

He asked if they had seen Hermione and was surprised to learn she had stayed behind at Hogwarts for the holidays, apparently with Ron although that might have just been another one of their jokes. She hadn't mentioned anything about it in her letters.

"Well, who knows? There was a whole falling out between her and Draco," George said. "You'll have to ask him about it yourself."

Finding Draco took nearly hour, not because the Slytherin was being particularly evasive, but because people kept stopping him to make conversation including several dueling club members and friends from his house, among them Ginny and Clyde who confirmed that Hermione had stayed behind. When he finally found Draco, he was sulking in his compartment with Natalie and some other Slytherins pointedly ignoring him.

"Harry!" Natalie cheered, throwing her arms around him. "We weren't expecting you back so soon!"

"Can't have you all getting complacent on me, now can I? So tell me what's happened while I was... er..."

"Indispose?" Draco offered blandly. He glared at the other people in the compartment and made a sharp gesture for the door. Grumbling, they stood and shuffled out into the hall. It was rude, but Harry wasn't going to argue to let them stay. He doubted everything they were going to talk about was meant for their ears. "Good to see you aren't horribly mangled."

"I missed you too, darling," Harry laughed, and settled in next to Natalie. "Now what's this Hermione and Ron business?"

It was entirely the wrong question to ask, because it sent Draco into a furious monologue about... well, he wasn't sure what it was about but it involved some sort of rumor and Draco punching Ron and Lucius Malfoy being called in and Hermione being angry at him and it was really Ron's fault and he was somehow slipping her potions when no one was looking and making her totally unreasonable. At some point, Natalie started tuning him out and asking Harry how he had been and what he had done for the holidays. With the young Malfoy having lost all semblance of coherency and knowing he was just going to have to wait and ask Hermione, he picked up the conversation with her.

He explained how the last two months had been utterly dull, with nothing to do but study and heal. Everything before the last two months was carefully avoided, and she didn't pry. She told him about her own charity campaigns which were still immensely popular, the substitute Dueling club captains who were taking over after Snape demoted both Ron and Draco for their recent stupidity, a whole ridiculous slew of rumors that popped up about Harry, some particularly funny accidents in potions, and an idiot had knocked up one of the seventh-year Hufflepuffs. Oh, and Fred and George had turned an entire corridor into a swamp in his honor. Professor Flitwick was terribly impressed and didn't even dock any house points.

Eventually Draco was distracted enough from his own personal angst to contribute to the conversation and asked relentless questions about Snape's fiancé who he had only met a few times over the summer. It wasn't the same without Hermione, but he managed to enjoy himself until he got tired and dozed off.

When he woke again they were in Hogsmeade and a blizzard was coming down on the little village. Atop its hill, he could just barely make out the burning torches of the castle. Outside the winter wind ripped through his clothing like paper, and he hurried into the nearest available couch to escape it. A familiar excitement filled him. He had been gone for so long it felt like returning after summer break, and endless possibilities waited upon his return.

The travel to Hogwarts was slow and cumbersome, and the coaches rocked dangerously from side to side in the wind. Natalie held on to

him tightly every time it shook, but it was Natalie. She may have just been looking for an excuse.

And then he was home, walking through the portcullis and shaking the snow from his clothes. The ancient stones were glowing warmly in the firelight, and all around him familiar faces were laughing and talking and hugging one another. Teachers were gathered along the edges to greet their students, and among them was McGonagall whose severe expression softened a bit when she saw him. He grinned back at her.

"Harry!"

He spun around and found Hermione practically swimming through the crowds towards him. She hesitated for a moment when she reached him, looking him up and down for possible frailty. He rolled his eyes and pulled her into a hug, and she broke out into laughter.

"It's so wonderful your back! I missed you so much!"

"I missed you too. It feels like for-"

"AAAAHHH!"

They both turned to the other side of the room at the sound of terrified shrieking. Amongst the melee of students, one particularly unfortunate girl was panicking and flailing about as large clumps of her hair started falling off her head and something that might have warts or might have been boils began popping out all over her.

"Oh my," Hermione said, her eyes wide. "It looks like someone slipped poor Trudy Sabbat some Troll Juice. The twins really shouldn't have snuck those into the holiday party favors. Who knows whose hands they wound up in."

He gaped at her. "Hermione!"

"Don't look at me!" she said, in mocking indignation. "Would I do something like that? Besides, you were with me the entire time!"

He glanced around the hall.

"Yeah, but where was Ron?"

She shrugged and he rolled his eyes.

"Honestly, I'm gone for two months and he's corrupted you!" he said, and then grinned. "I have to say I rather like the change. I'll assume she deserved it?"

"And then some! I'll tell you all about it on the way to the tower, and you can tell me what Uncle Severus' wedding plans are. He's been horribly secretive."

"Hermione, I don't think he even knows what the plans are. He's left Ira to plan the whole thing on her own. I don't know what she would have done without Vicky there to help her. I think she's going to make her the Maid of Honor at this point."

They made their way to the tower, an easy conversation flowing between them as if nothing in the previous semester had ever happened. He basked in the simple pleasure of it, knowing eventually it would fade and he would be faced once again with his painful past and his uncertain future.

For now, however, he could forget and simply enjoy the moment.

Author's Notes:

Rhiannon's daughter is a special case. Even though she's called a goddess, she does in fact have a half-human soul. She's really the spirit of a demi-god. The way in which she died prevents her from taking on a god's mantle, so she lives in a between state, attaching herself to specific sorts of people.

Goodfellows, like in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, are sprites that like to play tricks on humans.

Hello, everyone. Sorry, I haven't been around lately. Very, very busy. I had to move (AGAIN) a month after I had just moved into a new place! That, on top of summer classes and work, just didn't make for a lot of time to write. I'm in between semesters now though. Hopefully, I'll be able to make up to in until then.

Book VI

Chapter 1: Rising Darkness

"You are distracted," Snape observed, without looking up from his paperwork. It was a fascinating skill he had, the ability to appear absorbed in one thing and yet still able to pick out 'delinquent' behavior no matter how small. It made most of the student body hate his classes (and sometimes the man himself) and Harry wasn't above admitting he found it rather annoying himself. Although, in this instance he was hardly being subtle.

"It's the last day," Harry said, forcing his eyes from the open window and towards his guardian. They were alone in the DA&D class, fulfilling their 'debriefing', as Harry liked to call it, just like they had every week since he had returned to Hogwarts. They were tedious and awkward most of the time, Harry hating to talk about himself especially to someone as hypercritical as Snape, but he had to admit his anxiety had stayed in manageable levels since they'd started. His depression was another matter.

"You've been distracted all week."

"We had exams."

"How did you do?"

"I didn't fail anything."

"Ah, the aspirations of youth. You're final project in Arithmancy was quite impressive. Professor Vector wants to submit a paper on it to a university press."

Harry looked away. His final project had been ridiculously simple in his opinion, involving little more than tweaking an old pagan spell using modern arithmancy theory. The idea was novel enough, however, to impress his teachers.

"Are there any university presses that haven't been blown up yet?" he said blandly. Snape looked up.

"So that's why you've been moping all week. You're worried about London. I assure you Mr. Potter, this isn't the first time it's been burned down and it will not likely be the last."

"And I feel instantly lighter having been made aware of that heart-warming fact."

London had been attacked ten days ago, and for all intents and purposes was still under attack. It had been the first domestic attack in months. With a majority of Germany's forces pre-occupied with trying to re-fortify against British encroachment there had been a long period of tense quiet, but recent alliances with Italy, Switzerland, and Austria had increased their enemy's offensive capabilities and the battlefield had expanded into their backyard once again. More than one of his classmates had received word that a family member had been lost in the fighting or their home had been destroyed. More than one of his classmates had glared death at him as if it were his fault. In some twisted, convoluted way, it probably was.

"Do you need anything?"

And by 'anything' the man meant potions.

"No, thanks. I just got off the last of my medical potions two weeks ago. I want to try to keep it that way. Besides, it hasn't kept me from sleeping or anything."

Snape stared at him pointedly, looking for any sign he might go crazy again. Harry rolled his eyes.

"I'm fine."

His guardian made a noncommittal noise, and turned back to his paperwork.

"We have an appointment for a fitting in Coventry on Tuesday, be ready to go by two. The rehearsal is on Friday."

"Why precisely do I have to go to the rehearsal again? I'm just sitting with everyone else."

"Because it's your lot in life to suffer and I said so."

Harry grinned. "You just don't want to be left alone with your in-laws and you couldn't convince Malfoy Sr. to go and hold your hand."

Snape turned a nasty glare at him, and essentially confirmed his hypothesis. He honestly didn't blame the man. Susan was the champion of inane prattle and talking to Morgan was like talking to a wall... a big scary wall with the entire domestic security force in Britain standing behind it, which left Snape in a rather awkward position.

"Don't you have some packing you need to finish?" the man hissed in annoyance.

"Yes, I do," he lied pleasantly, and got up to leave. "See you at dinner."

~Page Break~

Instead of going back to his dormitory, Harry went in search of something useful to do. His housemates, while not as openly hostile as they once might have been (even the ones who stared at him accusingly never dared say so to his face), were not comfortable in his presence. Nothing could induce a tense silence like him walking into the commons room.

He didn't fault them their unease. The school year had been one giant shock after another, first with his defense of Luna in full werewolf form, followed by his running away, then enlistment into the army, and subsequent involvement in the largest and most notorious

battle in the war so far. A living, breathing reminder of the chaos their world had fallen in to, he was met with more than a little suspicion around the castle.

He didn't mind. His mind, body, and soul had suffered terrible blows and he needed his space more than anything else to recover. His closest friends had remained, some of them confused and uncertain, but still loyal and that was more than he had hoped for. There had even been a few surprisingly persistent supporters.

"I don't know how we're going to beat Rookbridge. They've got twenty more members than we do!" Ron whined, trying to keep his expression pensive so it didn't look like he was. "We'll all have to do three duels for every two they do. That's completely unfair."

Cedric grinned and rolled his eyes, helping Harry organize the Dueling Club supply closet for the last time. Ron had been ranting and fussing about the upcoming summer competitions since they had started, doing very little in the way of helping. The Sr. Dueling Club vice-captain was 'supposed' to be at the Hogwarts Herald final staff meeting and end of the year party, but he had been roped into 'helping' last second by Captain Johnson (Angelina had tenaciously held the title for the entire year against his relentless ambition) and been stubbornly refusing to do anything out of spite.

"It'll be fine. Just don't enroll the entire club in that particular competition. It's not like everyone is going to be able to make it anyway," Cedric pointed out, not bothering to look up from his check list to make sure all the dueling swords were accounted for.

"I won't be able to make it. Neither will Hermione or Draco," Harry reminded, sorting through dueling armor. They had finally gotten a standard set of robes for their club, black and red, courtesy of a generous donation by Malfoy Sr. Harry rather liked them, but they did make telling which belong to who rather difficult. "The wedding is that weekend."

Ron was not appeased, and if anything was more furious than ever.

"Oh, that's bloody brilliant! I lose two of my better players and my assistant. I can't keep track of all the rookies on my own!"

Harry snorted. The 'rookies' were anything but after a year of intense Dueling Club training, and while he hadn't been able to participate in a lot of hands on dueling while he was recovering from his injuries he didn't think he had been demoted to being Ron's 'assistant' at any point in the year.

"Oh, woe," he said blandly.

The Slytherin scowled at him, but didn't say anything further. They had both been getting along better over the recent months, in no small part do to Hermione's insistence, and they might tentatively call themselves friends... if you can call someone who you didn't particularly like but didn't completely despise a friend anyway. He supposed with Slytherins it was completely possible.

"Alright, I think that's the last of it. Thanks for coming to help, Harry," Cedric said, straightening up. They all walked out of the supply closet, allowing Ron to lock the door behind them. While he was busy setting the wards, Cedric turned to Harry and held out his hand.

"It's been an interesting couple of years with you around. I certainly hope this won't be the last time we meet."

The Gryffindor grinned and took his hand.

"Our world is a small one. I'm positive this isn't the end of it. Congratulations, by the way. I heard you won a full scholarship."

"Thanks. It's better late than never. I'll see you at dinner! See you around, Weasley."

Ron grunted, but didn't say anything until the older boy was gone from the room. Then he turned to Harry, his expression shifting from annoyed to... something else.

"I need to talk to you about something."

"Is this about Hermione or Dueling Club?" he asked. Really, those were the only two things they could talk to each other about... at least civilly.

"What? No. Nothing like that. This... is about something else."

He didn't like the sound of that, but he stood there and waited a moment for him to continue. Ron was fidgeting, his fingers clenching and unclenching, fumbling into his pockets and fiddling with his wand, but his eyes were hard and intent as they focused on Harry.

"You know 'old' magic, right? I mean, I've seen you do some pretty weird shit and all with magic. Crazy, power shit they don't teach around here. Shit barely anyone even knows anything about anymore."

Harry was starting to feel the urge to fidget himself now, but forced himself to remain still. He didn't like the direction this conversation was heading. It wasn't that he hadn't talked about pagan magic before. He had explained it to the best of his abilities to anyone who had asked, and had demonstrated it on several occasions including for his final project in Arithmancy. There were times, however, when those questions had become extremely uncomfortable and he had a feeling this was one of those.

Ron waited for a response, but receiving none he continued.

"I want to ask your help for something."

"...What?" he asked cautiously.

"You have to promise you'll help first."

"The hell I do. You're asking me for help, not the other way around. I don't owe you anything."

"Shit... well, at least promise you won't tell anyone that I asked."

Harry considered it. It seemed a minor thing, although honestly he didn't even want to know what the favor was.

"Fine, I promise I won't tell."

"In a Wizard's Oath."

"For Merlin's sake, Ron!" he snapped, and turned to storm off. The Slytherin quickly grabbed him by the arm.

"Wait, wait! Jeez! Chill out, will you? I just need you to take this seriously."

"Then stop acting like a git. I take it you want me to help you with something illegal?"

Ron nodded once.

"More illegal than what the twins and I were doing?"

He honestly wasn't entirely sure the twin's smuggling ring was really 'illegal' or not, but it was certainly more than enough to get them all suspended if they had been caught. Despite having missed most of the holiday season, their original plan to make a little extra money smuggling packages in and out of the school had been a rousing success do mostly in part to Harry's frequent and regularly scheduled medical appointments at St. Mungo's. The teachers hadn't figured it out yet, or if they had they were turning a blind eye, and most of the students knew only that it involved the twins and that there would be hell to pay if any of them snitched that fact. As far as he knew, the only ones who seemed to know about it were Ron and Ginny, and Harry wasn't certain how or when that had happened exactly.

"Yeah," Ron said, "Definitely."

"Okay, so what is it, then?"

Harry watched as he licked his lips and swallowed thickly, his intent gaze flickering elsewhere for a moment.

"You know about my dad?"

"...Yes. Ginny told me."

"I saw him last summer. I was probably the last family he ever saw, and he was so far gone by then he didn't even recognize me. He thought I was Bill. Kept telling me to look after mom and the others."

"I'm sorry."

Ron shook his head and looked away. "I don't need your pity, Potter. That's not what this is about. While my dad was rambling on about taking care of the family, he told me something else. Something I didn't know about before. Something I don't think anyone else knows."

He paused for a moment, looking around the room suspiciously before casting a silencing ward so no one could overhear them. He was starting to freak Harry out.

"He told me the truth about who sent him to prison and why."

"The truth? It was just all those muggle contraband charges, wasn't it? A stupid and petty thing to go to Azkaban over, but..."

"Shut up, Potter! What do you know about it? It was stupid. So what? People do stupid things everyday. You're a walking example."

"And you're a talking example. Just spit it out. You don't have to be a dramatist about it."

"The worst my dad should have got was a month tops in Azkaban, not...not twenty damn years. Everyone knows it. Everyone. Someone pulled some strings, paid to keep my dad locked up and tortured until he died a miserable forgotten failure of a man and a father. He was stupid, but he...he wasn't that stupid. He didn't deserve... We didn't deserve....fuck!"

They both squirmed awkwardly in the tense silence that followed, as Ron tried to compose himself again.

"I found out who did it. I found out who threw my dad in prison and kept him there until he died."

"Who?"

Ron turned back to him, the familiar, obnoxious smirk in place.

"Give me an Oath and I'll tell you."

"I'm leaving now."

"I want to kill him."

Harry paused. "Yeah, okay. I can see where you might, but-"

"And I want you to help me."

"... You're serious?"

"He's a powerful man. I can't just... sneak up behind him and cast a Killing Curse. It can't ever be connected back to me. It has to be untraceable. You have to know of ways. 'Old' magic has, like, a million weird ways to kill someone."

Harry just stared at him, trying to fathom what he was hearing. Ron seriously wanted him to help murder someone using pagan magic. If it weren't so completely abhorrent he would be laughing.

"You wouldn't have to do anything," Ron promised, "Just point me in the right direction; maybe help me get some supplies. I tried looking myself, but anything I need would be in the Restricted section and I can't have anyone knowing what I was doing and I can't go to a dealer. Most of the books they hand out are pure malarkey and I don't know enough to tell what's real and what isn't."

Harry just looked at him.

"No."

"If you're worried about someone finding out, I'll take an Unbreakable Vow not to tell-"

"No."

"Is this about money?"

"No! Merlin, this isn't about money. Are you listening to yourself? You're asking me to help murder someone!"

"It's justice, not murder! He imprisoned and killed my father! And if that's not enough for you, he killed Ginny and Fred and George's father too! He ruined our lives!"

"So you're going to kill him? Will that make it better? Will your dad rise from the grave and everyone live happily ever after? What if you're wrong, Ron? You said it yourself that your dad was out of your mind when you saw him last. He could have just made up someone to blame. Are you really going to go kill someone because of a paranoid delusion?"

It was a good thing Ron had remembered to put up a silencing charm because at this point they were both shouting at each other.

"Screw you, Potter! I know what happened! He killed my dad! I can't just pretend I don't know! I can't ignore it! What would you do in my position? What if you knew where the guy who killed your folks was and where to find'm? You going to tell me you'd just shrug and say 'whatever'?"

Harry hesitated. His parents' murderer was already dead, overdosed in an alleyway months after his crime, and Harry had never had the time to truly ponder what he would have done if he had ever met the guy in person. What would he do if he knew the man were still alive and wandering free in Cologne? He was not naïve enough to think he would let the man walk away. Not even a year ago he had nearly strangled a man to death with his bare hands after the Goddess Colony Massacre.

He still couldn't say he wouldn't kill the German Auror if he ever saw him again. Not really an issue since he suspected he was either very dead or wishing he was by now.

At the same time, he could not bring himself to justify what Ron intended. There was nothing to guarantee that the accused wasn't just the convenient target of a delusional man or that there were some unseen factors accounting for Mr. Weasley incarceration. What if he had justifications of his own for imprisoning Mr. Weasley? He didn't know Mr. Weasley personally, but he did know that the man had fought on the opposite side of the war and there was no telling what he had done during those dark times. For all he knew, the unknown man had paid to keep Mr. Weasley in prison for murdering his family! The mass amnesty that had been granted after the conclusion of the war resulted in dozens of cases of murderers and thieves walking away from crimes that should have had them rightfully thrown into Azkaban. How was he to know this wasn't one of those instances? Who was Ron intending to kill anyway? Was it someone they knew? Someone with a family of his own? Was that why he hadn't told him already?

"Probably not," Harry finally admitted. "But I'm not going to help you. What you're asking for... that's Dark Arts on a level I'm not going to go screwing around with. Not unless I know it's worth it."

Ron glared at him, burning red and radiating his anger and frustration. Harry inched away from him, more out of physical discomfort than fear. With his magus sensortia, the radiant magic flowing off the Slytherin felt like hot sandpaper against his skin and smelled faintly of phosphorus.

"Fine. I should have known better than to ask," he snarled, stomping towards the door. Before he reached it, however, he couldn't stop from turning and throwing out one last barb. "Hypocrite."

Harry didn't bother to refute it. It wasn't untrue. He had messed with powerful magicks for the wrong reasons or no reason at all several times before, and it had hurt others and himself. It had also saved others. He was hoping that as he grew more experienced the ability to tell which reasons were legitimate and which weren't would

become clearer. In the meantime, yes, he was on occasion a hypocrite and he didn't like that about himself.

That didn't mean he was going to go pandering to Ron's rather skewed sense of justice. That would involve something far worse than hypocrisy.

What to do now? Should he try and stop Ron? Should he tell someone?

He had promised he wouldn't tell. If he didn't, someone could die though. If he did... it would be a mess. Annoying prat though Ron could be, he had reason to be angry and attempted murder accusations would bring down more trouble than was probably warranted.

He would have to talk to Ron again later, hopefully after he cooled off. Perhaps he could convince him to try something less drastic, or even to drop the matter altogether. If worse came to worse, he could talk to Hermione. If anyone could convince the guy he was being unreasonable it was her.

He liked to avoid involving her if he could help it though.

He sighed. Bother. He had been looking forward to a quiet summer.

~ Page Break~

"And where might our Lord Chaos be off to? You look like you're up to something suspicious," George said, appearing at his right from out of no where. Harry had no sooner turned to answer him, when Fred appeared at his left.

"Can we help?"

Harry rolled his eyes.

"I'm just going to pick up Inana from the greenhouse. Professor Sprout is locking them up tonight, so I won't be able to get in tomorrow before we leave."

"Then it's a good thing we spotted you!" George insisted. "It isn't safe to go wandering the grounds without protection. Anything could just come out and snatch you away! Like German Aurors-

"-or Italian Aurors-

"- or Swedish Aurors-

"- dementors-

"- dragons-

"- merpersons-

"- fangirls-

"- a pterodactyl-

"-a... a what?"

Fred shrugged. "It could happen. It's Harry."

"True."

He fought valiantly not to smile at their combined antics, but it was admittedly difficult. They continued on their way towards the main entrance, where McGonagal was already working on readjusting the wards for next morning's exodus from the school to the train station. Several Sentinels were there as well, watching for danger and assisting where asked, but saying very little.

"Hello, Mr. Potter," she greeted pleasantly, before turning a rueful expression to his two companions who were still listing off potential threats the grounds might hold.

"- aliens-

"-orcs-

"-lawyers-

"-Jehovah's witnesses-

"What are they going on about now?" she asked.

"Haven't a clue. They wanted to come down to the greenhouse with me to get Inana."

She nodded, and gestured him along. There was enough security wandering the grounds already that she was not worried about aurors... or dragons or fangirls or aliens. The sky was warm and sunny and the grounds green with spring growth. It was a time to enjoy the outdoors, not cower inside the castle. She let them go, playing hardly any mind as they wandered away and disappeared around a corner.

Once alone in the greenhouse, however, the twins closed in on their younger friend.

"Now that we've got you alone...", Fred murmured, batting his eyelashes coyly.

"Please remember you're locked in a room with one of the most venomous snakes in the world before you try anything," he said blandly.

They both chuckled, and handed him a black bag. He took it cautiously. It was heavy and jingled in his hands as it moved.

"What is this?"

"Your cut. We had a very profitable year. There's just under fifty galleons in there. I'd put it somewhere the auditors can't find it if I were you," George explained. "It's too bad we won't be here for the next year. We could probably make twice that now that we've got a good reputation... relatively speaking. We want to hand it off to Ron and Ginny if you're agreeable. They could use the money and the experience before they graduate."

Harry nodded, pocketing the cash. He had no idea what he was going to do with all that money. He had some of his own from his summer jobs and also from his service pay while working as ambassador for the werewolf colonies, but that was all sent directly to his Gringotts account and he had never looked at it closely and very rarely touched it. That money, he had decided after he got back from Germany the first time, was to pay off his Hogwarts tuition and Court debt when he graduated and was not to be touched. Hogwarts and the Court provided all his living essentials, and the few extravagances he indulged in were usually gifts from friends or provided for some ulterior motive (his entire wardrobe was Voldemort commissioned and approved, and only those who didn't know him thought they were a gifts). This wasn't something he could just dump in his savings account and not expect someone to ask some rather uncomfortable questions. Primarily Snape, who took more interest in his bank balances than Harry did.

"I'll help out if I can, but I don't think we'll be able to rely on medical appointments next year. I'm all healed up."

"No worries, mate. You and Ron'll figure something out. He can be quite devious when he puts his mind to it."

Harry felt a flicker of unease. He considered telling them about his conversation with Ron only a few minutes ago, but ultimately decided to wait. There was no telling how they would respond. They might try to stop him... or they might try to help him. They were good friends to have, but pranks were not the only reason people feared to get on their bad side.

"I guess so," he said, moving further into the greenhouse in search of Inana. "Any idea what you'll do with your earnings?"

"We're starting a business. This'll cover the down payment on the mortgage. We've been wanting to do it for a while, but figured we might as well wait 'til we graduated. Mum would have a coronary if we dropped out early. Can't imagine Ma and Pa Stone* would be too happy about it either," Fred said, idly wandering the rows of vegetation.

"Good thing we waited too. Real estate prices are rock bottom, what with the war going on and all."

Harry looked up. That didn't make any sense to him. As far as he had heard, the price of real estate was actually ridiculously high with so many people being forced to move or searching for safer homes outside of...

"You're starting a business in London?"

He didn't know why he said London. It could just have easily been one of a dozen other cities that had all but been half abandoned in the wake of foreign attacks, but the twins had never done anything by halves and London seemed too insane a choice to pass up.

"By golly, he's sharp!" George laughed.

"Shhh! Don't go telling anyone. It's a secret! We got a real bargain on this place. Normally it'd be twenty times what they're asking for, but the owners don't have any kids to leave it to and since they wanted to get out of town fast we got it was a steal. Only one of the walls got blown up too!"

Harry shook his head. His guardian was getting married, Ron was plotting murder, and the twins had decided to start a business in the middle of a battlefield. He was almost afraid to run into anyone else if this was going to set the tone for the day.

"Just be careful, will you?" he said tiredly, not even trying to convince them they were crazy. They knew they were already. "You're my favorite minions after all."

"Aaahhh! You like us! You really do!" Fred sang, and rushed forward as if to hug him, but came up just short. "Too bad your girlfriend doesn't."

He pointed to a spot behind Harry, and sure enough Inana was raised up until her head reached the middle of his chest, her hood flared wide. Confused by her suddenly aggressive display, Harry hissed softly to her and gently stroked her head and hood until she relaxed

once again. He carefully lifted her up and wrapped her around his shoulders, taking her out into the spring sun.

As the twins made to follow, she flared her hood once again and hissed nastily, bringing them both up short again. Harry smirked over his shoulder.

"That's what you get for feeding her a rubber mouse."

"Oh, come on! That was funny! She squeaked like a toy for a week!"

"Yes, I remember. So does she. I'd sleep with one eye open tonight."

Judging by the rather stunned looks on their faces, he supposed his warning had been received and he made his way back to the castle. He walked as slowly as possible, soaking up as much of the sun and fresh air as he could.

~ Page Break ~

Harry made a brief attempt at finding Ron again, but gave up fairly quickly in favor of terrorizing the student body with Inana. It probably wasn't very Gryffidnor-like (or more like it was and no Gryffidnor would admit it), but pretending to act friendly (and that meant hugging and hand shakes and generally being within a arm's length) with a giant cobra around his neck made for some very interesting (failed) conversations, facial expressions, and escape attempts.

Not exactly his most stellar behavior, but it was the last day of school and if he was feeling a little Slytherin-like no one was going to remember it in August. Besides, Inana had a wonderful time. He finally returned to the Common Room for a shower before the End of the Year Feast, and found Hermione waiting for him with a letter.

"Uncle Severus dropped this off for you. It's from Blackbone," she said. Her expression was strangely pinched, and he assumed that meant she was disturbed by it, and didn't feel right about handing it over. Harry wondered, not for the first time, if she didn't blame Sirius to some extent for what happened to him in Germany. She had been uncharacteristically evasive on the subject of werewolves, and given

his own desire to avoid discussing what had happened he had been happy enough to pretend he didn't notice.

It seemed that was no longer an option.

After more than five months of silence, his godfather was finally reaching out to him. Harry was afraid. Sirius had made no attempts that he knew of to come and see him while he was in the hospital or when he was recovering, and there had been no letters. The silence had felt damning then, but the break of it felt like fall of a guillotine's blade. Was his godfather going to officially break their bond here and now?

Could he blame him? For every gift that Harry had ever brought to his godfathers and their pack was soon followed by incredible tragedy.

He turned the envelope over and over in his hand, searching for some sort of clue about its contents, but there was only his name written out in Sirius' sharp, slashing script. He considered waiting to open it until after dinner or perhaps on the train or even once he got back to the cottage. Why ruin his last day with bad news?

Except the day hadn't been that great to begin with, and Hermione looked about ready to tear the letter out of his hand and read it herself... or set it on fire. One or the other. Cautiously, he opened the envelope and pulled out the contents. It was brief, and rather uninformative. Rather than feeling relief, Harry felt an even greater anxiety.

"What does it say?" she asked.

"It's a summons. Sirius is requesting to see me 'at my earliest convenience'. Whatever that means," he said, not looking up. The tone was formal, cold even, and nothing about it suggested the Head Alpha was looking forward to a reunion anymore than Harry was.

Hermione stepped closer to read the letter as well, biting her bottom lip and generally looking unhappy. After reading it herself, she said, "I don't think you should go."

"I have to. It's an official summons. I'm still, technically, Sirius' ambassador," he said without much enthusiasm. Harry, as far as he knew, had not been officially retired from his position and still received some sort of pay even though he had not been actively carrying out his responsibilities for some time. 'Medical leave' is what Draco called it.

"That's a load of crap, Harry."

His eyes jumped to her instantly. "Hermione, did you just swear?"

She rolled her eyes.

"You don't have to go if you don't want to. Just tell the Dark Lord. He'll get you out of it. It's... It's not safe for you there."

His first instinct was to protest, to state that he was perfectly safe and no one wanted to hurt him there, but the words died in his mouth. He had lied frequently in his life, but he had never been comfortable with it and certainly not with a lie so blatantly obvious.

"I'll figure something out."

~ Page Break~

"I... Yes...I wanted to ask you if I could... if you would...tell me your story. Can I be your biographer?"

Potter's eyes were soft with sympathy, but there lingered a persistent wariness. His face was that of an ordinary fourteen year old, but his eyes... there was a story there. A thousand stories.

"No, I'm sorry. I can't do that."

Voldemort prodded the memory for a moment, but it lacked the oily flavor that marked Tom's presence in McGunny's mind. The young man in his grasp struggled weakly, clawing at his arms with carefully trimmed nails and kicking at his knees. It was pathetic and useless. Even months before inactivity and potions had stolen his strength McGunny had never had the ability to pull himself free. Ruthlessly,

the Dark Lord shoved aside the memory and searched for another, looking through the shattered debris of memories the mind-healers had knocked loose since his last visit.

"Now?" the lilting, female voice asked from behind the Venetian mask. The eerie, white face almost seemed to float in the air against the night sky. Voldemort did not recognize her voice by only the one word, but he thought she might be the dark vampiress he had glimpsed once before in another memory. Tom was also wearing a mask, and with it he could easily distinguish his younger counterpart's full control over Horace's body.

"Midnight. Not a minute before and not a minute after. We cannot give the Aurors time to gather themselves and-"

A bell rang, deep and low, distracting all of them. They turned to the house below them, and with a few violent slashes with his wand, Tom destroyed the protective wards.

The memory faded, and the Dark lord tugged and poked at it violently, trying to force out just a few more seconds of information that refused to come loose. It took him a second to realize he was physically shaking McGunny as well, who was now squeezing his eyes shut and crying and begging for him to stop. Disgusted, he tossed the young man aside, not even bothering to watch as he crawled away to the nearest corner of his tiny room. He had seen it before.

Every few weeks, as his schedule allowed, he would come and see how much progress the mind-healers had made in unlocking his lost secrets. So far it had not been anything helpful. All he had been able to gather was that Tom had attempted to grow his own body but was forced to abandon the venture prematurely (which he already knew) and that he had been hiding in Germany for several months including the siege of Berlin and that vampires were somehow involved and underground tunnels.

He could make neither heads nor tails of it, and the more time that passed the more irrelevant it seemed. Surely, where ever Tom had disappeared to could no longer be traced? But there was still the chance, and he found he could not abandon the course he had set.

Besides, even if he could not uncover Tom's whereabouts, he might discover what exactly had happened prior and during Durmstang's escape. Now that he knew Tom had been acting through Horace, there was a world of possibilities he had not considered before. There was also the matter of what exactly Tom had been up to in Germany and whether those plans were still taking place.

Today wasn't going to be the day he found out, however, and he stalked from the room and allowed the medi-nurses in. As he walked away, he could hear McGunny screaming nonsense as his caregivers descended on him with potions and bindings. Mind-healers lingered in the hall, refusing to go in to check on their patient, and instead watched him fearfully or accusingly. He smiled darkly at them as he passed, reminding them they were coconspirators in tormenting an innocent boy and their consciences were no more clean than his own.

He flooded from the hospital administration office to a secure floor in Bristol, just a block away from the Brass Cult headquarters, and walked the short distance to get there. The streets were thick with soldiers patrolling and marching in formation, so that the few civilians still left in the city moved about nervously in attempt to stay out of their way and out of their notice. A few paused to watch the Dark Lord pass, but he was not so rare a sight these days. Soldiers stopped to salute, but he was moving passed them before gestures could even be completed.

He had been in a bad mood since the attacks in London, and he would not be satisfied until he had levied a blow against his enemies that wasn't at least three times as devastating. This would be difficult now that he had Germany's new allies to contend with on top of the Germans themselves.

This was why he was in such a hurry to see Lucius. He needed to update his General on the latest status of their own alliances and begin making plans for their counter offenses now, before they held their next war council. He made a brief stop in his private office to check his messages with his office assistants and run through his appointments for the day, then headed out across the courtyard to track down Lucius.

He took a moment to watch the latest recruits practice in the courtyard from somewhere they wouldn't notice him. Fresh soldiers were coming in fast and heavy now with the local attacks, Private businesses in the major cities were moving or closing down, and there were hundreds of displaced and angry witches and wizards looking for work and revenge and glory in the aftermath. With the end of the school year, he was expecting even more patriotic young men and women with intentions to join the fight. He felt no small amount of pride as he watched his army grow in size and power, but he also felt a sense of caution. The increasingly militaristic state of Britain was to his benefit, but the massive redistribution of wealth and industry that came with it was something he was going to have to watch out for. It wouldn't do to strengthen his military only to weaken the influence of his nobility, degrading the cultural and educational development they oversaw on his behalf. He had no intention of ruling a country of brutes.

He made a mental note to schedule appointments with the Heads of the Court of Cultural Affairs and the Court of Education sometime that week, and continued on his way. Soldiers stood at every door and hallway, tense and bored, but quick to salute and get out of his way. Their over abundance was explained in part by the need to prevent any unauthorized individuals from reaching Lucius' administration offices, because once that happened there was too much chaos to know if someone was demanding reports or launching an attack on Romania.

"No, I need another report. One's that's actually legible! Haven't you heard of-"

"I put that file on your desk an hour ago; it's probably under-"

"These statistics are over a month old!"

"I don't know. Those aren't a priority. What about-"

"What do you mean she's dead? She was alive yester-"

The Dark Lord waded through the papers littering the office and shooed away paper airplanes with a flick of his wand, no one paying him any mind as he slipped into through the office's back door and into Lucius' private waiting room. The secretary, a new one he noted, stood as he entered and offered him refreshment.

"Coffee. No milk. No sugar," he said without looking at her, brushing stray sticky notes from his robes. "Is the General in?"

"Yes, my Lord," she said, pouring him cup from one of the seven different carafes lining the counter behind her. "He's in a private meeting with his lawyer right now. I'll announce you if you like, or I could... offer a bit of a distraction while you wait?"

He actually looked at as she approached and noticed that she was in fact a very attractive woman. Dark wavy hair, pale soft skin, and green eyes that most would consider vibrant if they hadn't seen Potter's up close before. There was a definite sway to her hips as she stalked towards him, and when she stopped just a little too close to hand him his cup, he noticed with some amusement that her position was such that he could accept the cup without looking down her blouse.

Subtle, she was not.

He felt himself smile just a bit in dark amusement, and she suddenly tensed. No doubt she realized she had just bitten off more than she could chew. Later, he thought. He turned away instead and simply headed for Lucius' office, silently undoing the protection spells and letting himself inside without knocking.

Lucius sat behind his desk as always, his space the exact opposite of the administration offices. It was elegant, tidy, and not a scrap of paper or a single quill present unless he was actually using it. Voldemort often wondered how he managed it. The Malfoy patriarch did not look surprised by his sudden entrance, and simply rose respectfully. His guest, the lawyer no doubt, wasn't as prepared and sat staring dumbly at him for several seconds.

"My Lord," Lucius greeted. "This is Robert Reicher, he's representing me for the suite against Crouch I told you about."

That seemed to snap the man out of his stupor, and he immediately jumped to his feet and bowed politely.

"It's an honor to meet you, my Lord," he said cautiously, and Voldemort mentally applauded him for not stuttering.

"Likewise," he said, blandly, then paused. "Reicher... that name sounds vaguely familiar..."

"Ah, yes. Your...ah, young Mr. Potter is a friend of the family's."

Voldemort thought about it for a moment, before recalling the context he had heard their name. Snape had mentioned them once or twice.

"You're the one with the two little girls, yes?"

"Yes. I...yes."

The Dark Lord nodded and dismissed the matter for later examination.

"Well, I'm sorry, Mr. Reicher, but I'm afraid I must borrow your client for an hour or so. If you don't mind?"

Reicher wisely nodded, before turning to Lucius.

"Shall I come back later?"

"Come back tomorrow, the same time."

Reicher nodded and left quickly, without exactly scurrying. Voldemort watched him closely until the door was closed and the Silencing spells activated.

"Is there any particular reason why you chose that particular lawyer? He seems a bit below your usual pay grade," he noted, his eyes flicking back to Lucius who was already putting away the paperwork the man had left on his desk.

"He is adequate. I am not expecting much of a fight from Barty on this case. Besides, I thought you would be pleased. Keeping Potter's circle of acquaintances within your own circle of acquaintances is to your benefit."

True enough, but the Dark Lord seriously doubted this was done for his benefit. He decided to drop it for now. It was a trivial matter.

"Speaking of Barty* and circles of acquaintances, he just sent me the latest intel on Germany. It seems the latest alliances were only agreed upon with the formal appointment of power to an official military commander of their choosing. I'll give you three guesses on who wormed their way into the position."

"Dumbledore," Lucius said, honest irritation seeping into his voice. The name had been appearing with increasing frequency in the reports that crossed his desk from the frontlines, and he was starting to see a trend of mission failures when it did. Why, oh why, hadn't they offed the old goat in the last war?

"Afraid so. On a vaguely brighter note, the Italians hate him, so there's no real coordination on their part. This business in London is primarily their doing. It's always been a 'Sodom and Gomorrah' to those bloody Catholic nutjobs."

"We can drive them out of London, easily enough," Lucius insisted. "We could have done it days ago."

Voldemort shook his head. "We'd have been fighting over rubble. We evacuated most of the museums and libraries months ago knowing this would happen eventually. Better to let them destroy a bunch of empty buildings than have them touring the entire country."

"It doesn't sit well with me, my Lord."

"It doesn't sit well with anyone, Lucius. We had nearly three hundred new recruits the day after the first attack. We've had nearly a thousand more since then, and I intend to march every single one of them straight down Italy's throat and make them pay in blood and

gold ten times what we've lost in London, but we have to be patient. Public sympathy in France grows everyday, and soon enough we'll have enough support for Queen Ophelia to sanction an official alliance. After that we'll have the additional support we need to launch an attack into Italy and break the stalemate in Germany. She is already preparing her soldiers for this eventuality."

The question was how much were they will to lose while they waited for that 'eventuality'. Lucius sighed and leaned back in his chair, running his hands through his hair. He was tired. They all were. The London attacks had been a blow to the nation's morale, and neither of them were immune to it.

"I bow to your greater wisdom, but I still think we should find a way to give them all a plague."

"I'll see what I can do."

"And Dumbledore?"

"Put a ridiculously high bounty on his head for now. I doubt we'll get much response yet, but when things really start to get bad... I imagine we'll have a few desperate fools making his life difficult. Some of his blood or a lock of hair would work as well. I can do quite a bit of damage with just that. Barty's already got some spies working on it, but it's too early to say whether they'll get close enough."

"We should hold another war council."

"I scheduled it for Thursday."

"So soon?"

"I believe you have rehearsal and then a wedding planned this weekend," he reminded him, looking vaguely amused as Lucius eyes widened.

"I completely forgot," he sighed. "Why did it have to be this weekend?"

Voldemort made a dismissive gesture. "He wanted to honeymoon in France for a month. That doesn't leave much time before he has to return and attend to his new duties as headmaster."

Lucius didn't look any happier even with that legitimate reason, and instead asked, "Do you want me to bring him to the council meeting? He usually has some good ideas."

"I doubt he'll be in any state to be useful. Do you recall how you were the week before your wedding?"

Lucius grimaced. Not even his bachelor party had been enough to wipe those particular memories of misery away.

"No," he said, "Will you be in attendance?"

"I will attend the ceremony and the toast if time permits. I won't be able to stay long. With Morgan and you in attendance, someone has to stay at the office and run the country."

~ Author's Notes~

Just a reminder, the Weasley twins were adopted by Clyde's grandparents, the Stone family. Clyde is technically their adoptive nephew.

2. Yes, this is Barty Crouch Jr., alive and kicking it with a nice position as Head of Court Foreign Intelligence. He's as crazy and loyal as ever, and he's Lucius' rival. If you're wondering why you haven't seen him until now... I honestly wanted to wait till I had a good role in the story before I brought him up. Plot wise, we'll just say he and Lucius can't stand each other and are never in the same room, and since Harry hasn't met him yet he really doesn't have much purpose showing up.

Book V

Chapter 2: Holy Union

"I don't know why you're being difficult about this, Harry," Hermione pleaded. Harry was resolutely looking out the compartment window at the passing scenery so he wouldn't have to look at her. He had a feeling if he did, he would give in. Next to him, Natalie was ignoring their conversation in favor of playing with Inana. Draco had grown bored an hour ago and was reading a newspaper, looking up every so often so see if they were still stuck on the same topic. "It's not safe. You know it. I know it. Everyone knows it. After what happened the last time-"

"Don't," he bit out, warning her against that particular subject. She had only heard one side of the story of what had happened with the Du'on nadi and the possession, and it certainly hadn't been his. That was more his fault than hers, but he didn't want to get into it now.

"What are you hoping to gain, Harry? What do you think you'll accomplish?"

He didn't say anything for a moment. He was still trying to sort that out himself. There really weren't very many reasons why he should return to the Goddess colony, and those were rather weak reasons themselves. He didn't know how to explain it, but it was just something he knew he needed to do.

"They're family," he said, leaving it open for her interpretation. She could usually find logic behind his reasons even where he couldn't. His friend wasn't up for playing that game this time, however, and all but sneered at that statement.

"Funny. They didn't seem to remember that while you were in the hospital."

He tensed. Natalie looked up from her thumb-wrestling match with the tip of Inana's tail, and glowered at the other girl.

"That was uncalled for," Natalie said, sharply. Hermione flinched and looked down, contrite.

"I'm sorry, it's just... Can I talk to you for a moment in private?"

He honestly didn't want to. He didn't want to talk at all. She had been trying to convince him not to see his godfathers since he had shown her the letter, and the more she talked the more depressed over the matter he got.

"Please?"

"...Fine, but after this you drop it, okay?"

"Okay."

They got up and walked out into the corridor, Natalie and Draco watching them both suspiciously but not saying a word. They had both stop being suspicious that the two Gryffindors would suddenly disappear together and elope when neither had shown any hint of jealousy at the other's romantic affairs (such as they were) over the last two years. Hermione led him passed another passenger car and into the first baggage car, and cast a Silencing Spell on the door so they wouldn't be hear even if they could be seen through the door's glass window.

"Alright," he said, leaning against a set of trunks. "What do you need to say that can't be said in front of Draco and Natalie?"

"Listen," she said, looking frustrated, at him and at herself. "I get it, okay? I get not wanting to give up on your godfathers. It's like you've said before, they're the last remaining family you have and I know that's precious. I know that. I feel the same way about Draco, but..."

She stopped, her expression pained. Something in Harry's heart twisted. They weren't just talking about him anymore.

"... but eventually, you have to decide you've had enough. You have to draw a line, because... because even if they're family... even if you

love them or just want to love them... they can tear you down into smaller and smaller pieces until..."

She shook her head, and swallowed her rising tears with a hard snuffle, then continued on like she were lecturing on the importance of taking thorough notes in class. "I don't want that for you, Harry. You've gone through so much already, and I don't think you can handle dealing with this werewolf business on top of everything else. You did what you could for them and it was incredible what you managed on your own, but that doesn't give them the right to take advantage of you like they have. You're not a werewolf and you're not Blackbone's whipping boy-"

"Whoa, whoa! Hermione, come on!" he objected. "I am not and never have been Sirius' 'whipping boy'. I helped because I wanted to, not because he made me or tried to guilt trip me. What happened in Germany... that wasn't his fault. It wasn't anyone's fault, except my own."

"And that werewolf girl who poisoned you?" she interjected, looking furious.

"... yeah, and maybe her a little too."

"What about when he sent you to France with a small army at your beck and call?"

"...To be fair, that was Voldemort's idea too."

"And when those werewolves with you didn't try to stop you but just let you lead them into almost certain death in enemy territory?"

"Hey, they were all like... under a spell or something. Not their fault!"

She wasn't buying it, and he felt a swell of annoyance. What did she know about it? He was there! Where did she get off acting like he was the one who didn't know what he was talking about?

"Listen to yourself, Harry! You just keep making excuses!"

"Because you keep making accusations! Jeez, what do you want me to say? That I'm just going to cut all my ties and forget about them? It's too late now. Damage done! I... it's up to Sirius how things go from here on."

He had to turn away from her as he said it, unable to look at her pity and condemnation. Meanwhile, Hermione had wrapped her hands around her arms and was squeezing them to keep herself from crossing the few feet between them and wrapping them around her friend's throat in frustration.

She didn't know much about what happened in Germany, but from what Severus had told her, what the newspapers and rumors hinted at, and from what Harry refused to say, she could guess it had been truly horrible. She knew about the seven different potions he had to take, despite his attempts to hide them from her, and how there were just as many to allow him to sleep an entire night through as there were to treat his damaged body. She knew from Clyde that they didn't work all the time. She knew the sudden silences Harry fell into sometimes had nothing to do with worrying about a pop quiz in DA&D or that cute seventh year Ravenclaw who had smiled at him in the hall like he claimed.

She knew it was Sirius Blackbone and the werewolves' fault Harry had turned into a ghost of his former self. What she didn't know, was why he refused to escape them for good.

"It doesn't have to be that way," she said firmly. "You can break free."

"It's not that simple," he insisted, tiredly. He had tried to explain to her already, but she hadn't accepted what he had said and he didn't think anything else he said at this point would make a difference. All he wanted was her to just drop it and let him deal with it. He wasn't... scared of his godfathers or the werewolves, it was just... awkward. Uncertain. They just needed to work through it, one way or another, maybe even breaking it off altogether like Hermione was saying, but it had to be worked out between them and she had no place in it. If he said that to her, he had no doubt she'd punch him in the face.

Not exactly the best way to start the summer.

"It is if you decide it is."

She hesitated again, as if debating with herself to tell him something or not.

"I'm... breaking free," she said, cautiously. He looked up, confused, but now it was her turn to look at the floor.

"...What do you mean?"

Again the hesitation, but...

"I'm breaking free of Lucius... I... I really just can't stand him any longer. It's killing me staying under his thumb. I never know when he's going to just bring it down and crush me completely."

He knew about Hermione's 'relationship' with Lucius, and felt she was completely justified in hating the man, but he was still confused at what she was saying.

"So... how exactly?"

"I'm going to get emancipated."

He just blinked at her. He didn't even know what that meant.

"Like divorcing your parents," she explained. "Or disowning myself. I'd take care of myself and he couldn't dictate my life anymore."

"Oh..." he said, feeling more than a little stunned. It had never occurred to him that you could do such a thing in the wizarding world. "Oh... but... how?"

She smiled a bit sadly and shrugged.

"It's not really that hard. Especially since I'm not his biological child. I just need to prove I can take care of myself, get a sponsor, and fill out some paperwork."

"And can you? Take care of yourself, I mean? What's a sponsor do? Are they like a guardian?"

"I've got some money," she said. "Not a lot, but I can get a Court loan to finish my education at Hogwarts, and then I can probably get a work-study scholarship to put me through college. After that, I'm on my own, but I'm hardly the first person who had to do that. I can do it. I know I can."

Harry knew she could too. She was the smartest and hardest working person he knew. He still felt uneasy about it.

"When?"

"As soon as I get a sponsor. I thought about asking Severus, but that just doesn't seem fair. It would ruin his relationship with Lucius and Draco, and I don't want start a feud between him and the Malfoy's just when he's started a family of his own."

He didn't know what to say to that. Suddenly, he felt very immature. Snape was getting married, the twins were starting a business, Ron was plotting murder (he really needed to talk to him about that soon), and now Hermione was divorcing her foster parents. Yes, certainly, he had fought in several battles and been mixed up with political intrigue since he was eleven, but that was stuff that had happened to him not stuff he had done himself. Which again, was silly, because he had done a lot of really adult things of his own accord before... months ago. In fact, the more he thought about the more he realized he had been trying his hardest not to be an adult for the last six months.

"Say something, Harry," she pleaded, anxiety gnawing at her in his stunned silence.

"Wow," he managed weakly. "Just... wow. Does Draco know?"

He already knew the answer to that. There was no way Draco could know and not have thrown some sort of tantrum or argument or something. It seemed inconceivable; however, that she would hide something like this.

"No," she admitted. "He wouldn't understand. He'd think I was trying to get rid of him, and it's not about that. He's the only reason I have for staying-"

"But he's not enough."

She looked down again, inexplicably ashamed.

"No. He's not. If it came to a choice between me and Lucius, I know he would choose his father, and maybe that's how it should be but..."

"Yeah," Harry agreed, even though he really didn't. He didn't think she was giving Draco enough credit, but then what did he know? He had only seen Draco and Lucius together maybe two or three times in the entire time he had known them. He had no idea how close they were. He knew Draco was extremely proud to call Lucius his father, but he was perhaps even more proud to be able to call himself Hermione's 'big' brother. "He's going to have to find out sooner or later. You'll have to tell him eventually."

"Not until there's no way he can stop me. He might tell Lucius."

And that obviously filled Hermione with some sort of unspoken dread. Harry felt a moment of fear himself. He had never been on the receiving end of the Malfoy patriarch's enmity, but if he had been at the right hand of the Dark Lord for all these years it could not be something easily dismissed. Harry had a sudden feeling that before this was through, he was going to have to find a way to protect her, and he had no idea where to start. Harry had power and influence of his own, but not on the same level as Lucius, who had been playing and winning on and off the battlefield for decades.

"Is it worth it?" he asked. "I can tell you're scared."

She nodded, and although she still looked frightened, she also looked certain.

"There has to be a line, Harry. He's pushed me over it one too many times. I'm not going to let him push me anymore. I'll find a way."

"Well, okay. I'll help you as much as I can. I still think you should tell Draco, though."

"Thanks, Harry. I'll try to do as much of it on my own as I can. I don't want you on his bad side any more than Severus. Chances are, you'll be seeing a lot of him after you graduate."

"Joy."

She smiled weakly.

"You need to draw your own line too, Harry, or one day you're going to look around and wonder how you let things get so out of control. Or, you know, you'll be dead."

He managed a smile a bit more firm than her own. Asking him to draw a line at this point in his life would be like doing so in sand... in the middle of a storm. By the time the storm was over, not only would the line be gone, but everything else would be changed around, buried, or uncovered.

"I'll try, but even if I do, I know that I still have to face Sirius. I don't know why you seem so intent on blaming him for everything that happened to me, but he's not some sort of devil. He's not Lucius Malfoy. I respect him. I... I love him... as my godfather and my mentor. He has a right to say his piece, and I have a right to tell him mine."

She looked at him sadly, but finally gave up arguing. There was no point. She had said all she could and as much as she hated the idea of leaving her friend to face this danger again, she knew he was also right. Sirius Blackbone was no Lucius Malfoy, and even though he was scary in his own right, she didn't doubt that he had at one point loved Harry too.

"At least take Uncle Severus when you go."

He actually had the audacity to laugh at her suggestion.

"Oh, yes, that will make things much safer!"

~ Page Break~

The bridal tent was full of strange women. The only ones Harry recognized were Victoria (who had in fact been selected as maid-of-honor) and Ira's mother, and there were at least six others he had never seen before. One of them had asked for his autograph. He couldn't see Ira, but then if the steady flow of women to and from behind the oriental screen were any indication, she was still in the process of getting ready. He hadn't seen her all morning, and for all he knew she had been getting for hours.

"Er..." he said timidly, rather aware that the tent had the interior of a Persian suite and he was surrounded by several women dressed beautifully (if not all beautiful themselves) in pastel colored dresses and robes made of nothing more than elaborate lace or transparent silk. 'Harem' was not a word he thought anyone of them would appreciate hearing at the moment. He managed to tiptoe around the room until he finally reached Mrs. Morgan. "Can I speak to Ira?"

She looked horrified by the suggestion.

"Absolutely not! That's horribly bad luck to see the bride before her husband!"

"Oh... I didn't know. Sorry."

"That's alright, dearie," she assured him, "No harm done. Was there something you needed to ask her?"

He shook his head.

"Just checking on her. Thought I'd ask if she needed anything, but I guess she's got her own private army for that," he said, indicating the other women who all seemed to be busy with something; either arranging the bouquet or making small snacks or helping the bride directly with something or other.

"She's doing wonderfully. Can't stop smiling or wanting to throw up. All perfectly normal."

Harry wasn't sure how someone could be happy and nauseous at the same time, but he had heard somewhere that women were better multi-taskers than men, so he supposed it was possible.

"Oh... Do you want me to go get some anti-nausea potions? I think they're some in the first aid kit."

"No, no. That will give her hiccups! Can you imagine Ira trying to say her vows like that? She'll be fine. Now off with you! We're almost done, and we can't have you peeking."

He hurried out of the tent and into the bright afternoon sun. The air was warm but not too warm and a gentle breeze out of the West brought the faintest hint of salt water under the smell of flowers. Outside of the tent, the wedding and reception preparations spread out like fair grounds. Aside from the bride's tent, a rather grand domicile (and yet nothing compared to the interior) of white silk and laden with white and pink lilies and roses, there was also the groom's tent, modest and masculine in light green and covered in ivy, the portkey tent where security was checking each guest as they arrived (no one knew exactly where they were except for Morgan for security reasons, concession stands that were currently only serving non-alcoholic drinks before the reception (if some actually interrupted the ceremony in a drunken stupor, Snape would be honor-bound to kill the fool and that was a bad way to start a marriage according to popular opinion), a tent for entertaining children and keeping them out of the way, another tent for smoking (doing so outside was also apparently bad luck at a wedding), a large tent where the actual wedding feast would take place, some tents designated as the restrooms, and nearly half a dozen others for various and sundry. All of them were in different and festive colors and draped in different flowers. Hundreds of butterflies, native and exotic and all transfigured, floated around the grounds, alighting on flowers and amused guests before fluttering off again.

The area where the wedding would take place was blocked off by a naturally occurring spring dividing the grounds and a wall of weeping

willows. A pair of Trumpeter swans (not transfigured) lounged in the shade of the overhanging branches, adding yet another touch of natural elegance to the entire affair. A wide, wooden bridge arched over the spring, leading to a path that curved through the willow grove. Somewhere beyond the tree was the 'chapel', but Harry had not seen it yet, again because of security, but Hermione and Draco who had been drafted to help decorate (apparently it was good luck to have family and friends decorate and help set up the sacraments) had said it was quite spectacular. The guests were expected to start moving to their seats in another half an hour and the ceremony itself was an hour after that.

In the meantime the guests were busying themselves wandering around the grounds, admiring the decorations and the flowers and stopping to talk to each other. Several people Harry had never met had tried to stop and speak with him, but he had made a point to at least look busy to stave off conversation. At the moment, he was looking busy by heading directly for the groom's tent.

"How exactly are you affording all of this?" he asked by way of greeting, as he stepped inside. Unlike the bride's tent, Snape's was modeled after the modest interior of a tailor's fitting room and was almost empty but for the groom and Lucius, who was dressed in dark chocolate and rusty red browns. Like Harry, who was dressed in soft beige and cream, and everyone else, he was expected to dress more modestly than the groom just as the women were expected to dress more modestly than the bride. The Malfoy patriarch handled it with his usual arrogant flair, even as fitted his friend's armor like a common page.

Armor, of all things.

Not the clunky sort that muggle knights wore nor the leather sort used in dueling matches, this armor was made of a strange black metal, lined at the seams with gold. Harry had to admit it suited his professor quite well. With his hair tied back, Snape looked several years younger, and the individual plates highlighted his masculine form in a way that robes never really could. He looked very much like a fairytale villain, off to kidnap the princess and feed her to a dragon.

Harry briefly wondered if his father had also worn armor at his wedding and what he had looked like doing so.

Snape cast him an irritated look.

"Contrary to what you may have assumed, I prefer to live modestly. I am not forced to live that way. This affair, while not cheap, is not beyond me."

Harry didn't believe for a minute that Snape would have spent even a knut for anything as frivolous as transfigured butterflies or invited the more than two hundred people who were currently milling around outside. He didn't think either Snape or Ira even knew two hundred people. Seeing his skeptical look, the man rolled his eyes.

"I sold tickets," he muttered, and Harry wasn't sure if he should laugh or be outraged. Lucius smirked.

"I supplied the buyers. It's not everyday someone not of the Dark Lord's inner circle can find an ear with them. There are many who are willing to pay a great deal of money for just such an opportunity. Severus turned quite a tidy little profit."

"Does Ira know?"

"Of course. It's an unspoken tradition," Snape said, not even bothering to look at him now. He was staring over at Lucius' head at the mirror, and didn't seem particularly happy. "I look like an idiot."

Malfoy Sr. smirked. "You look great."

"I have absolutely no desire to laugh at you," Harry offered. They both ignored him. Snape stepped away to grab a drink of water from the nearby table. The young Gryffindor noted that his armor didn't make a sound and moved easily with his movements. He also noted that Snape's hands were shaking when he took his glass. The man was actually nervous! Merlin, this had to have been a first!

"You should have let me take you out," Lucius said, sounding more than a little put out. "You would be feeling much more lucid right now."

"I would be feeling much more hung over as well. I am a little too old to be gallivanting around bars and brothels until four in the morning. Besides, Morgan would have heard about it."

"True enough. Nervous?"

"Of course not," he said, and immediately turned to Harry to keep the man from calling him on his lie. "And how is my bride?"

"I went by her tent, but her mum wouldn't let me see her. Bad luck or something. She did say Ira felt like vomiting, but I guess that's normal."

Snape started to rub his temple.

"Why do people insist weddings are romantic? This is just another exercise in social torture."

Harry very much agreed and decided if he got married he was going to elope. Before he could share this sentiment, and enjoy the likely scandalized look from Lucius (at least he hoped it was scandalized, it might just be his usual boring sneer), Morgan entered the tent. Snape stiffened.

"Is anything the matter?" he asked Morgan.

"No. Security has encountered nothing more than the usual hidden flasks and snuff boxes*. My people will keep an extra close eye them."

"I leave it in your capable hands. Has our Lord arrived yet?"

"Yes. He's being delayed by a small horde of potential sycophants at the moment. I thought I should come and fulfill one of my duties as 'honorary' father of the bride before he arrives."

At Harry's confused expression, Lucius patted him on the shoulder and explained.

"It's tradition to threaten the groom on behalf of the bride's honor and happiness before the wedding."

"Oh." Harry still had no idea what that meant. He was learning far more about wedding traditions and superstitions than he ever wanted to today. Lucius didn't release his shoulder, but instead started leading him outside.

"He's a professional threat maker. This probably won't be suitable for your young ears."

Harry swallowed his indignation, and simply nodded to the other two men as he left the tent. When he was outside, he began to move away to find Voldemort but Lucius still hadn't let go.

"Just a moment, Harry. I wanted to speak with you. We so rarely have the opportunity, despite our mutual acquaintances."

Turning back to the man, he pushed aside his own trepidation to look at him directly. He had resolved himself to the fact back on the Hogwarts Express that eventually he was going to have to stand toe to toe with Lucius on Hermione's behalf, and this was probably as good a place to start practicing as any.

"I have never known you to particularly care for my company, sir, aside from the occasional negotiation."

He was referring of course to the instance in which they had conspired to blackmail Headmistress Lestrage into leaving him alone. He didn't know if the bargain held any influence over either of them any more now that Snape had replaced her at Hogwarts. Lucius' amused expression didn't waiver.

"No need to be quite so formal. You're practically my godson at this point."

Yeah, I'd like to introduce you to my real godfather, you slimy-

"For what such bonds are worth to either of us."

His words seemed to impress the man more than discourage him. "Oh, Harry, you should know by now these bonds are the most important resources you have in the wizarding world. They're more important than money, more important than titles. Your guardian is a perfect example of that."

Harry didn't have to ask what he meant. He knew already that Snape was only a half-blood and had never been particularly wealthy, which under most circumstances would have left him little more than a third class citizen. However, the man had managed to rise to a position of prestige with the support of the Dark Lord and to a lesser extent Lucius Malfoy. Their bonds were not familial, but they were just as tangible. Snape had likely shed blood for these men. Perhaps they had done the same.

"You can not expect to thrive in this world solely on the Dark Lord's or Severus' rather tenuous support. I believe it would be to your benefit to foster the relationship with my family you have already begun through my son."

Harry didn't miss that fact he hadn't said 'daughter' or even 'Hermione'.

"Severus informed me that while he and his new bride were away, the Morgans would be looking after you. Perhaps you would consider spending part of that time at Malfoy Manner. We would all be delighted to have you, and I am certain we could find ways to keep you suitably entertained."

He fought his first instinct to automatically say no and then his second instinct to automatically say yes. Honestly, the idea of being trapped in Lucius Malfoy's home for an indeterminate amount of time was in no way appealing, but spending said time with his friends was something he had always wanted to do. He had visited on occasion, too rarely, and had always had fun until it seemed cut short way too soon by Snape's busy schedule. He floundered for an appropriate response, still trying to not appear manipulated or uncertain.

"I... will have to get back to you on that. I am supposed to meet with my godfather," he said, feeling a moment of pure satisfaction at having evaded Lucius' attempted claim to that title. "...sometime this month. Some sort of official business that needs to be sorted out."

The Malfoy patriarch's expression tightened. He knew he was being evaded.

"I wasn't aware you were still on speaking terms with the Head Alpha. You have not been working in official capacity for him for quite some time."

"For obvious reason, I was unable to. The medi-wizards cleared me for active duty just a few weeks ago, and I am looking forward to getting back to work."

Liar, liar, liar!

"Well, it is certainly good to hear that you are so... eager... to continue your civic duties. Surely, it will not take a month to complete."

No, and I can't lie about it much longer. At least, he knows he can't have me at his beck and call.

"Very unlikely," Harry agreed. "I was just going to find Lord Voldemort and discuss it with him. As soon as I get things sort, I'll let you know."

He very carefully moved Lucius' hand from his shoulder and walked away. It was an effort not to run, especially when he could feel the man's eyes drilling in to the back of his head. Once he had moved safely out of sight, he let out the breath he was holding and grinned. All things considered, that had actually gone a lot better than he had thought it would. He hadn't actually told the man to bugger-off, but it had been close enough.

Now he really did need to find Voldemort and ask him about seeing his godfather. He should have written to him the day he had received the summons, but he had wanted to speak with him in person and

this seemed the best opportunity. He hadn't wanted to send a reply to Sirius until he had a better idea about the situation with the werewolves. There had been very little in the newspapers about them in the last couple of months and Snape had been evasive of the topic.

Before he could find the Dark Lord, however, he found himself just behind one of the concession tents where several ladies were engaged in conversation inside to avoid the sun. He hadn't meant to linger, and was in fact only there so he could avoid being spotted by other guests who might try to stop him for conversation, but something one of the women inside said made him pause.

"I don't know how she managed to dupe someone a second time into marrying her," a woman snickered, "I mean, it's not as if she ever put that much effort into making herself attractive. She collects bugs for Merlin's sake."

Several other women tittered insipidly along with her. Harry wondered if they hadn't managed to get sloshed before coming to the wedding.

"Well, it's not like her husband is that much better. I heard he was a mudblood, and hardly a Gilderoy Lockhart himself."

Someone snorted, rather unattractively.

"Oh, please, that's just jealous rumor. He's one of the Dark Lord's inner circle and General Malfoy is his best man! There's no way he's anything but pure blood. Bastard pureblood, maybe, but pureblood just the same. He's supposed to be some sort of genius too. He's taking over the Headmaster position at Hogwarts this year, and he's already published as some sort of potion's expert. At least that's what Barney says. He pays more attention to that sort of silly gossip."

Harry rolled his eyes.

"She really bagged one this time. Poor bastard. Do you think he knows she's barren?"

Someone gasped.

"She's barren?"

"That's why I heard she was divorced in the first place. I heard she tried to commit suicide afterwards. Although, who knows? She might have been trying to get him to take her back. She had to have been desperate. At least that's what Barney says."

"Well, Barney is apparently full of it. No one in Severus Snape's position would bother with that sort of girl."

"No one in Severus Snape's position would bother with secondhand goods either, but here we are! Sitting at this tacky little wedding in the middle of a field like a bunch of peasants marrying the local goatherd and milkmaid!"

Harry, who had heard far more than he was willing to tolerate, stepped out in front of the entrance of the tent. There were five women inside, although he had only heard three.

"Silencio," he said, and with a wave of his wand they were all struck instantly mute. Not that they would have said anything. They were all still quite stunned by his appearance. He tucked his wand away and gave them his nastiest smile. "In case you don't know who I am, let me introduce myself. I am Harold James Potter of the Potter Family, ambassador and godson of the Head Alpha Sirius Blackbone, protégé to Lord Voldemort, parselmouth, and I might be a Lord of something or other, I haven't really bothered to look it up. Anyway, I just thought I would let you know that Professor Snape is my guardian and Miss Beadle is going to become my guardian when she marries him. Miss Beadle, who you have so tackily been insulting at her own wedding, is a very nice lady who I have a great respect for and as one of my guardians, she's practically a mother to me."

The gossipers' eyes grew wider and wider with every word he spoke, and he felt his smile grow nastier by the second.

"Now, what do you suppose a son might do to someone who called his mother 'used goods' and implied she was ugly, weak, and manipulative at her own wedding where anyone could overhear

them? I'm honestly not certain myself. I could always go ask Voldemort, I suppose. I am sure he would have some ideas."

One of the women got up, looking as if she was about to apologize.

"Sit."

He thought he might have said that in parseltongue, he was so angry at the moment. Whatever he said, she obviously understood because she sat down immediately and closed her mouth.

"Well, since I haven't found him yet, I suppose I'll just have to wing it. Since you apparently have no sense of common decency or common sense, I think it would be appropriate that none of you say anything further for the remainder of the day. You will leave the silencing spell on until you leave. If you take them off, I'll have to do something more drastic...like cut out your tongues. Hopefully, after today, you will have learned to speak of Miss Beadle... excuse me, after today she would Mrs. Snape... that you will have learned to speak of her in a polite and respectful manner deserving of her character and station... you nasty, useless little trollops. Bessiasus!"

With seeker-like speed, Harry made his escape as the tent collapsed down on top of the women. It did so silently, and since the gossipers couldn't actually scream, no one noticed what had happened for several seconds, and that was plenty of time for him to disappear behind yet another set of tents.

Well, that was...annoying, he decided. He sighed, and ran a hand through his hair. A part of him wanted to go back and fill the tent the women were still struggling to crawl out of with bees. This was not the angriest he had ever been, but it was close. He couldn't believe they would talk like that about someone as sweet and kind as Ira, and one her wedding day no less! She had told him about the divorce before, in vague terms that made him think the details were too awful for her to articulate to him, and for some strangers to come along and manipulate it into some sordid little melodrama for their own amusement was more than he could stand.

Maybe he should set the tent on fire.

But no... they weren't worth it. They were mean and petty and stupid, but not worth more than the vicious scare he had given them. Maybe worth even less than that. It wasn't something he wanted to make a habit of doing.

He was so distracted by the encounter (and just waiting for someone to find and scold him over the matter), it took him several minutes to notice the ladybug sitting on his sleeve. When he finally did, he very carefully pretended he hadn't. After another minute or two, he took a deep breath and walked back out onto the grounds. He glanced briefly over at the collapsed tent, where several of Morgan's security were helping pull the frazzled looking women out, but carefully kept himself from smirking and continued on his way to the nearby concession stand. A primly dressed young wizard handed him a champagne flute of water, and he drank it slowly and headed further away from the crowds. He could not move beyond the grounds and into the surrounding forest because of the security, but he did move off to relative privacy beside the tent that had been set up out of the way to hold the extra supplies that might be needed during the reception.

He glanced around briefly, to see if anyone had noticed him (and luckily almost everyone was distracted by the great collapsing tent event), and very casually poured out the rest of his water and placed the open mouth of the flute over the ladybug, trapping it. The little insect immediately tried to fly away, but met only unbreakable glass, banging its tiny little body against the transparent walls. While it struggled, Harry transferred his hand over the mouth of the glass quickly, so that he could take a closer look at what he had found. He tilted his head curiously.

"It seems I found myself a wedding crasher," he said idly

The ladybug simply struggled harder than ever against the glass and his hand, trying to squeeze through, but he wouldn't let it. Carefully, he turned the glass over in and then set it down just behind the tent where no one else could see. He stepped back. If this went badly, he wanted to remain in sight where someone might notice and raise an alarm. He pointed the wand at the upturned glass.

"Patefacio humanus!"

The glass instantly shattered, and where once there was a beetle there now laid a rather harried Rita Skeeter. Harry just stared at her.

"Of all the silly, stupid..." he started. "Do you have any idea how close I was to handing you over to Morgan directly?"

She smiled rather sheepishly up at him, righting her glasses and stumbling to her feet to right the rest of her. Wisely, she stayed behind the tent and out of sight. Her bright red robes were not going to go unnoticed amongst the crowd of neutral tones.

"H-how did you know?"

"We have like... twenty million flowers out there, of course we set up anti-pest wards. No real insects should have been able to get in. Even the butterflies are just transfigured paper."

"Oh... well, yes. I didn't think of that. But... but how did you know I was animagus? For that matter, how did you know the revealing charm for it?"

"Duelling Club," he said reflexively, which was his excuse for knowing just about any spell he probably shouldn't. "Do I even have to ask what you think you're doing here?"

"Well, I would have thought that was obvious! This wedding is huge! The biggest names in politics are here! Voldemort, Malfoy, Morgan, Talmac, Blackwell, Dovesky, Burman... and no one from the press. There hasn't been this much security for an event since..."

"Don't care," he said, sighing. "And what precisely have you learned so far that made risking life in Azkaban worth it?"

She was actually grinning excitedly, which made him wonder about her sanity. And also about his own for not calling one of Morgan's

security over immediately. There were a few looking over at him curiously already.

"I know Snape actually sold tickets to this event. Very, very naughty. It's an unspoken tradition for a reason you know. I also know Miss Beadle is not the blushing virgin bride we all thought she was."

"Watch it," he said, tightening his grip on his wand and making sure she noticed. Her smile faded somewhat, and she took a step back.

"And I know you're not entirely the prince charming you claim to be."

"I never claimed to be a prince, charming or otherwise. That's what you," he said, pointing at her, "and the rest of the press decided to call me. But okay, congratulations. You've uncovered all these nasty little secrets. What do you think you're going to do with them?"

She frowned. "I'm a reporter. I'll report them of course!"

He shook his head.

"I don't think so."

She pouted. Literally. Her bottom lip stuck out and everything. He nearly laughed. He had caught her and they both knew it. His victory left him feeling more generous than he had with the gossipers, even though Skeeter was likely a hundred times more dangerous. Lucius was right. If he wanted to make it in the world he was going to need more than Voldemort and Snape.

From the corner of his eye, he caught sight of one of Morgan's Sentinels heading towards him slowly. He turned back to her.

"I only have about a minute before that sentinel comes over here and sees you, so I'll make this quick. If I wanted to, I could tell anyone here that I saw you and what you did and you would disappear off the face of the earth just for the sheer audacity of it. But, no harm, no foul. I'm willing to let this go. I'll even ignore the fact you're flittering about for the rest of the wedding if you want to stay. You do so at your own risk."

She was grinning again like a mad woman, but then stopped and narrowed her eyes behind her speckled glasses.

"What's the catch?"

"You don't write anything that embarrasses me or my..." family? Associates? "circle of acquaintances. That includes the Snapes, the Morgans, Voldemort... if you'd even dare... and... the Malfoys..."

Because even if he didn't like Lucius, he wasn't going to let anyone hurt Draco or Hermione if he could help it.

"In fact, you have to write something nice about Ira. Compliment her hair or something in your article," he said, quickly, getting more nervous as the Sentinel drew closer. Skeeter started to object, but she didn't get the chance. "Change back now!"

Without a sound, Skeeter disappeared and a little beetle disappeared into the grass just as the Sentinel reached him. The woman was looking at him curiously, and then behind the tent.

"Is something the matter?" she said, suspiciously.

"Er... yeah, sorry. I broke my glass," he said, pointing to the shards of the flute still littering the ground. "I've just been trying to remember the spell to fix it. I know it's a really obvious one. I just feel stupid that I can't-"

"Reparo."

Instantly, the glass fixed itself and the woman handed it back to him. He smiled at her sheepishly.

"Thanks, that was it. I just didn't want anyone else to see me. That would be completely embarrassing."

She didn't seem exactly suspicious, but she didn't seem to be buying his story either.

"What are you doing back here to begin with?"

"Oh... uh... "

He struggled to think of a logical excuse, but before he could she smiled knowingly.

"Bathrooms full?"

He just blinked at her. His ears suddenly flushed red. Her smile widened.

"They never have enough toilets at these things. Don't worry about it, your secret's safe with me. You better get back though. They're about ready to start seating people. I think you're at the front row."

"Yeah... thanks."

She winked at him and moved off, signaling to someone else that everything was fine. Skeeter landed on his shoulder, and even though he couldn't hear her, Harry was positive she was laughing at him.

"Hey, I only told you the condition for letting you stay," he warned. "You're just going to have to wait till I decide on the condition for not telling everyone that you're an animagus. Probably an unregistered animagus at that."

Apparently, Skeeter was much less amused about that than his little misunderstanding with the Sentinel, and she flew off in what he assumed was a huff. Just the same, he was feeling quite clever. Next time he saw Hermione he might tell her about what had happened, and maybe find a way to get Skeeter to help find Hermione a sponsor. Who knew, perhaps Skeeter could even be Hermione's sponsor. He would discuss it with her later, when he went to stay with the Malfoys.

~ Page Break~

After his second brush with blackmail, Harry managed to enjoy a full thirty minutes where absolutely nothing even remotely interesting

happened. This was primarily because he was stuck in a line waiting for security to double check him for dark artifacts or any other items he might use to assassinate someone. This took quite some time since everyone who was sitting towards the front, himself included, kept setting off the equipment used to detect 'dark' magic. No one but him noticed the tiny little bug fly over their heads and into the trees.

He entertained himself for a few minutes imagining if someone had.

Finally, he was allowed to cross the bridge and make his way through the trees. They wound around and between several large rock formation for almost a hundred or so feet before the trees gave way to yet another clearing. There were rows upon rows of red cushioned benches, a wide red carpet dividing them in half and leading to the front where platform made of unshaped stone rose up for everyone to see, and an stone altar draped in white clothe and sacraments waited. A choir stood off to the left, draped in red and white robes, and to the right a woman with a harp and man with pipes were playing a gentle, festive tune.

It could have been the interior of any church or cathedral Harry had ever been in, except there were no stone walls to house them, but rows upon rows of closely growing trees, their overarching branches acting as the vaulted ceiling, while heavy white bouquets of flowers hung down, raining flower petals from above. Beyond the platform and altar were not more trees but instead a rocky shore leading to waters of an ancient lake, and beyond those cliffs towered hundreds of feet above the water. Cloud shadows danced across the verdant cliffs and deep blue waters, making them seem some how alive.

Hermione had been right. It truly was spectacular.

"This is a sacred place to the druids, you know."

He gave a little start, and looked up to see Voldemort had somehow snuck up behind him. Being neither a traditionalist or modest, the man had kept his usual dark robes, black with hints of blood red, and no one dared comment on it. At least not where they would be heard. Harry wondered what he would do if he had heard someone, and if it would have been anything like what he had done to the gossipers or

if he really wouldn't have torn out their tongues. Maybe he would have just crucioed them.

The Dark Lord seemed amused by his distraction, and placed his arm around Harry's shoulder to lead him like a lost little lamb to his seat. Or what was now his seat, because he was quite certain he was supposed to be sitting on the other side of the aisle. It was best not to complain, he decided, especially when he realized he would have been sitting next to a group of rather unfriendly looking people who were already glaring at him.

"They married many a king and noble along these shores."

"And what shores are these?" he asked. "I suspect Wales, but I'm not sure where."

Voldemort grinned, pleased. "You are correct. We're just North of St. Bride's Bay, appropriately enough. About the closest Wales and Ireland get to each other. You look well, Harry. Are you enjoying yourself?"

Strangely enough, he was. It wasn't exactly as fun as Quidditch, but enough was happening to keep him on his toes without any real crisis breaking out. Plus, he had the strange feeling that he was winning at the moment, even if he didn't understand all the rules.

"I think so. I'm glad you could come. I know you've been busy."

The Dark Lord tilted his head curiously and when he spoke again it was in parseltongue.

"I hope you have not been feeling neglected."

"No. I undersstand. I've been enjoying the quiet... while it lassstsss."

Voldemort nodded in acknowledgement. He would not keep Harry out of the world for much longer.

"I wishhhd to ssspeak to you about Ssiriusss and the otherss," he continued. "He ssent me a ssummonss."

"Yesss, I know."

"Do you know what it'ss about?"

"No. Blackbone iss... unpredictable at the moment. He hass been reorganizing the coloniess in wayss I do not fully undersstand. He iss not ass you remember him. He iss aggresssive, driven, tyrannical. As vicious ass Greyback ever wass."

Harry tried to imagine what Voldemort was saying, and for a few moments he thought he could see it. Blackbone could indeed be vicious and a bully, but after those few moments he couldn't help but remembering his godfather grinning like a lunatic or bickering with Remus over the silliest things. His expression must have shown his confusion.

"If you are uncertain, I can accompany you. I would ssay you don't have to go at all, but we both have a contract to honor."

Harry shook his head.

"No. I don't want him to think I'm hiding behind you. I don't... want him to think I'm scared of him."

Voldemort looked down at him for a long time, studying him. Harry looked back, although he didn't know what he was looking for or what he wanted to say. He was scared, but not of Sirius. Not really. Their reunion would be painful, no matter what either of them said or did, but not knowing would be worse.

Finally, the Dark Lord let out a sigh and ruffled his hair affectionately. Harry felt his face flush in embarrassment. The entire 'chapel' had to be watching them.

"I will make arrangementss. Be ready in three dayss. You might not think you need me, but you will not go unprotected. You have not sseen what I have sseen."

Having nothing more to say, he merely ducked his head and said quietly, "Thank you, my Lord."

"You do me proud, Harry, when you are least intending to."

He didn't know what the Dark Lord meant by that, and he didn't have time to question. The music suddenly changed and the choir began to sing, signaling the beginning of the ceremony. Everyone took their seats, and fell silent.

The ceremony was thankfully brief, and tastefully done. There was very little difference from what Harry knew of muggle weddings and he was able to follow along fairly well. Hermione stood off to the right side with another girl Harry didn't know as some sort of maid of honor. Snape stood at the left side of the altar, Lucius a little further down with Draco beside him, acting as ring bearer.

Outside of the tent, his expression severe, as if daring anyone to make one remark about his wedding armor (which Harry thought was pretty funny in a symbolic way but suited him quite well), Snape struck an even more dramatic figure.

And then there was Ira.

Harry barely even recognized her. Morgan walked proudly beside her, her arm grasped in his, his expression the fiercest Harry had ever seen it as walked his stepdaughter down the aisle. He thought he might understand the man's protectiveness.

She had never been what he thought of as beautiful or had the attention catching features of someone like Snape, but on this particular day she was nothing less than breathtakingly radiant. Her dress was the picture of elegance, bringing out the natural elegance of Ira's own body, mirroring the gentle slope of her shoulders over soft curves of her bosom, hugging her slender waist into an ever decreasing diameter until it flared at the hips in a series of voluminous satin folds. The sleeves were long, covering her arms and extending over the back of her hands in an ironic display of modesty, because the back to her dress was open, exposing a rather risqué amount of skin by wizarding standard even with the veil she

was wearing covering most of it. Harry smiled to himself when he noticed she had somehow managed to create giant butterfly out of light blue ribbons to rest at the base of her back, making it all somehow perfectly Ira.

Harry couldn't recall much of the ceremony after that. He knew the priest talked a lot about duty and honor and love, and that they had their hands tied together in a ritual knot, but he didn't notice when or how the ritual sacraments were used. He was much too busy studying the bride and groom in rapt fascination. Snape's expression, which had at first been stern and foreboding, had softened at Ira's approach. He wouldn't call it lovesick or star struck or anything so sentimental, but it was... warm. Affectionate. Welcoming. When the man had pulled back Ira's veil he could safely say she was at least head over heels for the man.

He found himself looking down in embarrassment when they actually kissed. It was just weird.

Later, during the reception, long after the Dark Lord had excused himself and many hours of dancing, drinking, celebrating, and a dozen strange wizarding traditions played out, Hermione would finally manage to sit him down at one of the long tables and tell him what he had missed.

"He's completely in love with her," she said. "You can't kiss a woman like that and not be. I don't think he even realized it till now."

He found himself looking for them amongst the crowd, and found them on the dance floor of all places. The evening was winding down and the songs were mostly slow now. Ira, now officially Mrs. Ira Snape, was resting her head against Snape's shoulder, looking tired and happy as he led her around the floor, one hand at her waist and another stroking a curly lock of hair that had managed to escape the bridal weave.

It occurred to him that he hadn't realized Snape was in love with her until now either.

~ Author's Notes~

The Hogwarts Express didn't stop at London, because obviously London is under attack. I hadn't forgotten about that. It stopped at Liverpool during this trip.

Yes, wizards do imbibe both booze and drugs on inappropriate occasions, such as weddings. They wouldn't be human otherwise.

I know I probably could have written three chapters just on the wedding and all the traditions and symbolism, but then someone would have to shoot me. I can only stand so much romantic fluff before my skin starts to crawl.

Book VI

Chapter 3: The Wall

Life in the cottage felt rather surreal for Harry without Snape and Ira there. It hadn't occurred to him how...homey it was until their absence. The professor, while he spent much of his time cloistered in his potions lab, appeared at least once or twice a day to eat and make sure Harry hadn't been kidnapped or burned down the house. He had often thought of the man as authoritarian, but there was something vaguely comforting about that. Patriarchal, if not exactly fatherly.

Ira was a constant feminine presence, even when she hadn't technically lived at the cottage until Harry's injury. While the domestic skills were pleasant and helpful, it was the gentle air about her that he missed the most.

She was not like his mother, not really. His mom had always been tempestuous and excitable; passionate about everything from her politics to her breakfast cereal to the point Harry had often felt baffled as a child. Ira was quiet and thoughtful, finding enjoyment where others might only find frustration. Harry sometimes felt she was oblivious to the world, but he had overheard enough evening conversations between her and Snape to know she thought about a great many things, political and esoteric both. She didn't speak of these things to Harry, he suspected, because she wanted him to feel as safe and happy in his own home as possible and that meant the rest of the world could hang itself.

In this way, she reminded him very much of his mother.

Not that he really thought of her as his mother. It was only that he felt her absence so keenly that made him think along those lines. Ira's mom was nice an all, but her hectic and busy manner got on his nerves rather quickly. Snape and Ira had always seemed to have things to do, but had never hurried themselves while doing them, where as Susan Morgan didn't really seem to have anything to do and yet was always in a rush.

"Are you all packed, deary?" she clucked, hovering about in his doorway. This was third time she had asked in the last hour, so he just nodded and tried to hide his impatience. For the time being, he was simply killing time skimming through the animagus book Remus had given him last fall. He supposed it was foolish to expect to be taught that mysterious art now, but he still wanted to give the book another once over before he returned it. "Do you suppose you have time for a cup of tea? I bought these wonderful orange and cranberry scones from the market this morning, and it would be such a shame-

It would have to be shame, because a knock sounded at the door, interrupting her and her plans. Harry practically leaped for his bag, shoving the book inside, and heading for the door. His shaman's staff leaned against the wall beside it, his wand already placed safely inside, and he squeezed passed Susan.

"That's my lift! I better go!"

"Are you sure you and your friend can't stay for tea?" she called, as he disappeared down the stairs.

"Can't be late! Diplomatic affairs and all. It would be bad form!"

The fact that he was dressed as if he were going camping rather than attending to 'diplomatic affairs' went completely ignored by both parties.

"Oh yes, you're right. Send word as soon as you know when you'll be back!"

"Yes, ma'am! Say goodbye to Mr. Morgan for me!"

Escaping to the front door, he threw it open to greet his chaperone and paused. Tall, black, and completely bald with a gold loop in his ear, the wizard at the door could easily have been mistaken for a muggle professional athlete if not for his wizarding style dress, although even that seemed geared to strenuous physical activity rather than the robes wizards typically wore. Harry had seen many great and dangerous wizards before, but none exuded the sort of

physically robust health of this man with the exception of perhaps Sirius and Remus.

"Mr. Potter," the man said, rather cautiously for a man who looked like he could pop his head like a grape. Harry blinked and mentally shook himself.

"Just Harry's fine. You're...?"

"Sentinel Kinglsey Shacklebolt, at your service. Kingsley is just fine for this trip, although in public..." he said, his previous tension fading somewhat. Harry nodded.

"Formalities," he said with a grin, finding himself instantly liking the man for some reason. "Speaking of which... password?"

"'You need a haircut'."

"That would be it."

"Honestly, kid, you really do."

He rolled his eyes, and walked off the stoop and into the garden, Shacklebolt following him. The man made a cursory glance back at the cottage, clearly curious.

"Were you expecting a mansion?" Harry asked.

"Honestly, yes, I sort of was."

That explained some of the man's previous caution. Perhaps he thought he was going to be dealing with a rich brat who expected to be called 'Mr. Potter'. He imagined Draco would expect that sort of respect if they were in a similar situation.

"Despite popular perception, I'm not actually rich. I'm going to Hogwarts on Court Scholarship, did you know that?"

"I did not. I assumed the Potter vaults-"

"Are not accessible to me. It doesn't matter. I don't need them really."

They exited the garden gate and Harry shivered a bit as they passed through the protective wards. He always felt a moment of complete exposure after leaving them. It passed within a few seconds and they found themselves heading up the road towards the town.

"So," Harry continued. "What did you do to get stuck guarding 'the little rich brat' from werewolves? Not exactly an assignment people are scrambling after, I imagine."

The man laughed, his deep voice an earthy rumble.

"Actually, you would be surprised. You're big name around the office. A big, scary name. Half the rookies want to be you."

"What a horrifying thought." He was only half joking when he said this. It really was vaguely horrifying that anyone would want him for a role model, or in any way duplicate his life experiences. "So why you?"

"The Dark Lord wanted a specialist for this. Just so happens I am that specialist."

"You specialize in werewolves?"

"No, I specialized in kids."

Harry did a double take, turning to Shacklebolt. The man's expression was rather sardonic at this point.

"I work a lot with children and teenagers who are abused or mistreated. I get between them and whatever threatens them."

"I've never-" he started but instantly stopped and reworded his sentence, then just had to let it die an undignified death and start anew. "Blackbone has never hurt me."

"And the chances are he never will," the sentinel agreed. "But that's not entirely what I'm here to protect you from. You were traumatized in the Battle of the Berlin Underground."

Harry stiffened. "I'm fine."

"I can see that. I am also trained to see when you aren't."

The Gryffindor turned away, feeling stupid and naïve for assuming this man would be a friend. His friends didn't treat him like frail child about ready to wet himself at the slightest provocation. He wasn't weak. Stupid, sometimes, and perhaps more sympathetic than was strictly healthy, but not weak.

If he were, he wouldn't be going to see his godfathers at all.

"I'm not insulting you. I'm not here to be your babysitter. I am here to be your backup," the man insisted, catching Harry's sudden withdrawal. "The Dark Lord told me that you had already refused his assistance and since your guardian is out of the country, he had to pick someone experienced in knowing when you, a kid, were fine and when you were in over your head. I don't know if it's escaped your notice, but you're not exactly visiting a bunch of old ladies for tea and biscuits. No one should be going alone, let alone someone in such a tenuous position with the Head Alpha."

Frankly, after three days with Ira's mother, he would happily choose angry werewolves over old biddies, tea, and biscuits. In fact, he was choosing werewolves. He sighed.

"You know, most kids, when they're about to do something difficult, are supposed get words of encouragement. All I've had so far are the implications that I'm going to die horribly or be driven insane. I'm feeling really unloved here."

"Would you like a hug? I'm a professional hugger. They have classes to train you for this sort of thing at the Academy."

Harry laughed, and some of the tension cleared. He wouldn't make the same mistake of thinking of the man as his friend again, but there wasn't any reason they had to be enemies.

"Careful, Kingsley! I've invaded countries for less!"

He was already turning away to head up the hill again, and missed the pained expression that crossed the Sentinel's face. There was little time after that left for talking and joking, before they reached the village floor.

~ Page Break~

Harry followed the path to the boundary of the werewolf territory easily, though it was nearly invisible under the thick growth of a full, wet spring. At some point, he stopped and stripped down only his pants, tucking his shirt and shoes into his pack, much to Shacklebolt's curiosity. He eyed Harry's collection of scars and tattoos thoughtfully, but asked nothing about them. The man had been quiet since they had entered the forest, and Harry was no longer in a chatty mood.

His previous nervousness over his reunion with his godfathers was back and strong as ever. A secret need to hide his own uncertainty was the only thing that kept him moving forward, and Kingsley followed his lead, less knowledgeable about what they were to face than Harry himself. To the young wizard, the forest was bright and warm, filled with life and memories, as familiar as the cottage garden. To the Sentinel, however, the place was too silent, haunted by unseen things living and not. There was constantly a shadow or movement just out of the corner of his eye that disappeared the second he turned to look more closely.

"This place is strange."

Harry glanced back at him and smiled mysteriously.

"It probably feels the same way about you. Come, it's not much further."

A few minutes later they came to the boundary, a glowing green line that seemed to come from above and below simultaneously. Harry paused at its edge, looking around briefly for a moment. He reached out timidly for the barrier and sighed in relief as his hand passed through it easily.

"Permission to bring a guest?" he called out, seemingly to no one.

Kingsley wand jumped to his hand as a man suddenly stood, covered in a blanket of grass and foliage that had rendered him all but invisible without an ounce of magic. Harry didn't even have to turn his head. He had known he was there from the start.

"What guest then, Twilight Seeker?" the man called. "Not the Black Eel then?"

The Black Eel was the rather unfortunate name given Snape, and Harry rather hoped his guardian wasn't aware of that fact.

"Sentinel Kingsley Shacklebolt, friend and protector! I'll vouch for him!"

The man thought for a moment, but quickly enough gestured for him to enter. Two more figures appeared on the path, startling Shacklebolt a second time. Once again, Harry did not seem alarmed by their sudden appearance.

"Jumpy fellow, isn't he?" one of the figures, a young woman dressed in a dark green tunic. Her sister, dressed similarly in reddish brown, just smiled. "Welcome, stranger. And welcome back, brother! It's been too long."

Both women hugged him tightly, and a part of Harry uncoiled in their arms. He had been afraid, so incredibly afraid that he would be rejected when he returned, treated as some sort of stranger that he had resigned and steeled himself to it. Now... at least part of him could relax.

"You both look wonderful, Winterhare, Fleetfoot. Have you both taken up archery? You're about ready to break my ribs."

They both giggled and let go.

"Noticed, have you?" Winterhare said, showing off the strong, lean muscle of her arms. "Blackbone's got all the womenfolk taking it up."

Says he doesn't like how vulnerable we are to aerial attacks. Fleetfoot's the best shot in the clan. She can shoot a running hare at fifty paces, while running herself."

"Come by my cabin later and I'll give you a lesson or two. You must be completely out of practice since we last saw you."

He smiled ruefully at them. He had not seen them since the last summer festival, during which time they were not a part of the Goddess Clan colony (lucky for them or else they would probably not be alive to tease him here). It was a bittersweet thought.

"I'll take you up on that if I can. How are my godfathers?"

Their smiles faltered somewhat, but Winterhare plowed through the question easily enough.

"They'll be much happier having seen you up and about. You look wonderful! Now hurry up. Blackbone will have our hides if we hold you up any longer."

Harry nodded, and looked around for a second. "Where did Rubin go?"

"On ahead most like, to tell Blackbone you're here. Come on. You too, handsome."

Shacklebolt gave them a big, white smile and that sent them both giggling as they scampered off down the trail. Harry followed more sedately, giving his bodyguard time to look around and to gather his nerve. A lot had happened since he was last here, and he had no idea what or how things had changed. Sirius had still been in the infancy of his rule as Head Alpha, the shrine to Greyback and the slain had been erected, and the village had just moved North with new members before Harry had fallen under possession and led over a hundred werewolves to be slaughtered. He knew almost nothing about what had happened since then.

The first inkling that things were different came as they entered the sacred burial site and shrine. It was of course somewhat different

than Harry remembered, after a healthy spring growth had settled over the burial mounds, giving the shrine a settled look. Large stone slabs, cut and polished, rested atop the graves, covering them completely. Upon each grave marker was engraved a series of names and a moon, each one at a different phase. He hadn't realized until now that there were twenty-eight graves, one for each day of the lunar cycle. It didn't surprise him that Greyback's held the full moon.

The site was meticulously clean and there was a veritable garden of flowers around every grave and small offerings of food and drink and even a few handmade children's toys, but to Harry's pagan mind there was something off about it all. He stood staring at the graves for several minutes before he realized what it was.

"There are no weapons," he noted. "No animal sacrifices either. Not even a hare."

"And that's bad?" Shacklebolt asked, very quietly, sensing this was a sacred place.

"These are a people of the hunt. There should be offerings of flesh as well as offerings of grain," he explained, unsure what to make of it. There was nothing disrespectful in the offerings, they were neither cheap nor pithy, but it all somehow seemed incomplete. He thought to ask the other girls, but they were too far ahead and he refused to raise his voice in this place to call them back. The questions could wait.

After leaving the burial site, a slow rise in activity began to occur around them. A man cleaned and tanned hides a few yards from the trail, while a boy gathered the scrapings of fat into jars to make soap. Small groups of women and children weeded through the underbrush, weeding up mushrooms, roots, flowers, and anything else that could be harvested for food or sale. From far above they heard the whistle of look outs, marking their passage as they passed beneath them, though neither Harry nor Shacklebolt could determine where exactly they were hiding amongst the thick foliage.

None of this was strange to Harry except perhaps the tree-top lookouts, and even that was not out of character. Several people stopped or looked up as Harry passed to give him a respectful nod or a wave before returning to their work, as if nothing had changed at all since his last visit.

The illusion could not last long.

They reached the crest of the hill that flattened out into the village and Harry froze at the sight that greeted him. Beside him Shacklebolt also stopped, gaping.

"I take it this wasn't here last time?"

"No... I should think not...."

For standing before them was not the huddle of wooden lodges and temporary huts nestled between trees like he was used to, but instead... well, he wasn't sure what it was. At the moment, it didn't appear to be anything but a great big mess. A great stretch of forest had been cleared away and leveled, the timber used to create several platforms around which massive stone blocks, each as long Harry was tall and several feet in height, laid out in a half completed wall. Dozens of men and women, some with wands and some without, were stripped down to the bare essentials as they hauled and magicked the stone blocks from the other side onto the wall itself and fixed it in place. Priestesses followed afterwards, painting the newly placed stone with a series of symbols in what Harry suspected was blood (or some sort of blood mixture). They appeared to do this for every block that was laid, and he had to marvel at the notion as the wall, while only about six feet tall and obviously not complete, stretched in either direction as far as Harry could see.

Cautiously, Harry made his way down the path to the small door that had been left in the wall. As he passed through it, his entire body broke out into shivers as strange magic poured over him like icy rain against naked flesh, clean and deadly cold. Shacklebolt caught him, confused by his reaction.

"They're turning the entire wall into a keystone," he said faintly. He had a sudden flash of insight, a question and an answer that sprung up like an epiphany. "Like Hogwarts."

It had never occurred to him before to ask what it was that made Hogwarts so magical, even in comparison to so many other magical places in the world. He had always assumed it was simply the amount of magic that had been performed inside of it and expended on it over the centuries and to a certain extent that was the case. But there were many places where magic was performed constantly over the centuries and yet still could not compare, including schools and universities that had been around almost as long as or even longer than Hogwarts itself. What set Hogwarts apart, he now realized, was that from the very moment of construction, the castle had been designed to absorb magic. Just as the wall was designed to do now.

Harry felt dizzy at the realization, unable to determine what it might mean or even why it was being done.

"Magnificent, isn't it?" called a familiar voice. Harry's mind jumped quickly into focus as his gaze found Remus sitting atop a great pile of timbers, his wand in one hand and a canteen in another. He was stripped down as much as the other workers, and though he was at least ten years older than most of them, his body was still strong and powerful beneath the grim of dirt and sweat.

Harry could only blink dumbly, first at his godfather and then at the... great monstrosity that was currently cutting the forest in half. Remus smiled tiredly and climbed down from his resting place, calling out to another werewolf to keep track of the progress.

"It'll be years before it's completed at this rate, decades even," he said, "but it keeps everyone busy and out of trouble. It'll be a magical wonder if we ever finish it. How are you, Harry?"

And just like with Winterhare and Fleetfoot, Harry felt the disorientation at finding himself treated normally in a completely abnormal situation once again. If he didn't get fix on things soon, he wasn't going to be able to walk in a straight line let alone take care of business.

"I...I'm fine. How are you?"

He flinched at how stupid that sounded, but Remus just smiled and ruffled his hair before turning to Shacklebolt.

"Kingsley Shacklebolt, you little rascal. I thought you were dead for sure."

The wizard grinned back at him, and shook his hand in greeting.

"It's been awhile, hasn't it? I wouldn't have recognized you without those scars."

"You know each other?" Harry asked.

"Kingsley's father was an instructor at the Academy of Aurors, and the little bugger used to think he owned the damn place. I hadn't seen him since he was about your age."

"Yeah, and I was still bigger than you, Mr. Twig. Looks like country living did you some good."

Remus smiled for a moment longer, before his expression faded into something more serious.

"It is good to see you, Kingsley, but I'm going to warn you in advance, Sirius is not likely to be as happy. He's a man with a lot of responsibilities, a lot of burdens, and that's all but killed his sense of humor. You have a job to do, and you do it, but do it respectfully. Do not look him directly in the eyes, do not speak unless spoken to and keep your words short and to the point, do not joke or tease at any werewolf's expense, and do not ever point your wand at him or me. Break any of these rules and I cannot guarantee he won't kill you."

The Sentinel's pleasant smile faded throughout the Head Beta's warning, until his entire expression faded into something cold and blank. Harry, who was feeling an upwelling of dread at those words, could not help but marvel at it.

Remus turned to Harry, and the young wizard tensed.

"You're an honorary werewolf and member of our clan, so you have considerably more leeway. Just be respectful until you've had time to feel each other out. He's been anxious about your arrival, so he might come off as a bit snappish, but... he's still your godfather."

He couldn't help but wonder if that was true. How much had Sirius changed? How much of it was because of these awful events that Harry himself had brought about? Everyone was so anxious, especially Remus, even though he tried to hide it.

"Yeah... is he waiting now?"

"I think he's terrorizing the alpha of the Sheppard Clan, so we might as well go and rescue him," he said, a bit of honest humor leaking into his voice. Remus turned and lead them through the unfamiliar surroundings. On this side of the wall, the new colony could be seen, though it too was not what Harry would have expected.

The Goddess clan colony had always seemed vaguely transient, as if at any moment the entire thing could be disassembled and moved or abandoned altogether. The buildings themselves, while comfortable and functional, had been secondary to the everyday survival of the pack. Now, however, the lodge houses (more than he remembered, perhaps because extra werewolves had been brought in to build the wall) were all built on heavy stone foundations and decorated ornately in carvings of forest creatures on the heavy doors and exterior support beams. Behind each lodge there were large vegetable gardens, which Harry had never seen so close to the settlement, although know that the trees had been thinned around them there was plenty of sunlight to do so. Additionally, there appeared to be shops or rather work sheds, where various craftsmen practiced their art in the shelter of rough wooden and thatch buildings, where before they had almost always worked in the open air or not at all.

It occurred to Harry that he was seeing the development of the Goddess clan from a chieftain society to something closer to a feudal one.

"Sheppard clan? I don't think I've ever heard of them," Harry said distractedly, looking around curiously at this strange new world.

"Technically, they're called the Ovindell Clan, but no one really calls them that. They're new, most of them foreign. They're in charge of some grazing land up in Northern Ireland that the Dark Lord signed over a few months ago, and they were supposed to be ready to take on some sheep by now but there have been delays."

"Attacks?" he asked, cautiously. It was unlikely that such a thing would go unnoticed in the newspapers, but lately there had been a lot of focus on the attacks in London and the larger cities that perhaps an attack on a tiny little field in the middle of nowhere might simply be ignored.

"Only on each other. The alpha there was a farmer and has some sheep raising experience and he's strong enough for the role, but his English is bad and the English speaking werewolves resent him. There's been in-fighting and sabotage between the English and the German speaking werewolves almost from the beginning. Sirius will have them sorted out in no time."

They passed through the main part of the village, bustling with activity and found their way to the natural clearing where previously summer solstice feasts and bonfire had been held. There was another wooden building, this one different from the lodges, but familiar to Harry. It was a large circular building with a thatch roof, and series of flags that he though must symbolize each of the werewolf clans. It reminded him a great deal of the structure he had built in the first year of Celtic Studies under Brennan's tutelage. It also held that transient look that Harry thought quite curious for a something that was rather like the seat of government.

A pair of female archers was sitting on the roof, scanning the trees idly for any sign of attack, while another pair of males with spears and knives stood at the entryway. Otherwise, the field was empty, and felt strangely lonely.

As they drew nearer, Harry could make out the sounds of shouting and snarling, and his hands tightened around his staff. Remus did not seem concerned, however, and had him wait outside with Shacklebolt while he went in to announce their arrival. There was a sudden deafening silence, and then another series of angry snarling. A moment later, several men scrambled out of the round house, bruised, bloodied, and cowed.

One of the men caught sight of him and froze, causing several others to run into him. Harry was startled to recognize the man... sort of. He had been in Volpes-Wulf, a hunter of some kind. The man stared at him, horrified, before quickly hurrying away. A few others looked as well, and shied away upon recognizing him, their eyes cast downward as they scurried away.

The tension that had gradually been fading away, returned in force. No one had forgotten about Berlin. Remus and the rest of the Goddess Clan were doing a fine job of pretending they had, but it was all a ruse. Those werewolves remembered, and they were terrified.

"Come in, Harry," Remus called, startling him.

There was no door to the round house, but the inside was dark and ominously silent. Shacklebolt went in first, and Harry followed reluctantly after.

The inside of the round house was structurally the same as the Celtic round house he remembered, with a large fire pit in the middle (currently unlit), and wooden floor circling around it. There were windows too, but they were all closed so that the only illumination came from the open doorway. In the paltry light, Harry could see the shape of low lying furniture, lounging pillows, chests, and a myriad of instruments too small or slender to make out in the deep shadows.

It wasn't just a meeting place, Harry realized, it was a den.

"Harry."

He jumped and then with the quickest of Seeker's reflexes, his hand snapped out to catch Shacklebolt's wrist before he could even lift his

wand. Both wizards looked at each other, startled by his move and a deep, mirthless laugh rumbled through the darkness.

"It's good to see you're as quick as ever. I'm glad. I should have felt bad at killing Kingsley, even if he is a government lapdog now."

Sirius was suddenly at Harry's side, his movements so quiet and seamless, he may as well have been a passing shadow in the gloom. The young wizard stiffened, feeling keenly his disadvantage where he had hoped desperately that no advantage would have been needed.

"Sir-"

Fingers pressed against side of his back, and he stiffened, confused and frightened.

"This is new," the Head Alpha said evenly, studying the scar where Oblitz's knife had pierced with his fingertips. "Berlin?"

"Yes," he blurted, fear rising and the hatred of himself for feeling it.

The fingers moved unerringly to Harry's arm where the shadow wolf had bitten. The scars there were faint, imperceptible to touch, and he wondered how the other man could possibly find them so easily in the dark.

"These too. And more, I suspect. So many scars, Harry, and all of them deep."

He pulled away sharply, stepping back, immediately defensive, but Sirius had already turned from him and was looking at his bodyguard, whose wand was out and ready even if it was still pointed at the ground. His eyes were starting to adjust to the low light, just enough to make out his godfather's form. Sirius was dressed only in a pair of black pants riding low on his hips, his posture quietly aggressive and loose with masculine confidence. He regarded the sentinel coldly, but without anxiety, as if certain he could destroy the man without effort. Perhaps in this place he could.

To Shacklebolt's credit, he did not flinch or fold under that dominating aura. He kept his gaze down, avoiding the werewolf's eyes as etiquette dictated, but also watching his torso for signs of an imminent attack. Sirius assessed him silently for an uncomfortable amount of time, waiting for signs of weakness. When none presented themselves he smirked.

"I would have thought you would be locked in Azkaban by now or fighting me for my position amongst the werewolves. Your career choice borders on the ironic. Was it not the Dark Lord's minions that killed your father?"

Harry, who generally faced fear with aggression, was quickly becoming aggravated with Sirius and ready to start his own pissing contest, but Remus had swooped in and led him away from the two, whispering in his ear.

"Stay out of it. It has nothing to do with you."

Harry didn't agree, but Remus seemed to have a better understanding of his Head Alpha's craziness than he did and he would have to trust him.

"They did," Shacklebolt agreed. "And I would gladly see them all burned at the stake for it."

"And yet I don't smell any burning flesh."

"I don't see you leading any rebellions yourself. You sold your own men to the man who imprisoned you in the first place."

"Don't play stupid, Kinglsey. Provoke me and I'll tear your damn head off. What are you doing here?"

"I was assigned to protect Mr. Potter."

"That is my job."

"Smash up job you're doing too."

Two things happened simultaneously. One, Remus wrapped an arm around Harry's chest and held fast, and two, Sirius suddenly lashed out and kicked Shacklebolt in the stomach, sending him flying across the room.

"Sirius! No!" Harry shouted, and tried to move, but Remus did not loosen his hold and he was trapped. Remus had known this was going to happen.

Shacklebolt landed on his back, the wind knocked out of him. Sirius took the opportunity to try and kick his wand out of his hand, but the Sentinel caught his foot and kicked his leg out from under him. He rolled gracefully to his feet and raised his wand.

"Stu-"

Sirius, still on the ground, rolled, knocking his opponent over again. They wrestled and rolled on the floor for a few minutes, exchanging punches and kicks after Shacklebolt had lost his wand. Shacklebolt was bigger than Sirius, but the Head Alpha was stronger, much stronger, and it didn't take long before he had him pin, one arm pulled painfully behind his back. Harry was having his own wrestling match with Remus, but it too was embarrassingly one sided once his staff had pulled out of his arm.

"Yield," Sirius snarled.

"What the fuck is wrong with you, man?"

Displeased with that response, he pulled sharply on the Sentinel's bound arm. There was a loud pop, followed by a pained grunt as the shoulder was dislocated.

"Yield."

"Fine! Jesus, I yield! Now, get the hell off me!"

He released his captive and backed away, allowing him to struggle painfully to his feet. His right arm hung uselessly at his side, and there was a cut above his eye. He was probably injured elsewhere,

but it was impossible to see. Sirius' nose was bleeding, but aside from that he looked no more affected than if he had simply rolled out of bed. He swept back his messy tangle of hair and tied it there, seeming to ignore his defeated rival completely now.

"Welcome to the Goddess Colony, Kingsley," he said with mocking cheer. "I hope you enjoy your stay. Ask one of my guards to get you something for your shoulder on your way out. Go."

Shacklebolt, humiliated and in pain, was still not quite defeated. He tossed his head towards Harry, who had finally been released and seething with his own righteous indignation.

"I have orders-"

Sirius barked out a laugh, harsh and cruel.

"Yes, well, I think we've established that if I meant my godson any harm you would not be able to do much about it. Now get out before I rip that arm out completely and beat you with it."

Still, the man hesitated, but Harry could see there was no winning this.

"Just go," he insisted. "I'll be fine."

There was enough tension in the room that you could not only cut it with a knife, but possibly carve the Statue of David if you had the talent, but when the Sentinel looked to Harry there was no fear and nothing to justify his continued presence after such a thorough defeat. He hunted down his wand and left.

"About time," Sirius muttered after he was gone, his voice jumping from harsh and biting to exasperated amusement like... well, a crazy person. "I thought we'd never get rid of him. He's as bad as he ever was. Open the windows will you, Remy? It's bloody dark in here."

Harry stood stupidly, as his godfathers went about opening the windows, letting the morning sun filter inside. In the light, the little house was not nearly so ominous, and frankly looked rather warm and extravagant. The furniture he had seen was all in a sort of

oriental style in lacquered red wood and gold fixtures, oriental rugs and overstuffed pillows, and rich tapestries between which a fiery red Irish Salamander (a sort of wingless dragon) slithered, chasing a group of harried looking hunters. There was a low writing desk where several pieces of parchment and newspapers rested haphazardly, and beside it Harry was curious to note an owl stand.

"Are you thirsty?" Sirius asked, casually. "It's been god awful hot for this early in the summer."

Harry just blinked at him.

"What the fuck?" he blurted.

"Watch your language, young man," Remus admonished, but Harry didn't hear him.

"What the bloody fuck?"

"That's much better," Sirius said, grinning. Harry wasn't amused in the least.

"What was that?" he shouted, pointing at the door Shacklebolt had fled through. Both werewolves shrugged as if it were unimportant.

"A demonstration. A performance. They all think I'm a psychotic lunatic."

"'They' being who? Sane people?"

"Such people exist? I have to say I had all but given up hope."

Sirius was looking rather pleased with himself, which would normally have Harry smiling. He was starting to feel that urge now, but was thoroughly beating that impulse down before he was infected with their insanity. Instead, he scowled mutinously at the both of them. They both turned to each other and grinned.

"You look just like your mother when you do that," Remus remarked.

"I am armed and annoyed."

"She used to say that too."

Sirius handed him a glass of water and hauled him over to the nearby pile of pillows. He plopped himself down, while Remus stood at the nearby window looking between them both. Sirius gestured for him to sit, which Harry ignored.

"What is going on? First the burial shrine is... off, then there's a giant wall in the middle of the forest, and then you break my bodyguard's arm as some kind of practical joke?"

"Harry-"

"Let's not even mention the whole forgetting I exist for six months followed by a summons of all things, and when I do get here, after the aforementioned weirdness, you want to act like everything's just marvelous? No, Sirius. No freak'n way."

"Sit down, Harry," Sirius said calmly, as if he was being the rational one in this situation. The young wizard crossed his arms and glared at him stubbornly. Sirius' eyes hardened at his defiance. "Sit."

And Harry immediately did, stiffly, and some distance away from the alpha. Sirius closed his eyes and sighed.

"I understand that you're confused. These are confusing times. We are both changing. Our worlds are both changing. What happened last year... should never have happened."

Harry looked away.

"I am ashamed of myself."

He looked backed up, stunned, for those were his words and yet he had not been the one to speak them. Sirius was looking down at the floor, perhaps gathering his thoughts or simply waiting for Harry's response.

"Why? You didn't do anything to be ashamed of. You didn't... you didn't..."

Sirius looked back at up at him.

"You should never have been involved. I made you a diplomat and a soldier, when the most that should have been expected of you was to attend school and I deprived you of even that. I saw you as an adult, as a resource I could haggle over with the Dark Lord, when I should have thought of you as my child, in need of guidance and protection. My actions have caused both you and my werewolves great harm."

Harry slammed down his glass of water.

"Is that what you think? That you sent a child to do a man's job? That I was too young and stupid to know any better?" Harry bit out. "Don't you get it? I could have done what you wanted me to. I was already doing it. I was doing just fine! You didn't give me anything I couldn't handle. But the Du'on nadi... that was my fault. That was completely my fault. I knew it wasn't safe. I knew it and still I... Those people all died because... It all went to hell because I did something so unbelievably stupid! Whether I was a kid or an adult it was still incredibly-"

Remus' arms wrapped around him from behind, this time to comfort rather than restrain, holding him tightly as Harry's vision began to blur with unshed tears. He choked on a sob, and hid behind his hand so neither man could see them fall.

"Harry, Harry, ssshhh... It wasn't your fault. It was a trick. We all made mistakes, and they took advantage of that. It wasn't your fault," he whispered softly, running a hand through Harry's hair. Remus took his wrist to pull the hand he hid behind away, but he wouldn't let him, refusing to look, refusing to seen Sirius' recrimination. But the hand around his wrist was not Remus', and it would not let any defiance persist.

"I know about the Du'on nadi," Sirius said, staring down at him. "I know, and for that too, I am ashamed. You were grieving and you were scared. We made you scared. Scared to show weakness,

scared of the future, scared of failing. You needed to feel safe, and I was too overwhelmed at the time to see it. Jane gave you that drug, tricked you-"

"No, she-"

"Yes, she did. I know. She did it on Greyback's behest. She is precognitive. There was no ways she could not have seen what would come to pass."

Harry's eyes widened, staring up at Sirius, looking for the lie, for the attempt to alleviate the guilt of sin out of love and compassion, but found a dark, deep rage instead.

"I overlooked it. I didn't recognize the signs," he continued, his voice deepening with anger. "She was running her own damn little conspiracy right under my nose, and let her. I trusted her. That was a stupid mistake, Harry. The beginning of this entire fucking mess."

Calloused fingers brushed away the tears and led him over to the pillows, setting him down again. All three adjusted themselves until they were comfortably reclined, following the routine of those days and those nights they would gather in each others company and discuss the trivial and the divine with equal irreverence. They spoke in hushed tones of the events that had led to the Battle of the Berlin Underground as they each had experienced them, of decisions made in arrogance and ignorance and forces beyond their reckoning that had pulled them into a tide some called destiny and Sirius called 'the Divine Fuck-You'.

And then they were silent for a long time, longer than it took to tell their versions of the entire misbegotten tale. The sun rose higher and the round house grew warmer. Outside the air hung thick with humidity and constant drone of insects. Above them the support beams creaked as the archers on the roof moved about. It would have been nothing to simply drift, to neither think nor remember, and fall into the spell of summer.

But they did not fall asleep and they did not forget what they had heard. Instead, they let the words come together into meaning and

meaning into knowledge, and slowly they took that knowledge into them, carefully fitting it into place so that it settled firmly into the psyche. It stirred up the dust. Anguish, anger, despair, and self-hatred lingered in the aftermath of the mental shifting, but that too would settle eventually.

"Why did you wait till now to contact me? I thought you had blamed me," Harry finally asked softly, finally breaking the silence.

"...Strangely enough, I thought the same thing. I was quite certain you wouldn't want to have anything to do with me or the other werewolves after what had happened. Moony said I was being a coward-

"And you were," his beta said, irritated as he had always been with the subject.

"-and I was, so I kept making excuses. You were still in the hospital, you were too weak to travel, you were busy catching up with your classes, so on and so forth. Then I ran out of excuses."

"And the 'summons'? Cause, yeah, not the best way to say 'hi'."

"Sorry about that. I was still a bit edgy. I didn't know how you'd respond. I hadn't exactly received any word from you either."

Remus kicked him in the side.

"Hey! Besides, Lord Pain-in-my-ass seems to think I've turned into Greyback. I find this quite amusing and somewhat beneficial, so I figured I'd keep him thinking that. If he asks, you are my reluctant minion and heir apparent. Be prepared for gross over protection followed by public antagonism."

"I think I can handle it," Harry said, a sardonic smile touching his expression before moving on to something more serious. "What are you doing anyway? With the wall and the breaking Shacklebolt's arm-which was seriously uncool, by the way."

"I didn't break his arm. I dislocated it. He'll be fine. Besides, I find its best to remind wizards, early and often, that they aren't the bosses around here. Plus it gave me an excuse to talk to you in private. I don't want anyone knowing I think of you as any more important than any other werewolf. It's safer for us both if they don't. Do you understand?"

"Yeah, I get it. And the wall?"

"Something I've had to come up with to keep everyone busy. We've got too many people and not enough work for all of them. It makes them restless, especially the ones who want to be out fighting. I rotate all the clans for a week every six weeks to work on it. Anyone they can spare, including the clan alpha. Helps me figure out when and where there are problems, and to iron them out without having to travel all the bloody time."

"It's an awfully... magical wall for just being busy work."

"Moony's idea."

Harry turned to Remus who was looking rather pleased that his godson had noticed his pet project was special.

"It's an experiment," he said, "I've wanted to try it for a while now, but I never thought it would be on this scale."

"It kind of reminds me of Hogwarts," he said, offhandedly, hoping he had guessed right.

"In a way, yes, it's being built with some of the same techniques, but really I'm looking more at a 'Forbidden Forest' sort of thing."

"How's that? Last I checked there weren't any walls in the Forbidden Forest."

"Actually, there is. Or there was. There used to be an ancient wall around the forest to keep the Fae trapped inside. The Druid priests would take the bodies of men slain in battle, drape them over the walls, and perform rituals. Hundreds of men at a time. Thousands

over of the centuries, their bones all resting on the edge of the forest."

"They never mentioned that in *Hogwarts: A History*." Harry said, trying not to think too deeply about the macabre sight it must have been. "So what happened to the wall?"

"It disappeared right around the time Hogwart's was built. I think we can both guess what happened to it."

Harry gaped at him. "Are you serious? That's...ghoulish!"

"It's only a theory. Some still insist the wall was never really a physical wall, just a symbolic name. There are only two or three references to it in writing, and all of it by Romans and they could have been referring to another wall altogether. The only real evidence that it might have ever existed is the Forbidden Forest itself, which has neither grown nor shrunk from its borders in recorded history. It's been the same size for over a thousand years. That takes a powerful sort of magic and that magic needs an anchor."

"So I'm going to school built out of sacrificial altars. Marvelous. I hope you're not trying the exact same thing."

"No, of course not. The wall around the Forbidden Forest, if it did exist, would only have made up a small fraction of the castle. Perhaps only the foundation or ground up to make the mortar. The magic soaked stones, however, are probably what inspired the Founders to imbue the castle with blood magic. I'm using their technique, only to make another wall."

"And that will make your land like the Forbidden Forest?" Harry asked doubtfully, wondering why either of them when even want to live in someplace like the Forbidden Forest. It wasn't exactly the friendliest of environments.

"Well, not exactly. The Forbidden Forest is the way it is because there are so many Fae inside of it. I have no way of knowing exactly what our own forest will look like being run by werewolves. It might be centuries before there are any significant changes. My primary

interest is to see if this wall we made will create the same sort of sanctuary as the other. Like I said before, the Forbidden Forest hasn't grown, but it hasn't diminished either. Witches and wizards rarely go into it, and no one ever tries, at least not successfully, to cut it down. Imagine if we could make a place like that for werewolves? A sanctuary that, no matter how bad things get with the wizards, will always be safe from them? It would be quite remarkable if we succeed.."

Harry and Remus talked a great deal more about the wall and the Forbidden Forest and Hogwarts, exchanging theories and unanswerable questions. It seemed the beta had been waiting for someone to talk to about all of this because once he started he could barely contain himself. He was grinning and excitedly moving his hands around, like Hermione when she discovered something 'fascinating'. Harry found it strangely endearing. Sirius found it boring as hell, and took a brief nap during their entire discussion.

Finally, Harry ran out of interest and Remus ran out of steam and they kicked Sirius awake to continue their conversation on something else.

"Why isn't there any blood sacrifices on the shrine? Or weapons?" Harry asked, because that was still bothering him for some reason. Sirius frowned, and his godson wondered if it wasn't a sensitive subject.

"I've banned it. Greyback's power is strengthened by the sacrifices, and the nature of his strength changes according to what sort of sacrifices he receives. I am not going to allow another incident like before, but I wouldn't keep anyone from paying their respects. This was the compromise."

"The shamans must be furious with you," Harry said knowingly. He did not have much to do with the other shamans, but he knew a little from what Luna had told him and if he had felt even a little disturbed by what he had seen he couldn't imagine what they were feeling.

Sirius smirked.

"That they are. But it's just like with Kingsley. They need to know whose boss, and it isn't the one with the most magic."

"You have just as much magic as they do," Harry pointed out. Sirius was a wizard as well as a werewolf, after all, although he often seemed to forget that. His position as Head Alpha also came with its own sort of magic that was less easily categorized, and Harry did not really understand.

"But less than Jane, and she's terrified of me."

He didn't know how to respond to that. It seemed incredibly strange to him that his godfather would be bullying a goddess, even one trapped in the body of a little girl. Especially one trapped in the body of a little girl. Even if she was a manipulative little bitch.

"Is she here?" he asked instead.

"She's around. I keep her close to watch for her tricks and to work on the wall, but you probably won't see her. She's out of favor with the packs and she knows it."

"And Luna?" Because he hadn't seen her, but he couldn't imagine her abandoning her goddess.

"Her you probably will see. Just not with Kingsley around. She is aware there will be consequences if Voldemort knows you saw each other."

Harry sat up. Once he left the round house, Shacklebolt would likely attach himself to his side once again and he had no way of knowing how or when he would be able to get away to find Luna. Sirius and Remus shared a knowing look.

"Get out of here, pup. She'll know you're here and find you quick enough."

"Leave your things. I'll take care of them," Remus said as Harry scrambled up and towards the door. "Come back here in two hours

for dinner, and then you're turning in early for the night. You have lessons in the morning and you'll need-."

"Stop nagging the boy, Remy."

"Lessons?" Harry asked.

"Don't tell us you forgot already?" Sirius laughed. It took a moment to figure out what his godfathers were talking about. He couldn't help but grin. As awful and exhausting as their initial conversation had been, now that it was over he was feeling light and something close to giddy. Later, he might think back on what was said and it would weigh on him again as it had over the last six months, but for now the world was... not exactly great, but a lot better than he had thought.

He would enjoy it while it lasted.

~ Author's note~

1. Faerie rings are seen visibly as a ring of large mushrooms (toadstools), and to step into one is to step into the faerie realm. There are legends that men who have stepped into one and then left, felt as if only a brief time had passed and yet after they had left found years or even centuries had gone by.

Book VI

Chapter 4: Unraveling Threads

Harry followed an old game trail deeper into the forest. He was tired from his meeting with his godfathers, but he did not want to head back to the village before speaking with Luna and she could not risk being seen by Kinglsey. The trail led into a small grotto, and he decided it was a good place to speak privately. If what his godfathers implied was true she would find him, and he had but to wait.

Or perhaps not even that. As he set his staff down in preparation to make himself comfortable in the grass, he spotted her.

She stood at the end the trail as if she had always been, and perhaps she had. He had not looked back at during his trek here, and there was no telling at what point she had joined him on the path. She seemed frailer than he remembered, not exactly thinner and not really weaker, but there was a tension in blank expression where there had once been absolute certainty that had made her seem simultaneously divine and mad. Her grief after the Goddess Clan Massacre had not shaken that, but something since he had last seen her had.

"Luna."

"You came," she said, as if confused.

"Did you think I wouldn't?"

"Yes, though I can't remember now why I thought that. I've been so confused lately."

"Yeah, me too."

He moved towards her and for a moment he thought she was going to bolt as she tensed, but as he wrapped his arms around her she practically melted into him. It had been months since they had seen each other, bonded in their mutual grief and comfort and subsequently exiled from one another's company. It was easy and familiar to fall back into those roles, but there was something there

between them that kept them from falling completely. Some instinct brought about from a half remembered injury.

"Blackbone said you wouldn't. He said father nearly killed you and that you wouldn't want anything to do with us. Jane said you would come back, but she's not as strong as she used to be. Blackbone's all but broken her."

Good, Harry thought bitterly, but kept his expression gentle.

"Sirius is a lot of things, but clairvoyant isn't one of them."

"Was it very bad?"

"Yes," he admitted, and didn't elaborate. He knew she would not ask him to.

She pulled away, far enough to reach between them and pressed her hand to his stomach. He felt himself flush at her touch. It felt strangely more intimate than their hug.

"What is this? It's cold," she said. It took Harry a moment to realize what it was she was feeling.

"Oh, that. Voldemort gave me a special seal. It's protects my manipura...er solar plexus chakra. That's were possession starts, so nothing can get inside me unless I deactivate the seal."

She recoiled, withdrawing from him completely.

"A shaman should never do such a thing... your duty is to always-"

"What? Let the gods put me and take me off like a suit whenever they feel like it? No thank you. Besides, I was told I was a shaman. I never asked for it. If they want back the title they can have it. I'm never letting anything use me like Greyback did a second time."

She stared down at this stomach for a long moment, as if she could see the invisible markings and read in them things unfathomable.

"I understand. I'm sorry."

"It wasn't your fault."

"That's not what I'm sorry about."

Something of her former certainty returned, and he felt uneasy at the timing. Had his denial of shamanic responsibilities angered her? He knew she was in training to be a healer, and healers often went on to be shamans so perhaps he had inadvertently committed a heinous taboo amongst her profession.

"I know you must hate my father."

He couldn't deny it, and neither of them would stoop to placating or being placated with false sentiments.

"I know you must also hate Jane."

Again he couldn't deny that either.

"But they are my family. My most precious people. I'm sorry I can't hate them for you."

He flinched. That stung. He couldn't tell if it stung because she actually thought he would expect that of her or if it stung because she wouldn't do it for him. It would be hypocritical of him to judge her. Hadn't he said similar things to Hermione on the train?

It hurt though. It felt like betrayal, even though he understood it up to a certain point. She had chosen her family, even knowing what they had done and what they could have done. Even knowing they could have killed him.

Fine. Fine. If that's what she wanted that was her choice, but he wasn't going to pretend he was okay with that.

"What are the lives of mortals compared to the love of gods, after all?" he said bitterly.

"They are certainly less self absorbed for one thing," she said neutrally, and walked away.

"Luna, wait!"

He ran after her, but even though she had only been a few steps ahead of him, once she stepped into the underbrush she disappeared completely. He stumbled around for a bit, looking for her, but she was gone and clearly did not want to be found. He muttered curses under his breath, feeling like an idiot. What did he expect to do once he found her? Apologize? Compromise? And how would that work? Let her bastard of father possess him every once and a while? Pretend it was all forgiven?

And what did he expect of her? All but one of Luna's brother's was dead, so who did that leave to take care of her? He wasn't so foolish to think that Sirius or Remus would be welcoming her with open arms if she had refused to renounce her father, and he was forbidden to see her by the Dark Lord. Who did that leave her? Jane, of course, and whatever sort of guidance and protection she could receive from Greyback. It sounded rather unhealthy and more than little creepy, but he was in no position to judge.

But Merlin, what would it take to question her loyalty? Over a hundred werewolves had died and who knew how many witches and wizards in the Berlin underground. He had been horrifically injured himself. What would it take for her to realize Fenrir Greyback was poison and Jane likewise untrustworthy? What was she willing to do for them in the meantime? Were they enemies now? How had that happened?

He had come back to the Goddess colony believing his relationship with his godfathers was coming to a close, and that nothing could have destroyed the bond between him and Luna, not circumstance or distance. Now everything was upside down. His relationship with Sirius was stronger than ever and it had taken so little in the end to destroy what he had with her.

He didn't want to think about. He couldn't. It would drive him mad.

"I don't give a damn," he said to himself fiercely, as if he was expecting an argument. "I don't need her or her wonkiness."

To prove it, he took his wand out of his staff which he then broke in two and tossed aside. I'm a wizard, not a shaman. Wizards do it their own bloody way. So screw you, Luna, and your crazy family.

With that he tucked his wand in his belt and headed back towards the village, determined to hate her or forget about her, which ever meant he didn't have to feel as if he had just lost something.

~ Page Break~

The aviary was warm and sunny in the early afternoon, echoing with the chirps and cries of strange birds over the splash of the garden fountain. The air smelled of flowers, rotting vegetation, and water. If not for the lack of breeze, the Dark Lord might have been able to pretend it was a pleasant day in some distant tropical vista. He was enjoying a rare moment of leisure while he waited for word from his allies in Europe. Until he knew what they were going to do or not do, he was forced to put a hold on implementing any plans and that left him with very little that required his immediate attention.

"I don't know why you insist on coming here to read," Bobby grumbled, pecking off bits of carrot cake that his captor had graciously left for him. "One doesn't typically go to the dungeons for peace and quiet."

Voldemort flipped a page in his book and answered without looking up.

"I would hardly call this a dungeon. Although, if you wish to speak of unusual behavior, perhaps I should remind you that prisoners don't usually go to their captors for conversation."

"Hn. And who else would I talk to? You've left me with a bunch of featherbrains. Even the magical ones are dumb as rocks. You couldn't have left an owl or something?"

"And have the two of you conspiring? I think not."

"You can't keep me here forever."

"Are you so certain? I've kept you here for months without consequence. You were captured fair and square. Raecellos can't or won't help you, and you are not so clever that you can escape on your own."

"This is pointless. I won't join you."

He closed his book and set it aside in favor of a cup of tea.

"I do not understand your reluctance. It is true that we've had our differences in the past, but I had always believed that was the result of jealousy more than anything. We are no longer rivals for our Master's attention."

Bobby bristled and hopped from the table to the back of the spare chair, tottering this way in that in an avian interpretation of pacing.

"Ha! Ha! As if an arrogant little fool like you could ever understand why I despise you. You were never whole enough to realize what parts were missing, even before you turned yourself into an abomination. I was never jealous of you. I knew eventually you would bring about Carrigan's end. He knew it too from the very beginning, but he... he thought you were worth it...Idiot."

The Dark Lord frowned, setting down his tea.

"I protected him as best as I could. What happened was... not of my doing. I loved him like a father."

"Yes, and we both know how you loved your father."

Voldemort had always been fast with his wand, but Bobby was faster still. By the time the wizard had thrown aside the table and drawn his wand, the raven had disappeared into the surrounding greenery. The sound of shattering wood and porcelain set off a wave of alarm, and the glass cage was filled with the shrieks and rustle of wings.

As quickly as his anger came, it left again, and the Dark Lord laughed, sending the birds into a higher level of terrified cries.

"Just like old times, Bobitimus, but Carrigan's not here to save you anymore. Think about my offer. I have all the time in the world to wait for you to change your mind."

He swept from the room, slowing only long enough to snatch up his book which had been thrown in his fit of temper. Bobby watched him from the shadows, seething with anger and haughty vindictiveness.

Anger was the only thing he had left to keep the despair at bay.

His nemesis was right. He had all the time in the world, and Bobby feared if he did nothing that soon Carrigan's history would repeat itself through Harry and a cycle of misplaced love and death would repeat itself for Voldemort's seemingly endless reign. Already the Dark Lord, with his recently completed soul, was growing increasingly attached to the young wizard, and the war he had been fueling for the last year threatened to destroy the innocent of the two. It was all moving towards an inevitable end.

Fate, however, had given Harry a way out. A prophecy, a destiny. A way to end the cycle before repeated itself again. He had not been ready to face it before, and likely he still wasn't, but Bobby had to let him know before it was too late.

He needed to escape, but he lacked the means. The aviary for all its supposed beauty had more in common with a prison than a bird cage despite Voldemort's claim to the contrary. It was thick with magic that countered his own, keeping him trapped behind glass as surely as if it were stone. Only the Dark Lord and a squib servant in charge of the aviary's upkeep ever entered. The former could not be overpowered and the latter lacked enough power to take him from the room. Raecellos could not raise his hand against the Dark Lord, not without some sort of justification. Imprisonment was not enough. Bobby had been caught fairly during a battle and had been neither killed nor mistreated.

There had to be a way though. Even if he didn't know what it was, he had to believe that some way or another an opportunity would present itself or inspiration would come. He had his own role to play in this, and destiny would not keep him on the sidelines forever.

He needed patience. He needed faith. Most of all, he needed his anger.

~ Page Break~

"Let's walk the St. Martin Canal today," Ira said sleepily, not bothering to open her eyes. She didn't need them open to know exactly what her husband was doing. With her body pressed to his side, she could feel his every move, no matter how miniscule.

Right now for instance, she knew his left hand was tracing up and down the curve of her back and side, his chin was resting in the tangled mess of her hair, and his arousal was stirring against her bare thigh.

"The canal is for muggles," he said, his voice thick from sleep... and something else. Less than subtly, he tightened his arm around her, pressing her closer still. He was more than satisfied when she not only acquiesced, but reciprocated, slipping her leg between his.

"Paris is not like Britain. We cannot avoid the muggles completely. Besides, I'm not scared of them. Mother used to take me to muggle stores when I was little. I know you're not scared of them."

"Hhmm... alright... later though... Much later..."

She laughed as he rolled them. The bed in their hotel suite, a wedding present arranged by the Dark Lord, was more than spacious enough to accommodate. It was late morning now, and sunlight flowed through the transparent white drapes, setting the room aglow. They should have been up hours ago, but their nights and days were dictated by their passion rather than habit or decorum and they were more than satisfied with that.

Snape had hardly lived an abstinent life, but his sexual encounters had always been brief, shallow, and a means to an end. With his responsibilities to Hogwarts, the Dark Lord, and then Harry Potter he had always been forced to be discreet for the sake of his reputation. His schedule did not permit for a girlfriend, and his opportunities for socializing with eligible witches were few and far between. Affection had been a rare commodity, and love never a consideration.

He had never made love to a woman before, and hadn't been completely confident that he could do so with Ira.

She had made it easy though. Ira made it all so damn easy it was vaguely frightening. He hadn't known a woman (at least not a mentally stable one) could be as lusty as a man if she were so inclined, and his wedding night had been an education. A marvelous education he fully intended to expand upon during (and hopefully a long time after) their honeymoon.

Later, they found themselves walking the canal, hand in hand, with Ira leaning against him. Flowers were thick along the canal, squeezed in where ever they could conceivably fit. There were lines of trees too, close together and seeming to grow out of the concrete itself at times, providing shade from the late afternoon sun.

The canal was thick with muggles too, and they had to forego their robes for lighter fare. Snape in a summer suit, Ira in a peasant top and skirt. He felt strangely exposed, as he always did when moving amongst muggles, but Ira took them in as part of the scenery, something to be admired and enjoyed.

"You know, Jacobi told me muggles are decades ahead of wizards in reproductive medicine. Most of her research and practices are based off of techniques they've already established. Maybe that's why there's so many of them."

"I highly doubt it. There have always been an excessive number of muggles," he said, glaring disapprovingly at female jogger running about in what appeared to be her underwear. "Although, I doubt it's helped matters. Did she say which of these barbaric muggle techniques she wanted to use?"

"Don't be like that. It's all done very magically. There are potions and spells and magical underwear and everything."

"Magical underwear?" he asked, before he could stop himself. She was trying not to laugh, but only just managed it.

"It's to prevent my body from rejecting the egg. The magical egg. She makes it out of human amniotic fluid* and some of my blood. It'll make an egg with all my DNA*, but then she'll induce meiosis so there will be two unfertilized eggs. She can make dozens of them, and save the spares for later use. It's sort of based off of cloning techniques only with meiosis at the end. But it's all done magically so there's magical underwear so my own magic won't attack it, at least for the first two weeks."

He only understood about half of what she had said. He knew what an egg was of course, and amniotic fluid was used in some potions (what most would consider very dark potions), but the rest of it was only so much medical jargon. What on earth was cloning?* It might have sounded very interesting under different circumstances, but at the moment it just sounded experimental and dangerous and not something he wanted perform on his new wife.

She seemed to sense he was disturbed by what she had told him. Lifting their intertwined hands to her lips, she kissed his thumb and smiled reassuringly.

"You don't have to worry. The biggest concern is miscarriage, and that's not physically dangerous until later in the pregnancy."

"And we're not going to end up with a baby with two heads, are we?"

"As long as we're careful, our children will have just as much of a chance as anyone else's, and neither of us are careless people."

They walked for a ways in silence, sensing they were moving from casual conversation into something more meaningful to the both of them. They took a turn away from the canal and onto a walkway that led through a small park. Passing between two statues of Artemis

and a hart, they passed from Muggle Paris into Wizarding Paris, leaving the park behind for a garden maze. Neatly manicured bushes rose up to their chests and stretched out before them for a hundred feet in an indiscernible zigzagging pattern. Amongst the rows were statues and fountains and floral displays, and one could spend days wandering the different pathways and discovering the maze's secrets.

Snape and Ira were not concerned with secrets at the moment, but privacy was preferred. The bushes were too low to block them from view, but they did not block any of the other strollers either and the various turns ensured they could not only keep their distance but avoid running into anyone at all.

"Do you think you would be ready to start trying for a baby before the start of term?" he asked, uncertain how the suggestion would be received. They both wanted to have a family, he knew, but Ira might want to simply be husband and wife for a while. Their courtship had been brief and sporadic, and it was only after their marriage that they were able to indulge in each other's company for long periods of time. Plus there was the sex. Even he was reluctant to relinquish that while she was carrying.

He was rather afraid she would think he wanted a baby more than her companionship. Which he did in a way, but she was still his wife and he acknowledged more than a little affection for her. He didn't want to hurt her feeling. It was a rather novel idea for him.

She didn't seem offended, luckily, but she did express her misgivings.

"I wouldn't mind getting started, but are you sure this is the best time? You're starting your new position at Hogwarts this fall and that's bound to be busy and stressful, and with the war going on they're bound to start be stricter with the rationing and everything is already started to get more expensive. There's no telling how bad things are going to get."

He nodded, relieved she was choosing to be pragmatic. He could do pragmatic.

"These are legitimate concerns. My responsibilities as Headmaster will indeed be time-consuming and stressful, but that is unlikely to change regardless of how long we wait. I believe it would make things simpler in the long term if we develop a lifestyle accommodating to both my professional and home life as soon as possible rather than allowing my professional life take precedent and then disrupting it again to start a family. Also, it might prove advantageous to make use of your mother's presence in our home to assist you when I am unable. I am quite sure she will be thrilled with the opportunity."

He would be lucky if he could throw the woman out before her grandchildren hit puberty, he thought morosely.

"As for providing for the child... I am not overly concerned. I have no intention of raising our children extravagantly, but my position is such that I have access to many resources that will ensure neither you nor our children shall ever be in want regardless of what happens."

Ira brows knit together.

"Regardless of what happens?"

"... If something unforeseen should happen to me, I have made arrangements that you're taken care of."

"Please don't say that, Severus."

"I don't mean to alarm you. Quite the opposite." He didn't tell her of the likelihood of him having to fight at some point. Potter would inevitably drag him into something, and even if he didn't the Dark Lord would have need of his particular skill sets eventually. "I assure you I will avoid dying if at all possible."

"But you still want to have a baby as soon as possible just incase you do?"

Clever girl.

"Yes," he admitted. "Or in case something happens to Healer Jacobi or any number of things that could go wrong. The truth of the matter

is that what we've been given isn't a gift. It's an opportunity, and opportunities have a way of quickly passing by."

"I hadn't thought of it that way," she said, and thought about it for a while. "Alright, I'll talk to her as soon as we get back. In the meantime, do you think you could do me a favor?"

"If I am able," he conceded.

"Let's just be two lovers in Paris while we're here. No talking about work or babies or politics."

They came to a closed space in the garden with a wooden bench and white roses. Ira turned, thinking they would move on, but Snape took hold of her arms and sat her down. Sitting down, they were both all but invisible and with a flick of his wand the bushes closing them off from the rest of the maze. He smiled wickedly.

"I think I can manage that."

"Severus, what are you- oh! Ooohhh... oh, my..."

~ Page Break~

Robert was not a deeply philosophical man. He was a lawyer after all. Higher concepts such as right and wrong were romantic sentiments at the best of times, and a matter of perspective every other time. He understood irony though. Every lawyer did. Every lawyer also understood irony wasn't as funny as everyone else seemed to think it was.

For instance, it was ironic you sue a man for helping you. It was ironic that contracts were written on the business in and interpreted in the client's favor. It was ironic that civil suits lawyers had three times as much as public prosecutors and defense lawyers and yet still did a third of the work.

As a more personal example, Robert found it very ironic that his acquaintance with Harry Potter, one of the most honorable and kind

people he had ever known, was what brought him under the employ of man who appeared to be channeling Satan.

And certainly there was nothing funny to be found in this situation. Nothing at all.

"So let me get this straight," Crouch drawled, staring across the table at Malfoy like a bored cat. Bartemius Crouch Jr., Lucius Malfoy, Robert himself, and Bartemius' lawyer whose name no one could remember (including Barty) were seated in an extravagant restaurant not far from the Court's Bristol offices, partly obscured in a booth in the far corner. They had only water, and nothing else would come until one of them signaled a waiter to take their order. They had much to discuss "You're willing to drop this suit if I agree to marry your little mongrel?"

"Consider it the dowry," Lucius said evenly, unaffected by Crouch's disinterested demeanor.

Crouch shook his head and smiled unpleasantly. It looked awkward on him. Barty Crouch Jr. was not built to be a sinister man. He was pale, gangly, with straw colored hair and freckles. There was nothing aristocratic or commanding in his posture that demanded instant respect. What he did have, however, was a reputation for being a man you did not want to cross and an inability to be intimidated by anything or anyone. He was also known for being quite mad. His lawyer, a rather flabby man with a neat mustache, was sweating profusely next to him.

Robert had seen men like this before. They often worked for the unscrupulous sort and expected at any moment to be caught in their misdeeds. He had never had much sympathy for such men before today. While nothing they were discussing was strictly illegal, it was unquestionably immoral and he was feeling rather uncomfortable himself.

"You'll have to do better than that. My reputation is on the line here. Even if I were in the market for a bride, which I'm not, I've made my... preferences known. A mewling little mudblood isn't on my list."

Lucius rolled his eyes.

"Does it look like I care about your preferences? If she were to your preference then I wouldn't be offering to absolve your debt. I require recompense. An exchange. You take her off of my hands and I forget the several thousand galleons plus interest you owe. I don't care what you do with her afterwards. Keep her, divorce her, drown her in a bloody moat, whatever you like. Just as long as she's out of my family once and for all."

Crouch let out an annoyed huff and gestured for the waiter.

"If you want her out of your family, disown her. I know you have a perverse enjoyment for elaborate games, but you're complicating a very simple situation. I'll have the house Pinot Noir," he said to the waiter as he approached, and then gestured to the other men to order.

"I'll have the Aveleda," Lucius said dismissively, and continued while their lawyers made their selection. "This is not a matter of tossing out an old pair of boots, Barty, this is about revenge-"

Crouch burst out laughing, and the waiter quickly scurried away.

"What did she do? Not curtsy deep enough for you? Since when do little girls merit your genteel attention?"

Lucius scowled. "It was a personal affront that I have no intention of elaborating on. Needless to say a simple disowning is not enough. For all her many short comings, stupidity isn't one of them. If I disown her, she'll find her own way and think herself ever so clever for it."

"But throw her to me and she'll really be sorry, is that it? You're a riot, Lucius, you really are," he said, smiling insipidly. The Malfoy patriarch didn't rise to the bait, and gestured for him to give his response. Crouch sighed, and turned to his lawyer. "Can he do what he says?"

The portly man jumped, startled at being addressed after being ignored for so long.

"Er...I... I don't see w-why not. Th-there's nothing illegal about it i-if you break it d-down into it's separate p-parts. A marriage, a dowry, an absolution of debt."

Crouch turned to Robert. "Is this your idea then?"

"No," he said pointedly, biting of the series of epitaph's that sprung to mind at the suggestion.

"Is it legal?"

"As far the absolution of debt goes? Yes. I am not a marriage lawyer, however. I am not certain of the legalities for marrying off school children."

Bloody hell, did I say that out loud? Judging by the glare Lucius sent his way, yes he had. Damn. Crouch, however, laughed.

"Why don't you have balls like that?" Crouch asked his lawyer, who just shrunk into his chair. The waiter arrived with their wine, and each man took his glass. "He's got a point though. How old is your thorn? Fourteen? Fifteen?"

"Technically, she's sixteen and will be seventeen next April. Officially, however, I moved her birthday back some months so she wouldn't be legally older than Draco. Less confusion about inheritance that way. I can probably have it changed back."

"Hhhmm... just a baby," he said idly. "She won't last long. Alright, you've got my attention. Write up the contracts and I'll have my other lawyers look at them."

"Excellent. I'll have the papers for you by Wednesday."

The conversation switched to politics and gossip (not often distinguishable), which normally Robert would have found infinitely fascinating. How many people got to sit down next the Commander General and the Head of Foreign Intelligence after all? At the moment, however, he was more disturbed than anything. He thought of his daughters, of his two beautiful muggleborn daughters, and that some

one could have done something like this to them too. In that moment, he despised the both of them and he despised himself for his role in this entire disgusting affair.

What could he do? Quit, yes. For all the good it would do. The plot would continue and he would be out of job with two mortgages and a family to feed. He would need some sort of back up plan if intended to leave Malfoy's employ. Kyle would know what to do. Kyle was a god damn genius compared to him when it came to morality and decision making.

As he was considering how he would approach his husband on the matter, a name Robert recognized drew his attention back to the conversation.

"Kingsley got promoted again, did you hear?" Crouch said, idly. "Well, in a manner of speaking. He's on protection duty for that Potter boy. The Dark Lord picked him personally."

"Yes, with that Umbridge woman gone, there hasn't been anyone capable of keeping him from rising up the ranks. I heard the entire Juvenile Justice Department threw a party when she was declared legally dead."

"I admit I opened a bottle of Martell when I heard the news. She really was an annoying woman. Useful, but annoying."

"Let us hope, Mr. Kinglsey outlives the late Madam Umbridge. Although, he never said it plain, Severus implied that Potter held some sort of responsibility for her death. He's proven himself quite the Albatross to the unwary. Isn't that right, Robert?"

"... I am afraid I know of no one he is responsible for the death of."

"And yet death seems to follow him around."

"That could be said of a lot of people," he said pointedly.

Crouch laughed.

"Balls the size the mars, by god!"

~ Page Break~

"So I can pick any animal?" Harry asked, skimming through an encyclopedia of animals. He had picked a page at random, and was currently looking at kangaroos. That looked like a fun animal, he thought. You could hop away really fast or kick someone good and hard if you were so inclined. Rather conspicuous in Britain though.

It was early morning, just before sunrise, and the round house was still dim even with the windows open. Sirius was already up and had left to go hunting, unlikely to return until that afternoon, and Kingsley had taken the opportunity to take care of his own business before he got back. The wizard had recovered from his injuries the night before and was sticking close to Harry, particularly when Sirius was around. The Head Alpha, however, had held true to his warning and appeared to be resolutely ignoring his godson in favor of pack business and thus ignoring Kingsley. The deception was now thoroughly developed.

Remus took advantage of his friend's absence to begin the particulars of his animagus lessons. He had been decidedly unimpressed with the young wizard's grasp of the process so far.

"No, not any animal," Remus said, sorting through a trunk (Harry suspected there was a small library fit inside of it for the amount of rummaging his godfather had been doing), and deciding which ones to send off with Harry first. "Most people find themselves limited to certain types of animals, and have to choose between them. Sirius was limited to canines and bears. It took some convincing that a Grizzly Bear wasn't nearly as practical as a dog."

"My dad was a stag though, right? That doesn't seem very useful either."

"You'd be surprised. He was the fastest runner of all of us, and if necessary he had the antlers to fight with and the strength to back him up. It was certainly better than his other options."

"What were those?"

"Goats and sheep, for one. Boars for another. He chose a red deer in the end."

"Huh... so how will we know which ones I can do?"

"Process of elimination."

Harry looked up from his article on king penguins. "No way! That'll take forever!"

Remus shrugged. "It will take a while. We'll start at classes*; you know birds, reptiles, mammals, etc. I've never heard of anyone being able to move between classes; which will leave us with a lot of orders we'll have to wade through."

"Hm."

While it certainly might have been interesting finding and picking his animagus form, he was rather impatient to start the actual transformation. He couldn't imagine a form that he couldn't have all sorts of fun in.

"So how do we figure all of that out? Is there a spell? A potion?"

"There's tea."

Harry just stared at him.

"...Tea?"

"Yes. You are aware of the practice of divination? Reading tea leaves is the traditional way to determine one's animagus form."

He wasn't convinced, and was actually considering the possibility that Remus was playing a joke on him. That was more Sirius' thing, but with him being Head Alpha perhaps he had handed off teasing Harry to his Beta. It wasn't until the man finally found the book he was apparently looking for in his trunk, and handed it to Harry that it even seemed remotely plausible.

Babylonia's Compendium of Practical Tassomancy; Theory, Techniques, and Recipes*. It was thick and heavy, and when he opened it he found the writing miniscule and compacted.

"Geh."

"Don't worry, you won't have to read all of it. Just the chapter on 'revealing your animal form'."

Harry checked the index and flipped to the chapter he needed. It easily took up a third of the book.

"Oh, come on!"

"No pain, no gain. Now start reading. I want you to read all of the theories before you leave so that I can make sure you understand what you need to do."

"Can't I just do all of this here?"

"Not unless you're extremely lucky. It will probably take weeks, maybe months of hit and miss before you find the ones you need."

Harry grumbled about the unfairness of the universe and being forced to do this much heavy reading during the summer. Remus happily ignored him, leafing through his other books and bookmarking relevant chapters, and then placing them out of sight. When Kingsley returned, Remus excused himself to attend to his pack duties leaving his godson with instructions to do his 'homework'. Harry sulked, but did as he was told. The sooner he got it out of the way the sooner he would be able to get to the fun stuff.

It wasn't until several minutes later that he realized Kingsley was looking at him.

"What?" he asked, trying not to sound as irritated as he felt.

"Nothing. Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. Why wouldn't I be?"

"You were very quiet yesterday. You never said what you talked about with Blackbone after I left."

"It really wasn't any of your business," he said pointedly, and then grimaced. Yeah, he wasn't jerk. Although, honestly, it really wasn't Kingsley's business. His bad mood didn't even have anything to do with Sirius. "It was pack matters."

Kingsley looked skeptical. "For six hours?"

"Yes."

"Harry... if you don't feel comfortable staying here, all you have to do is say so. Lord Voldemort made it clear to me that you had full discretion on the matter."

"Then I say we stay for the three days we've been invited for. If you feel the need to go, be my guest." Wow, he really was in a worse mood than he thought. It had been pretty crummy since his talk with Luna the day before, followed by a night of being ignored by Sirius, and waking up to the summer homework from hell.

"I have no intention of leaving you here alone," Kingsley said shortly, showing a bit of his own impatience at Harry's attitude.

"I have Remus."

"Remus will side with Blackbone in almost anything, just like everyone else here. I'm the only one here who's on your side and not his."

Harry glared at Kingsley.

"I don't think you know enough about werewolves or Remus to make that sort of generalization. Remus isn't some brown-nose gofer. And neither is anyone else here. I don't need you to protect me."

"Do you honestly believe that?"

Harry didn't bother to answer, merely turned back to his book. He didn't feel like arguing with the man, especially when he knew there were no plausible arguments he could give and still keep up the façade Sirius was so carefully crafting. It might be underhanded and unfair to Kingsley, but as far as priorities went his godfathers came before a stranger, no matter how nice he seemed.

~ Page Break~

Ron counted his supplies and then recounted them again, moving them about so that they could be readily available when he needed them. He couldn't afford to be caught off guard or to flounder. This was more dangerous than any potion he had ever brewed or any spell he had ever cast, and he knew there would be consequences if he did it wrong.

Deadly consequences.

But he was prepared. He had read the spell a hundred times, and gathered all the right ingredients. He had double checked to make sure everything was fresh and of good quality. Even the cat was fat and sleek, if more than a little anxious squirming around in its cage.

For the last week, Ron had been working to convert the basement of his foster parents' house to his purposes. He had managed to move several boxes and chests of useless junk to the farthest end of the room to make space for his altar, and then scoured the floor clean of impurities as the book had instructed. He had even thought to burn some sage, as he had seen Potter do when ever he was to perform one of his more powerful spells.

He had also drawn a protection symbol for him to stand in during the spell. The book had said it was necessary to have protection drawn before performing the spell, but hadn't specified which sort to use. He had to find another book for that, and eventually decided on the sigil that looked most like the one he had also seen Potter use before.

There was a grim sort of satisfaction in knowing that the self-righteous prat had proven useful with this even though he hadn't

meant to. This old magic wasn't nearly as complicated as the Gryffindor had made it out to be. Once he had found the right book, which admittedly had taken some serious searching in the less than reputable parts of Oxford, Coventry, and Glasgow, it had all been relatively easy to find what he needed. The raggedy black book was old enough that the necessary ingredients the spells called for could all be found in the British Isles and did not require the more sophisticated harvesting and preparation that spells of the industrial age tended to lean towards. Most of the items he had needed he could find in the garden (or one of the neighbor's gardens) or the town pharmacy.

The only real difficulty was making sure his foster parents didn't guess what he was up to. They seemed convinced he had become some sort of hooligan since his fight with Draco and had been watching him like a hawk when ever they were around. Which fortunately didn't include a large chunk of the day when they were both at work. He was always very cautious to seem bored and sulky when they were around, and scurrying around trying to get things done when they weren't.

Now everything was ready.

He would perform the spell and then clean up all the evidence long before either of them got back. He had plenty of time. At least, if he started now...

The basement door was locked, the protective sigil was drawn, and everything he needed was there. His hands felt clammy and he wiped them on his trousers. Maybe he should take off his clothes?

This was bound to get messy.

It was cold down here though. His hands were already shaking. It didn't matter, he decided. Best to get it all done with as quickly as possible and then he could take a hot shower. He'd burn the robes. No evidence.

He moved to kneel in the center of the ritual circle, and opened the spell book. He could recount the words by heart now, but he didn't

dare try this without a reference to turn to. Skimming it one more time and confirming that it had not sprouted any additional instructions while he wasn't looking, he reached for the paring knife.

The cat let out a distressed yowl.

"Sorry, fella," he said, grimacing in sympathy. "It's nothing personal."

Then he closed his eyes and began to recite.

~ Author's Notes~

Amniotic fluid contains stem cells, which in case you didn't know, are cells that can divide to become differentiated cell types such as skin cells or blood cells or t cells or whatever. My thought here is that through magic, the stem cells in amniotic fluid would become egg cells and incorporate DNA from Ira's white blood cells in her blood to create viable Ira egg cell so she wouldn't have to get a donor egg and whatever child she has would genetically be hers as well as Snape's.

Somehow I just don't see witches and wizards studying cellular biology. Spellwork and potions don't work on that finite a level, and most non-magical techniques would only be used if they were particularly obvious, such as checking the pulse with the fingers or checking eyes for dilation for diagnosis and rarely used for treatment except in emergency situations where the necessary potions or equipment might not be available.

By classes, I mean the classes of animals according to Linnaeus's taxonomic classification. This includes mammals, birds, reptiles, amphibians, fish, insects, and invertebrates (not including insects). Orders of animals would be like canines (which include all dog-like species) or equines (which include all horse-like species)

Tassomancy is the practice of reading tea leaves.

Book VI

Chapter 5: Warfare

Author's Note: Happy (slightly belated) Birthday Yamanana and many happy returns! I started writing this as soon as I posted chapter 4 and wanted to get it done on your B-day, but it turned into this gigantosaurus of a chapter. I think you'll like it though.

And Happy Labor Day to all my fellow yankees.

Harry returned to the cottage early in the afternoon on the third day of his visit. He was tired and sore from the days spent working and studying (which included everything from his animagi lessons to archery to gardening) and the nights spent listening to Sirius tell him of the happenings at the Goddess clan and elsewhere. His sleep was short and fitful, haunted by Greyback and the shadow wolves and Luna's disapproving eyes. He did not see her for the rest of stay, but she haunted the edge of his thoughts where ever he went.

Kingsley was in a worse state than him, if possible. He had been tense and wary for the entire three days, struggling to recognize potential danger in a situation where everything should have been considered dangerous, and Harry's insistence to the contrary had not helped matters. Now he was just exhausted, and clearly wanted this job to be done and over with.

They had left a little earlier than intended as storm clouds had started to roll in and they decided to leave before they caught in it. It was drizzling in the village when they arrived, but they walked the rest of the way back to the cottage anyway. Harry invited Kingsley inside to clean up and have lunch, and took him around to the side door that led into the kitchen. Once there, they both got a surprise.

"Hello, Harry. You're back earlier than I expected," Voldemort greeted, looking up from his papers strewn across the kitchen table. Across from him, Morgan was sipping a glass of lemonade in one hand and filling out a form with another. Mrs. Morgan was puttering around the kitchen in the process of baking something or other, and reminded him to clean his boots before he walked across the nice clean floor.

Harry looked over his shoulder at Kingsley and asked him tiredly, "Is the Dark Lord really sitting at my kitchen table or do I just need to take a nap."

The Sentinel looked over Harry's shoulder at the scene.

"Yes, he's there."

"Oh, good. I was worried," he said, and then turned back to Voldemort. "Hey. Something wrong with your office?"

"I missed you too, and you know I don't like working at the same place everyday. Besides, I wanted to discuss how your meeting with Blackbone went."

"Let me take a shower first and I'll tell you all it."

"Very well. I'll talk to Shacklebolt first."

Harry dropped off his things in his room and took a quick shower. When he returned to the kitchen, Kingsley was looking very stiff and official as he made his report while sitting between Voldemort and Morgan. Someone had put the kettle on for tea, and Harry slumped into the last remaining chair as he waited for it to finish.

"I can't account for all of his decisions," Kingsley explained, "But there was nothing impulsive or erratic about them. He knows exactly what he's doing. Ha- Mr. Potter likely knows more than I do. Blackbone kept him at several meetings I was not privy to, even if he talked very little to him throughout our stay."

"I see," Voldemort said, and turned to Harry, who was resting his head in his hand and looked ready to fall asleep that way. "How was your reunion?"

"Worse than I'd hoped, but better than I expected."

Mrs. Morgan set down a cup of tea in front of him, and smiled gratefully at her.

"He's not happy with what happened, but he blames himself as much as he does anyone else, including me. Greyback really fucked us... pulled one over on us. I don't think Sirius is up to anything sinister or insane, I just think he's trying to re-organize so that it can't be done again. And now that he's the new Head Alpha he has to show everyone who's boss, and that means making everyone jump through hoops for a while."

"Including you?"

Harry grimaced, or at least hoped that's what his expression was. He hadn't exactly been practicing in the mirror.

"I guess so. Remus seemed to think it was normal."

"He never threatened you?"

Harry just sort of looks at him as if he'd been asked the distance between Mars and Istanbul. Voldemort didn't pursue it. It was hypocritical to ask given their history, and obviously it wasn't something that appeared to concern Harry overly much if Shacklebolt's rather frustrated account of his refusal to leave until scheduled was anything to go by. Instead, he smiled mockingly.

"Did you have a good time?"

The Gryffindor chuckled into his tea.

"It was fabulous. At least my aim with a bow has improved. I know how to skin a weasel now too."

"Useful skills, no doubt. Were you invited back?"

"Not until mid July. There was some talk about me going to the Summer Festival, but Sirius seemed to think there would probably be a lot of fighting and didn't want me in the middle of it."

This was partly true. Sirius was expecting a lot of fighting with the unprecedented number of werewolves coming into the Goddess Clan

village and many of them high strung with the reorganizations of the packs and the war closing in on them again, but his primary concern appeared to be that Harry would get into a conflict with the healers and the shamans for having sealed himself off from communing with the gods and discarded his ceremonial staff. Sirius had been relieved by his choice to discard his position as shaman, and felt it strengthened his own position against them, but he also knew they wouldn't take kindly to Harry's perceived insult. He didn't think that was Voldemort's business, however, especially as Sirius didn't want it to be the Dark Lord's business. The Head Alpha suspected the wizard would attempt to take advantage somehow, and Harry didn't doubt it.

They talked for a while longer about what was happening among the various werewolf colonies and Voldemort's own understanding of the public's reaction. No one seemed to even notice the new colonies, and with the greater threat of German and Italian forces moving into Britain they had all but been forgotten. There had been a few angry protest letters in the papers about foreign werewolves stealing the jobs of British witches and wizards but that was the extent of it.

Kingsley watched them both, too aware of his position to relax and too curious to look away as the most feared man in Britain made idle conversation with one of the most beloved. Morgan didn't even look up from his paperwork and his wife treated it all as an ordinary luncheon among friends. The Dark Lord eventually grew annoyed of his gawking, however.

"Let's move our discussion to the study," he told Harry. "I'll leave Shackbolt to you Morgan."

Morgan nodded.

"See ya, Kingsley," Harry said, as he followed Voldemort.

In the study, the Dark Lord closed the door behind them but didn't cast a Silencing Charm. He took the reading chair and Harry immediately moved to the loveseat by the window and reclined onto it.

"Don't fall asleep just yet," the man teased. "I still wanted to talk to you a little more."

"Sure. What did you want to talk about?"

"This and that. Do you play chess?"

Harry blinked at the unexpected question. "Sort of. I almost never beaten anyone at it."

"Then you need proper instruction and practice. Where does Severus keep his set?"

Harry stood and went to grab the chess set from its hiding spot on top of the liquor cabinet. Snape didn't keep a wizarding chess set. He claimed all the moving pieces bashing each other to bits were distracting, noisy, and entertaining to only the most juvenile of players. Harry thought Snape just liked being a stick in the mud.

Voldemort transfigured an ottoman into a small table and set it between the loveseat and reading chair. They set up their pieces, knowing without speaking that Harry would play white and Voldemort would play black. Harry moved his first pawn. Voldemort shook his head.

"You don't have a strategy," he said, disapprovingly.

"How can I pick a strategy? I've got infinite possibilities before the game starts."

"You can always change your strategy as the game proceeds, but you should have a goal in mind before you start. Right now you're waiting to react to what I am going to do, and since I am a master chess player I will have executed my move before you even see it coming," he warned. "Pick a piece of mine that you want to take, it doesn't matter which one, and then figure out three different ways that you can take that piece. Then move one of the pawns that will help you perform one of those tactics. Wait for my move, and decide if you can or want to continue or pick a new strategy."

Harry put his pawn back, and did as he was told, thinking of which black piece he wanted. He moved his pawn back where he had it in the first place.

"Better," Voldemort said, with a touch of irony. He moved his own pawn. "So did anything else interesting happen at the colony?"

"Not really." The novice kept his eyes glued to the board, and finding no opening he advanced another pawn to block the black pawn.

"I noticed you didn't have your staff."

"...I threw it away."

Voldemort looked up from the board.

"Why?"

"I didn't want it anymore. I was already being scolded for the seal on my stomach, so I just said 'screw this' and threw it away."

"Blackbone wasn't insulted?"

Harry smirked. "He just laughed. I don't think he likes the shamans."

The Dark Lord thought for a moment about it, and moved his bishop to take Harry's second pawn. "You should make an offering to Rhiannon at the next full moon. Your actions may be perceived as an insult rather than a personal choice otherwise."

"Alright. You're not angry?"

"About the staff? No. It was a symbol of your position within the pack, not of your relationship with the gods. It is of little consequence in these times of transition. I am, however, rather upset you didn't volunteer this information to me yourself."

Harry looked at him steadily, particularly where he knew the Dark Lord kept his wand. The man didn't even look up from the board.

"You don't seem very upset," he pointed out.

The man smirked. "Checkmate."

"Shit!"

They reset the board and started again.

"Think we can talk about something else?" Harry asked.

"Certainly, just don't think for a moment that my revenge is over."

"Noted. So... Ireland."

"A lovely country. I'm thinking about commissioning a palace there after the war is over."

"Er... yes, it is quite nice, rampaging fairies aside. I was thinking about going there this summer. I have a friend, Natalie Cypher, whose volunteering over there and she invited me to come and see. I thought since my current job doesn't take up a lot of time but I can't get a second one that I could go over and help. Just for a week or two in July and August."

"No."

"Alright, it probably wasn't the best idea to ask after your revenge spiel, but it would be good press. Everyone could see I'm fully recovered and bravely doing my civic duties and helping with the war effort without actually getting blown up again."

"Two words, Harry. Rampaging fairies. Your last visit was far from uneventful, and they've become increasingly aggressive since then. I would rather not tempt fate. Besides, I have already arranged for press coverage at your next dueling competition in order to reassure the public you are fully recovered. Although, since you desire to do your civic duty, there are a number of charity events in England and Scotland that I believe would benefit from your presence. Checkmate."

"God dammit!"

Harry thought about pursuing the matter. He really wanted to go to Ireland, and not just to help Natalie. While their friendship was better than ever and he greatly respected the work that she did, he wasn't all that enthusiastic about jumping back into the war effort even for a good cause. His true motivation for going was far more selfish. In his journey through his own private limbo, he had encountered a visage claiming to be Carrigan, which should have been impossible, but it had given him the means of verifying the truth. He had spoken to Harry of a place that only he and Voldemort and Bobby knew about, and a secret hidden there, waiting to be uncovered. If he could find that place and that thing, he would know for certain whether that being was truly Carrigan or a figment of his own psyche.

If it truly were the old druid, he wanted to find him again and speak to him. Since Brennan's death, he had very few to talk to about the pagan arts and what they meant. Voldemort, although Harry respected him a great deal, was not readily available most of the time and his lack of moral compass tended to skew his answers in rather dark directions. Besides, there were many questions he wanted to ask about Voldemort himself that he didn't dare ask directly.

It seemed he would have to find another way. If Bobby would just come around, he was certain they could find a way to get to that secret place and back again before anyone noticed he was gone. But Bobby hadn't come back. He had been expecting him to show up eventually but to no avail. Voldemort had told him of the 'talking raven Greyback had summoned', but then told him it had disappeared as soon as they reached the underground, so he must have gotten out before the fighting started.

Well, Bobby had his own things to do. He would show up when he felt like it just as he always did.

At least figuring out how to do it on his own would give him something to do. If all the adults he knew, excluding Sirius and Remus, had their way, it would prove to be an excruciatingly boring summer.

"You owe me apparating lessons."

Harry, in an unusually insightful move, took Voldemort's Queen with his bishop. The Dark Lord eyes actually widened, and he smiled before taking Harry's bishop with his rook.

"I suppose I do. Although you realize you will be receiving instruction on this with your classmates this year?"

Harry shrugged.

"I want to be better at it than them."

"A philosophy I generally approve of. I hope you don't expect to apparate to Ireland any time soon."

"Well, I hadn't thought about it until you said something. I'm just sick of all your wonky travel arrangements. I think I should be able to apparate anywhere in Britain. It's safer and more convenient."

"Very well, I'll arrange a tutor. Check."

"Ha!" Harry moved his King, taking out one of Voldemort's pawns.
"Thanks."

"You're welcome. Check."

The young wizard groaned and continued his retreat. They fell into a discussion about apparition; its history, uses, and limitations. Then about other forms of magic that were traditionally wandless, including flying on brooms, potions, divination (Harry was surprised the Dark Lord practiced several very simple forms of it for very practical purposes), and animancy*. Then they discussed wands and how everyone came to use them and why everyone's was different, which led to more discussions about keystones and magical elements and patronus. They theorized about the evolution of wizarding society as a reflection of the evolution in the practice of magic, and the growing distinction between wizarding folk and muggles. They talked for several hours as Voldemort navigated Harry around the intricacies of chess, and the younger wizard was increasingly impressed with his teacher's seemingly endless supply of knowledge about such a wide

variety of subjects. Hermione could be like that sometimes, but she wasn't able to connect seemingly unrelated subjects in an interdisciplinary web of 'truth' the same way the Dark Lord was able to.

She talked facts.

He talked components.

Not that Harry agreed with all of the 'truths' Voldemort had concluded with the seemingly logical arrangements of components, especially when it came to the man's disparaging view of muggles. He made several counter arguments that threw the Dark Lord off guard, during which Harry was careful to take advantage of his distraction to attempt particularly sneaky moves on the chessboard. Voldemort never did concede that any of his theories might be wrong, but Harry did manage to last for up to twenty minutes during one game and put his opponent in check twice.

A knock at the study door interrupted an argument on the merits of muggle science. Susan opened the door.

"Dinner is ready," she announced pleasantly, and smiled as she saw what they had been doing the entire time. "Will you want to finish this game first?"

Voldemort looked down at the board, and moved his queen.

"Checkmate. We're done."

Harry grumbled something unintelligible and followed the man back to the dining room, where dinner had already been laid out for them. Kingsley was gone, and likely had been for hours. Morgan was still there, however, and Harry was happy to let the Dark Lord discuss politics and battle plans and Mrs. Morgan made the occasional token comment while he focused on actually eating. After dinner was completed both adult wizards got up to go together.

"I need to drop off some of these reports at the office. I'll be back in an hour or two," Morgan informed his wife.

Meanwhile, Voldemort had pulled Harry aside for a few more words before he left.

"I'll send a list of apparition instructors tomorrow. In the mean time, send Lucius an owl. He's been asking after you. I would rather have the two of you getting along, so play nice."

He tried very hard not to show the Dark Lord what he thought of that idea, and simply nodded.

"And Harry, remember-"

"Muggles are evil," he guessed.

"Well, that too. The next full moon is in ten days. Remember to make an offering."

"I will. Thanks for coming. Be safe."

Voldemort quirked his head at Harry's curious turn of phrase. It wasn't the first time Harry had ever said it, but no one aside from the Gryffindor had told him to 'be safe' for decades, and it was a little startling to hear some one say it with any amount of sincerity. It made him feel strangely pleased for some reason. He squeezed his protégé's shoulder as he passed him on his way to the door.

"You as well, my friend."

~ Page Break~

Two weeks at the manor and Hermione was already stir crazy. Narcissa had refused to let either Draco or her leave the manor without an adult escort, and while she could send Dobby out to get her anything she wanted it wasn't the same. Natalie and Harry were both doing their own things, Ron was persona non grata on the estate and by extension everyone else in his family, and she honestly had very few friends she wanted to invite into her home.

At least Lucius hadn't been around very much. He was always gone during the day and only came home at night intermittently, and generally they were able to avoid each other. Draco was insistent that somehow he was going to convince Uncle Severus to start up Quiditch again this year, and was boring her to tears with his endless talk about it. He must have gotten this annoying habit from Narcissa, because lately she had been equally dreadful about teaching Hermione the 'feminine arts'. In fact, about the only time she had been let out of the house was when her foster mother was dragging her to boutiques and salons and clothing stores, changing up her style of clothes and hair and makeup (which she had never really had beyond a few tubes of lipstick she rarely used) to something decidedly more 'sophisticated'.

Hermione liked the new style and had to admit she did look and feel more adult, but it seemed a too trivial for all the effort spent on it and very out of character for Narcissa. The woman had always behaved as if she thought Hermione would be her little girl forever, and all of a sudden she was talking about her coming into her own and attracting a husband and starting her professional career. There were vague feelings of dread that followed after these talks, followed by feelings of guilt. Narcissa did love her, after all, in her condescending sort of way and she didn't want to hurt her, but what she wanted for Hermione wasn't what was actually best for her.

One of her few comforts was preparing for her emancipation. She had broken down everything she needed to do into several simple lists, and was eagerly waiting to get started on them. To cheer herself up after a particularly strenuous visit to the beauty salon, she had closeted herself in her room and was reviewing her lists of places she wanted to live (Glasgow was at the top because of the university, but there were several smaller villages where the term 'beauty salon' would have been met with a look of confusion by the local residents). It wasn't until around supper time that she was disturbed from her musings by Dobby popping up behind her and gave her a terrible fright.

"Oh!" she gasped. "You scared me!"

"Dobby is most sorry, kind mistress!" he cried, and she could already tell he was winding up to punish himself again if she didn't stop him quickly.

"That's quite alright. A little scare now and then is good for the heart," she said, and seriously hoped he wouldn't take that as a hint to jump out and scare her at random times. "Was there something you needed to tell me?"

"Yes, yes! Master brought a guest home and both Master and Mistress want you to meet him. They say he is very important! Oh, and Mistress says you should wear the peach dress."

Hermione was confused by the request. Narcissa she could see wanting her to meet someone 'important', but not Lucius. Quite the opposite, in fact, he tended to keep her out of the way when anyone of significance visited. The 'peach dress' was also a puzzle. It was one of her new dresses her foster mother had bought recently, light and elegant and appropriate for an evening dinner or a garden party. It was also what Narcissa teasingly described as 'flirty'.

Was this code that she was supposed to flirt with their 'important' guest?

They better not get their hopes up, she thought indignantly. She did, however, change into her peach dress and let Dobby pin up her a elegant mess of curls and flowered pins, before heading downstairs. Gigi was waiting at the bottom of the stairs to point her to the dinning room, and she was on her own after that.

The dinning room was enchanted to shrink or grow to accommodate however many or few people were expected to dine there. At the moment it was small and cozy (in cold and glittery sort of way), and the table was large enough to accommodate six. The first thing she noticed as she entered was that everyone else had arrived before her, including Draco, and they all fell silent as she entered. Never a good sign. The second thing she noticed was that their guest was someone she vaguely recognized. He was gangly and unimpressive looking, but he held some high position in the Court if she recalled. He dealt in foreign affairs of some sort, although exactly what she couldn't

remember. After a moment of silence, he stood and a smile slid across his face, sly and sickly and she hated him immediately.

"My, my, Miss Hermione, you have grown into an attractive young woman since I saw you last. It is indeed a pleasure to have your once company again."

Well, this was awkward. She had never been praised for being an attractive 'woman' before, and wasn't entirely sure how she was supposed to respond. It seemed that while Narcissa's lessons on the 'womanly arts' were apparently paying off, she had skipped over a few important lessons. She struggled for a long awkward moment before she could think of something 'sophisticated and womanly' enough to say.

"You are most kind, sir, and I thank you for the compliment. It seems, however, that in the time we did indeed share company your name has slipped my mind."

Okay, that didn't sound so bad. Not that she cared if she impressed this man or not. She was not going to flirt with him. He was probably twice her age and smarmy as a carriage salesman?

"But of course, I am Lord Bartimus Crouch Jr., Court Head of Foreign Intelligence. Please call me 'Barty'," he said, taking her hand and kissing it.

Ah, more important than she had originally thought. She looked to the other occupants of the room for some indication on how she should treat his forward behavior. Lucius was looking smug and evil and completely unhelpful. Narcissa seemed pleased. Draco looked ready to stab the man with a fork, but that was his typical reaction to most males in his sister's presence.

"Then a pleasure it is to meet you...again...Barty"

"Take a seat," Lucius said evenly, "We have a very important matter we wish to discuss with you."

Crouch pulled out a chair for her, and she slid into it. There was no food yet, but wine had been set for them. She eyed the red liquid thoughtfully, but decided against it. She needed to think clearly. Something was obviously going on.

Once they were all seated, Lucius turned to his wife.

"Would you care to do the honors, my dear?"

She nodded, and turned to Hermione.

"We have some very good news for you, darling. I've wanted to tell you all week, but your father wanted to make sure everything was settled before we said anything."

Alarm bells were ringing in Hermione's ears, and she tightened her hands on her chair as she continued to speak.

"You remember those two boys you were betrothed to?"

How could she forget? They were horrid. Egrecius Smault had been her first betrothal at eight, and he was a nasty, spoiled bully who used to throw mud and frog guts at her until Draco beat him with his toy broom and threw him in the pond. Desmond Argonstault had been the second when she was just short of ten, and he was dull beyond words and would just stand around and sulk and whine about everything. Neither of them had lasted more than a year, although dissolving them had been more political than having to do with lack of compatibility.

Something her displeasure must have shown through because Narcissa nodded sympathetically.

"Yes, they were completely unsuitable. Far beneath someone of your grace and education. After Desmond, your father and I decided to wait until you were older and your natural charms would become more obvious and attract those of more suitable breeding. It would seem our patience has finally paid off."

Oh, Merlin, no. No, no, no...

No, wait. It was fine. She could end the betrothal as soon as she was emancipated. He couldn't possibly marry her before then. They would have to wait until she was seventeen and she would get emancipated long before then. She just had to stay calm.

"Oh?" she managed.

"Yes," Crouch continued, and she found herself turning to meet his languid gaze. "A stroke of good fortune on both our parts. I have been looking for a wife for some time now. A lady of beauty, intelligence, and character. Such women are so quickly snatched up these days; I thought to put my bid in a bit earlier than most. I feel most lucky to have found a witch of your quality at all."

He's lying, she thought. Narcissa might believe that nurture trumps nature, but few self-respecting purebloods adhered to that philosophy despite the Dark Lord's stance on raising muggleborns in the 'proper' wizarding manner. It didn't matter that she was 'beautiful' or the top of her class in Hogwarts or a strong personality. Few would ignore her 'dirty blood', and only the lowest born purebloods would choose to ignore the ridicule they would suffer for tainting their own line in favor of money or connections, such as in the case of Egrecius and Desmond.

Perhaps it had been different before the war and the pureblood regime had taken firm control over the social and political arena, but it made little difference now. Not for her.

"Words escape me. Forgive me, I am overwhelmed."

"It is a bit much to spring on someone," Crouch said, jovially. "Not to worry, I am certain we will get along splendidly. We have an entire year to get to know each other, and I am certain familiarity will loosen your tongue."

"A year? Don't you mean two years," Draco butted in, the first thing he had said for the entire dinner and he sounded livid. She was glad, because right now she didn't have it in her to be anything more than horrified. "She'll only be sixteen next year, and there's still school."

"Draco, mind your tone," Narcissa scolded lightly.

"No need to be so defensive son," Lucius said, his tone holding considerably more threat than his wife's. "Hermione's true birth date is Sept. 19, 1979. She is in fact seven months older than is officially recorded. It was a small matter to change it back to the original date."

She felt her heart drop into her stomach. She hadn't known. Oh, she knew they had changed her birthday to the day she was adopted, but she hadn't known the true date and she had never even conceived of a way they could possibly have used such a simple thing against her until now. This September she would turn seventeen and be of legal age to marry.

Oh, god.

"As for school," Crouch continued, "Of course, I wouldn't deprive my wife of a complete education. She'll have the finest tutors money can buy."

Draco clearly wasn't satisfied with this answer, and seeing his sister seemed incapable of speaking he shoved on.

"I do not see why he can't wait until she's graduated from Hogwarts. It's not fair she'll have to miss graduating with all of our friends before being locked up in some ivory tower."

"Young man, that is entirely uncalled for," the Malfoy patriarch snapped. "These are adult matters and if you cannot speak as an adult you will remain silent, and respect our judgment. We know what we're doing."

"It's alright, Lucius, he is simply concerned for her well-being, like any brother would be," Crouch said, magnanimously, although from her position Hermione could see amusement tugging at the corner of his mouth.

Narcissa gave her son a disappointed look.

"Draco-dear, why can't you be happy for Hermione? This will insure her future. I know you're very attached to her, but you can't keep her all to yourself forever. You're being entirely selfish about this."

Draco stared at her as if she had spontaneously transformed into a Dementor.

"Selfish? I'm being selfish? YOU'RE TRYING TO WHORE OUT MY SISTER!"

Hermione laughed, screamed, cried, and choked at the same time so that only thing that actually came out was soft little note that could have been mistaken for a hiccup. It didn't matter. No one could hear her over the shouting that had erupted around the table. Narcissa and Lucius were shouting at Draco, Draco was shouting at his parents, and Crouch was half-heartedly requesting that at everyone to calm down.

She just sat there and watched the chaos; laughing, screaming, crying, and choking in perfectly silent stillness. After a minute or two, when it became clear that the fighting was not going to stop any time soon, she slipped away.

"Excuse me; all this excitement has overwhelmed me. I think I must lye down."

She didn't know if anyone heard, but no one stopped her as she stood up and left the dinning room. She could still hear the shouting when she reached the top of the staircase. Once in her room, she locked the door and slid down to the floor. She stared blankly ahead for a few moments, working out the tightness in her throat that was choking her until finally the first sob escaped, followed by another, then another. For several minutes, she simply sat on the floor and cried fat, messy tears of fear, frustration, hurt, and self-pity.

What was she doing? Why hadn't she said 'no' while she had the chance?

Because then she would be in the same useless shouting match Draco was locked in at the moment, no doubt. Already she could

think of a dozen reasons why fighting at the dinner table would have been useless. Lucius wouldn't have cared; he obviously was doing this as some sort of revenge scheme. He had already convinced Narcissa that this was a good idea, and if Hermione objected well then obviously she was just like Draco, acting childish and selfishly clinging to childhood.

No, that was a lie. Well, no, it was true that arguing would have been pointless, but the reasons she hadn't argued had nothing to do with logic and everything to do with the fact she had been caught off guard by Lucius' little trap and frozen. He was probably down stairs right now feeling smug and superior over his obvious little victory. No doubt, he would mock her for her graceless retreat later and torment her with her impending nuptials.

A spark of anger rose in her. She couldn't immediately stop the tears, but she could stop feeling sorry for herself. Rising to her feet, she wiped the tears away angrily and blew her nose.

"You have to stay calm," she told herself. "Think this through. He changed your birth date. That means this September you'll be seventeen, so you won't even need to get emancipated. You're already a legal adult...no, no that's not right. You have to complete your schooling before you can be considered a legal adult... then how can I get married before then? Maybe you can do that with your guardians' permission? Whatever, maybe I can just graduate early. Uncle Severus would probably help me... maybe, but he would have to go against Lucius and then Lucius might bring in Lord Voldemort and I don't want that. Maybe I can do it on my own without Severus' help. I can do it. I just need to take the NEWTS early, and since I don't have any tests sixth year, I should be able get enough studying in if I quit the paper and Dueling Club. I should probably do that anyway if I'm not coming back for seventh year. It would be best to get a replacement for the paper as soon as possible. Maybe Ron... he could do it..."

Her long, brainstorming rant she was so famous continued in her head, until eventually it became obvious to her she would need help. She would be watched like a hawk now that she was to be married to ensure she did nothing to 'mess it up' as the little farce of a betrothal

and she would someone to be her hands and feet as this was all sorted.

Harry was obvious choice. He had promised already that he would help, and right now she needed him more than ever. He was the only person she knew who could in some way stand toe to toe with Lucius. He had Lord Voldemort's favor, perhaps even more so than Lucius himself, and if anyone could pull her out of this horrible situation it would be him.

Together, they would find a way.

~ Page Break~

"Petrificus cruce afficio!" Harry shouted, and his opponent hesitated, no doubt by the words that sounded like a cross between a body-bind and the Pain Curse, and it was long enough for the spell to hit. The girl, a seventh year student, stiffened and suddenly stuck both of her arms out like a scarecrow. She was stuck like that, unable to bend her limbs or waist, and after a moment she lost her balance and fell flat on her back.

There were several sympathetic groans and winces from the stands, as onlookers watched her go down.

"Match goes to Hogwarts!" the referee declared, and the crowd cheered or booed depending on the school they were supporting. Harry immediately canceled the spell, and helped his opponent to her feet.

"You okay?"

"Yeah," she coughed, still a bit breathless. "I've never heard that spell before."

"Amanda Hexly's Hybridization of Hexes, Curses, and Jinxes. 1932. It's a mix of a body-bind and a crucifixion curse."

She smiled. "Thanks. I'll check it out."

They shook hands and went to their separate teams. That had been his last duel, and he was feeling invigorated after six successes in a row. His wins had bolstered team morale during the lagging second and third round of duels, and now they were well on their way to winning their second competition of the season. Ginny handed him a cup of water, and directed him to go cheer up a first year who had been struggling with his last two matches and after a quick pep talk and some coaching he was finally free to relax for a while.

Which he didn't do, of course.

Instead, he went to track down Draco. Hermione was conspicuously absent, and her brother had been acting strangely, either too distracted and missing obvious attacks or too aggressive and attacking too violently. Ron was acting weird too, perhaps for the same reasons, but Harry had a sneaking suspicion that he was hung over if his the bags under his eyes and obvious headache were any indication. He had things he needed to talk about with Ron, but his immediate concern was Hermione.

"Hey," he greeted Draco, sitting next to him on the bench. "Where's Hermione?"

Not exactly subtle, but there you have it.

The Malfoy heir grimaced, and ran a hand through his hair.

"Mother and father made her stay home to spend some time with her fiancé."

Harry just stared at him. He closed his eyes. He opened them. He pinched himself. No, he was awake. Dammit.

"Hermione has a fiancé?" he said, evenly, because really he wasn't sure what sort of reaction he should be having right now.

"She does now," was Draco's rather unhelpful reply. They sat there in silence for a minute before Harry could think of anything remotely intelligent to say.

"Who?"

"Lord Bartimus-please call me Barty- Crouch Jr. Some stupid-looking bloke from the Court of Foreign Intelligence. Spy stuff, you know? He's a fucking asshole. I don't know what my parents are thinking."

"How's Hermione taking it?"

Draco glared at him for asking something so stupid.

"What do you think? Not very bloody well! She won't talk about it with me and she just sort of stares off into space all the time." Some of vinegar seemed to drain out of him, and his expression turned tired. "I'm really worried about her. I've never seen her like this."

Harry put a hand on Draco's shoulder and squeezed.

"Tell you father that I requested to visit. He's been bugging me about it lately, so hopefully I can come over as soon as tomorrow. Don't worry. I'm sure together we can snap her out of this funk, and then figure a way to get her out of it."

He didn't tell Draco that Hermione was probably already working on the problem now. In all likelihood she was planning to get emancipated before the wedding ever took place, and was just acting miserable in order to fool Lucius. If they pretended that this emancipation idea came about as a way to get out of the marriage, they might be able to pull Draco into their idea without making him feel as if she had been trying to get out of being his sister and thus save their relationship.

The sooner they could count him into their plans the better. Draco might not have the political clout Harry had, but he was better connected and might know where to find Hermione a potential sponsor.

"Yeah, okay. Thanks," the Malfoy heir conceded glumly.

"Tell me what exactly is going on with this marriage bit," he insisted, and soon enough Draco was recounting the events of last night's

dinner. Things were worse than Harry had originally thought. They would be working without a net if they did this, with no cushion of time at the end of sixth year to get emancipated and get out of the marriage. Hermione had been intending to have all of it taken care of by then anyway, but failure had not result in ruining her life.

He wasn't sure of everything that could wrong, but no doubt Hermione had by now and would tell him the next time they were alone.

Draco wasn't any happier about the situation after he was done telling Harry all the nasty details, including his own punishment for the hissy fit he had thrown (it was the first time his father had ever crucio-ed him and he didn't know if he would ever forgive the man), but he did seem to take some comfort in the Gryffindor's calm reassurance that they would make sure nothing bad happened to his sister.

They parted ways so Draco could finish his last match, and Harry did his rounds with the others duelists, giving encouragement where he thought it was needed and would be accepted (a few of them still feared and despised him since his return from Germany). He avoided Ron, who he was in no mental state to deal with and didn't seem receptive to visitors at the moment.

From the stands, he could hear and see the occasional camera going off and fought the instinct to hide behind someone. He had talked briefly with some reporters before the match and was reminded again why he generally loathed them. At least they were a cowardly bunch, and his half-teasing threat to set them on fire if they distracted him or any of the other duelists during their matches had been heeded. He was starting to wonder if he was developing a mean streak.

When the competition was over, Gryffindor won 48 to 33. That made their second win of the season and everyone was feeling enthusiastic about their chances of reaching the national finals at the end of the summer. Harry went through the motions of bravado and congratulations with his teammates, then gave them the usual advice and study references to prepare for their next competition. He lingered in the dueling hall after most of them had left and spoke to some of the duelists from the other team and to people from the

audience and to the reporters who lingered until the very end. One of them was the girl he had defeated from his last match, who invited him to join her and some of her girl friends for ice cream. Before he could make up an excuse to get out of it, Kingsley appeared by his side.

"We should go now if you want to make it before the library closes," he said. The girl quelled at the sight of dark Sentinel in his full fighting regalia, who up until that moment had been an invisible shadow in the stands. He nodded politely. "Sorry to intrude, but we are on a schedule."

"T-that's alright," she said nervously.

"Sorry. Maybe another time," Harry said, and headed to the locker room to shower and change. "How did you know I didn't want to go out with her?"

Kingsley smirked.

"I didn't. But you looked upset by something when you talked to that Malfoy kid. Aren't you dating his sister?"

"What? No! She's my best friend, not my girlfriend!" he snapped defensively, but then sighed. "That's sort of what we were talking about. It turns out she's been betrothed to some Court jerk."

"Yikes, sorry man."

"Don't worry about it," Harry said, although he considered broaching the topic with him. Kingsley worked with children, so he had to know something about the emancipation process and sponsoring and maybe even birth date changes. He would wait to talk to Hermione first though.

He showered and changed, and headed out to the York Public Wizarding Library which was only half a block down from the Clearwater Magic Sports Center where the dueling competition had been held. Kingsley hadn't been lying about the library. Harry really did need to pick up some materials. The walk was short, but the

sidewalk was crowded. Across the street there was a small hospital, a large hotel, and several busy restaurants and shops scattered all over the place. Some of the people recognized Harry on the street, but none dared stop him or get his way with his bodyguard towering over them and they made it to the library without incident.

The library was majestically shabby; built upon the premises of grand architecture, it was temple-like with its soaring ceiling, marble columns, and arched doorways, but the wooden shelves were slowly rotting, the marble was cracked, and the glass lamps should have been replaced a century ago. It gave the entire place a solemn, cathedral like feeling that Harry found depressing. A woman behind the circulation desk, who looked disturbingly like Madam Pince, stared at them both curiously as they entered. He checked his book list for the things he wanted, mentally added some on marriage law, and got to work.

For all of the library's size, its collection was not as extensively developed as Hogwarts, and Harry found himself distinctly dissatisfied with their potions and astronomy selections. He did, however, get a pleasant surprise when he went in search of some books on animals, and found an old friend.

"Hagrid!"

The giant man was squished uncomfortably between two rows of shelves, trying to see books without actually bending over. He looked up and his smile could be seen clearly even through his wild forest of a beard.

"Ar-"

"Sshhh!" someone hissed.

They both smiled sheepishly at each other. Harry gestured for Kingsley to wait outside the stacks and look after his books, and went to join Hagrid. He cast a Silencing Charm and then Space-Making Charm so that at least their isle would be large enough to accommodate his large friend so that he could do more than simply shimmy along from side to side.

"Arry, fancy meet'n ya 'ere. An excellent bit-o luck," Hagrid said, giving the young wizard an affectionate hug.

"Most definitely. I just had a dueling competition down the street and thought I'd get some books for school. What are you doing here?"

"Ah, nothing special. Thought I'd see if they had any books on raising livestock. Meat's been getting expensive, and Charlie's thinks we should try raising our own at the sanctuary to save money. Smart guy, Charlie."

Quickly enough they fell into conversation about the dragon sanctuary where Charlie ran his program to raise orphaned dragonets until they were large enough to release into the wild. With the war going on, they had lost a lot of funding, but the need was greater than ever as the black market price for authentic dragon hide had skyrocketed and many a mother dragons had been slaughtered to feed the demand. As Harry predicted, Hagrid went on a big long spiel about the injustice of it all, and how he was proud of the work he was doing and had never been happier.

"I owe you a lot for that. If you hadn't recommended me to Charlie in the first place, none of this would have been possible."

Harry shook his head, and just smiled. "I don't think you owe me anything, Hagrid. This is the way it was supposed to be. I know the dragons are lucky to have you on their side."

"Well, then both me an' the dragon's owe ye. If ye ever need someth'n that I can provide..."

Feeling like Hagrid needed something so he could walk away with a clear conscious, Harry struggled to find something the other man could possibly do for him. He couldn't think of anything that would be to his personal benefit at the moment, so he decided something a bit broader in interpretation would have to do.

"If you really want to pay me back, and I honestly don't think you need to, but if you want to, then do me this favor. If you ever find

someone in trouble, help them out, even if you don't think you know what to do. I think half the problems in the world could just be solved if we didn't ignore each other's problems because we didn't think we could do anything about them. Even if you fail at it, at least that person knows you cared enough to try."

Hagrid considered his words for a moment, rubbing his beard thoughtfully. Harry could visibly see when the giant man settled into the idea as his eyes hardened into determination.

"I see yer mean'n. An yeh be make'n a mighty big request. Bigger than I think yeh realize, but I'm a big fellow so I ain't too worried about it."

"Thanks, Hagrid."

Kingsley moved into the stacks and their bubble of silence. Wizard and giant eyed each other suspiciously for a moment, before the Sentinel spoke.

"They announced the library's closing in fifteen minutes. Better get the last of what you need and get checked out."

Harry checked his pocket watch and sure enough it was fifteen minutes until five, and the both of them scurried around in the shelves looking for what they needed. After checking out their books, Harry and Hagrid parted ways, not realizing that the promise that had been made would come into affect that very day in the most dramatic of ways.

Once alone with his bodyguard, Harry was reluctant to return to the cottage. It was an hour before dinner, and he wanted to enjoy his brief freedom for as long as he could.

They killed some time at a pet store they had passed on the way to the library, and Harry picked up some owl treats for Elsbeth and some molting solution for Inana, who was at the beginning phase of shedding her skin and highly irritable. A quarter till six and Harry knew it was time to go. He couldn't think of any excuse left to stick around..

Or so he thought.

As they were walking to the next floo station, Kingsley watching the crowd for potential danger and Harry thinking about his slowly rising tide of problems and projects, a sudden and unnatural silence fell. It wasn't a spell. Sound was traveling unimpeded through the streets and buildings, but never the less all conversation suddenly ceased in a moment of unaccountable public premonition. Harry stopped walking, and instinctively looked to the sky before turning to look around him. Kingsley was doing the same, and though neither of them saw anything there was absolute certainty that something was happening.

The scars on Harry's palms began to burn*.

The first explosion took out a small restaurant, disintegrating it into a cloud of fire and wood. He saw the few men and women eating outside blown into the street, limbs torn from their bodies in the process and half consumed in fire. Harry stood, paralyzed, unable to comprehend what he had just seen while around him men and women and children screamed and panicked, racing to escape in every direction. Some of them managed to apparate, but most either lacked the skill or were too affected by the surrounding chaos to try. He was vaguely aware that people were running passed him, into him, pushing him backwards and threatening to topple and then crush him in their haste.

Where was Kingsley?

The second explosion occurred somewhere behind Harry, knocking him and several others down in the process. Bits and pieces of stone and wood and who knew what else rained down on them, and the air was suddenly thick with smoke. Somewhere next to him a child was screaming.

His palms felt like they were on fire.

He was one of the first to scramble to his feet, and likely the first to see the wizards flying down from the sky. He could barely make out their Dark Blue uniforms in the thickening smoke.

Italians.

He could see a dozen of them, but there had to have been more. They had abandoned destroying buildings in favor of cutting down groups of people in the street, spitting out curses on the panicking masses that had not yet even seen them. Memories of the Goddess Clan, scattered dead in the snow interposed upon the scene and he could only watch as he saw not only the gruesome end result but the even more gruesome process of slaughter play out before him.

He could not feel his limbs or tongue, and could not lift his wand to cast a spell. All he could feel was the burning in his hands, the stinging smoke in his eyes, and his lungs struggling to take in air and finding none. A panic attack at the worst possible time and his mind trying to escape the complete horror of it, and he simply stood there.

As if sensing his vulnerability, one of the flying soldiers turned towards him and aimed his wand.

Still, Harry could not move. Staring helplessly, he could almost see the spell, bending the light ever so slightly like heat rising off pavement, streaking towards him. It should have hit him, torn him to pieces, and killed him, but someone smashed into him, knocking him aside. He landed heavily with an even heavier body landing on top of him.

"Ugh, fuck, kid. Where's your damn dueler's instinct?" Kingsley groaned, and rolled off of him. Harry lifted his hand and saw it was soaked in blood, and turning to the Sentinel he could easily spot the source in the blooming red stain on his side.

Harry could feel his limbs now. He could feel his legs and his arms. He could feel his lips and his tongue. His breath still didn't seem to want to catch the air, but above them he could see the wizard taking aim again. Harry didn't even bother trying to block.

"Flumen vipereus vastatio!" he screamed, and his curse swallowed the other's like a serpent swallowing its feeble kin and then speared onward. The wizard tried to dodge, but Harry followed his movement with his wand and the curse arched to follow him until at last it struck. The Italian shrieked as his body was consumed in lightening, his body and robes catching fire before he fell from his broom.

Harry did not watch him fall nor did he wait before he was casting his second curse. Pointing his wand at the burning rubble that had been a restaurant, he shouted his incantation and then flung his arm straight at the largest cluster of attackers. The restaurant exploded a second time, but now balls of burning rubble launched themselves at the wizards as if shot from cannon. Three of the soldiers were caught directly, shot out of the air cleanly, and as the seven remaining began to scatter, Harry shouted another spell and the flaming balls of wreckage exploded in midair tearing them to pieces with shrapnel.

People were still screaming in fright, and likely a few had been the unhappy recipients of falling debris (some of that debris being bodies), but they had started to rally and were now casting shields to protect themselves. Harry ignored them in favor of destroying the threat.

He barely managed to throw up his strongest shield in time, and even then he was thrown off his feet as several powerful curses struck it at once. He rolled to his feet, slipping on debris and blood, and cast two more shields to buy him the precious seconds he needed to find his next targets.

A hundred feet from in front of him, another spell smashed into the small hospital, collapsing half of it. From inside, people were wailing and screaming, and Harry felt himself flush with a new wave of anger and hatred.

"I'LL KILL YOU ALL!"

His palms felt on fire, pulsing with magic that was not entirely his own, but familiar and welcomed into his very core. He felt it strengthen him, feeding his magic and his rage. Curses smashed into his shields, shredding them to pieces, and while he renewed them yet again with

his wand, he lifted his empty left hand towards three wizards and witches who had spread themselves into a wide arch above him.

"DOWN!" And with that, his magic seized hold of their brooms, just as he had done hundreds of times years before in his innocent days a quidditch seeker, and commanded them to obey with unrelenting force. There was no counter spell his attackers could erect against it. It was a trick unique to Harry and not one that any other had developed a defense against, and the witches and wizards could only leap or hold on until the end as their brooms plummet at breakneck speed into the ground. The result was the same no matter what they did.

Behind him he could hear Kingsley calling for him, telling him to run away and hide, but he ignored the man. He was here. He could fight. He wanted to fight. He wanted to kill them for what they had done.

The curses were becoming more complicated and more powerful the longer Harry's shields held against them, and soon he was being forced to dodge as well as block, and his aim became worse. Harry tried to identify the leader amongst the attackers, but they were all little more than indistinguishable dark blue shadows. He considered finding an intact broom and taking them on from the air, but unless a broom actually made itself available (he was certain he smashed or burned all the Italian's brooms) it was a moot point. It did give him an idea though.

Reaching into his pocket, he pulled two of his shrunken library books at random. Unable to do what he needed to do and still avoid the attacks, he ducked into an alleyway between two restaurants, and ran to the next street over. There was another attack going on here, though not as heavy, and he shot down two unprepared soldiers as he went, then ducked down another alley until he reached a street that did not look like it had yet been touched. Sirens had started to sound across the city, and even here people were scurrying to find shelter, but in Harry's traumatized mind he couldn't fathom where they could possibly hide. Their attackers were unscrupulous and would burn them out of whatever sanctuary they found. They had to be destroyed completely before anyone could be safe.

With shaky hands he went to work. Amanda Hexley's book on combining spells had more theory in it than examples, which Harry had glossed over in his reading, but which he had a vague understanding of. Right now, he was feeling powerful enough that whatever he lacked in finesse he could make up for is sheer magical brute force. His magic running wild inside of him, waiting for him to channel it into something. Anything, no matter how impossible.

He returned to the two library books to their original sizes and immediately started to transfigure them. Pages flew out of their bindings one sheet after another, too fast to count, and folded themselves into swifts with sharp w-shaped bodies. Once folded they floated in the air and pressed tightly together in an ever growing line, waiting for his command. After all the pages of each book had been transfigured he found himself with easily over seven hundred paper birds stretched out for several yards into the alleyway.

Now the difficult part.

He could have commanded the birds individually, a few at a time, or to move as one massive thing, but what he wanted required far more cunning. He needed them to act independently, while at the same time working towards a single goal. This would require the hybridization of both arimancy and the Imperius curse. Arimancy would guide the paper's movement and behavior, and the Imperius curse would imprint the focus.

It would likely fail spectacularly, but if it succeeded he could turn the battle.

He placed his left hand on the origami bird at the front of the line, it was almost perfectly the length of his hand from its beak to the tips of its tail, and closed his eyes. His magic flowed through his body and through his palms, mingling with the familiar foreign magic that manifested there, and moved into the first paper bird, then to the second, the third, so on and so forth until it reached each and every one. In his mind he pictured real swallows, how flew fast and erratic their flight, beautiful in their unpredictability, strong and certain in all their movements. He pictured how they swarmed upon flying predators, fearless and fierce they struck and fled, struck and fled

until the danger was driven from them. He felt the paper birds stir, something like desire stirring in them, to move and fly and hunt and play. Animalistic instinct only. They needed something more intelligible than Harry's mental imagery.

He placed his wand between his spread fingers so that it rested against the paper birds' chest. He had never used this curse outside the classroom, but he had been taught and his target was ready and waiting for instruction.

"Kill them all."

The line of paper exploded into a flock of birds, flitting this way and that, faster than Harry could follow and yet still avoiding hitting him or each other. They burst out from the cover of the alleyway and took to the open air in a frenzy of flapping paper wings. Within seconds the alley was empty.

Within seconds the enemies found his hiding place.

He completely missed the first attack, but it hit high, knocking shingles from the roof and raining them down on him. He took a few unfortunate hits to the head and shoulders, but kept his wits enough to throw up some more shields. There was no second attack, as the two soldiers who had found him were now fending off the strikes of a new set of unexpected enemy.

His paper swallows had swarmed them like bees protecting a hive, their magically strengthened bodies slashing at them with razor sharp wings. They flung spells blindly to fend them off, and though a few fell the others were too many and too fast, and finally they tried to flee.

Harry shot them both down with a Lightning Curse before they could escape.

The birds flew on to find other targets and Harry gave chase after them.

In his pocket, he could feel his watch begin to burn against his thigh, and let out a small hysterical laugh. He was late for dinner, he realized. Mrs. Morgan would be worried.

For ten minutes and twelve Italian soldiers, Harry followed his little army of birds as they hunted down and attacked the enemy. Sometimes they could kill or incapacitate a soldier all on their own, slashing them to pieces in midair or causing them to fall from their broom. Sometimes he would help them, and with increasing frequency random citizens would use the distraction the birds provided to take out the enemy themselves. Every attack cost him more birds, however, and soon they dwindled into minor nuisances and the invaders quickly found the source, and Harry was once again running and blocking again as dozens of soldiers chased him through the streets, setting fires and killing randomly as they went.

"Titubo!" he shouted, flinging his wand over his shoulder without bother with the proper movement. He heard one of his pursuers falter and crash behind him. There was cussing followed by curses, and he crashed through the side door of a random building to avoid being hit. He found himself in the backroom of a shoe store and scurried to find an exit before they attempted to bring the entire thing down on him.

A loud pop and Kingsley was suddenly in front of him. Harry was moving so fast he ran straight into the man's arm. There was another pop and they were in front of the cottage, perfect and whole with birds singing and flowers blooming thick in the yard. Their momentum had knocked them both to the ground, but Harry rolled immediately to his feet and spun around looking for the enemy that was no longer there.

His eyes wide and unbelieving, his mind stunned as if he had just been dunked in ice water after a walk through the boiling heat of a lava field. He turned to Kingsley who was slowly struggling to his feet, gripping his injured side. The man looked terrible. He was barely able to move and it was a marvel that he had managed to not only find Harry at all but perform a side-along apparition as well. Still high on his adrenaline rush, the blood-thirsty Gryffindor felt neither awe nor concern but intense anger.

"Take me back!" he demanded. "It's not finished yet!"

The Sentinel looked at him as if he were insane.

"They'll burn the city to the ground if I don't stop them! They're monsters! They have to die!"

"No, Harry," Kingsley wheezed. "The Culties were already starting to arrive when I finally got you. They'll take care of it. You did enough. God almighty, you did more than enough."

There was a hint of horror in his voice that only fueled Harry's anger.

"You coward! Run and hide if you want, but don't expect the same of me!"

He started to run towards the road, intent on reaching the village floor and getting back to York. He only made it a few feet, however before he stumbled. Confused, he turned back to Kingsley who was still trying to raise his wand and failing miserably.

"What did you do?" he asked.

The Sentinel just blinked at him.

"I didn't do anything."

"I can't feel my hands."

His wand slipped through his numb fingers to the ground, and he lifted his hands to look at him. The scars on his palms were blacked and the flesh around them was red and blistered and yet the only thing he felt was an icy numbness that was slowly spreading up his arms. Soon his arms lost strength and fell limp to his side.

Anger was soon replaced with fear.

"Kingsley..." he managed weakly, and then slipped into unconsciousness.

~ Page Break~

Horace stared at the large patch of blue sky where there had once been a wall for several minutes. It was a very lovely sky. Lots of bright blue and just a little bit of fluffy white cloud. A lovely summer sky that he couldn't be entirely sure was really there or not. It wouldn't be the first time he had fallen into a memory and not realized it until he was trying to claw his way through the walls.

The sounds were familiar too. Screaming and fire and curses being cast about. A soft breeze carried them into his little room, caressing the bare skin of his face and arms and feet.

Was he dreaming, he wondered? He had been a little while ago, he knew, but he thought the explosions might have woken him up. Maybe this was a new dream. A dream within a dream or a memory within a dream or a memory within a memory. It was all the same these days... nights...years...

As he was sitting there quietly, lost in his unreality, something that had never happened in his dreams or memories occurred. A little bird fell through the hole in the wall. It fluttered uselessly on the ground, attempting to take flight again. The poor thing must have broken its wing. He should try to help it.

Finally motivated to movement, he slowly pushed himself to his feet and moved towards it. As he got closer, he realized it was not a real bird, although it moved just like one. He knelt down and picked it up, and found it was a little bird made of folded paper. There were words printed on it and he read a few fragmented sentences, but there was very little he could make out with all the dark red and brown stains on its body. Although it moved like a real bird, it didn't struggle in his hands like one. Instead, it sat there placidly and tilted its paper head from side to side.

Horace wondered if it could see him, because there was nothing to indicate it had any eyes. He studied it curiously, and soon found the reason for its flailing about. Its right wing had been nearly torn off.

"Poor thing," he said, and petted it soothingly. "I'll find someone to fix you. A little repair spell and you'll be good as new. I would do it

myself, but I don't know where my wand is any more. I think Tom took it."

He didn't bother trying the door. The door hated him, and never opened when he wanted it to and never stayed shut against all the bad people who came in to hurt him. So he headed for the opening in the wall, forgetting that he thought it wasn't real only moments ago. The bricks and mortar cut into his hands and feet as he climbed out onto the street, but he was only vaguely aware of it as he was only vaguely aware of anything. He knew he must be hurting himself, but surely the paper bird was more seriously injured than he was.

There were more paper birds outside, but they were all dead or flying around on their own. There were people too, also dead or flying, but also running and crouching and making all sorts of ghastly noises. He stopped beside one man who was hiding behind a bench.

"Can you help me?" he asked.

"Get down, you stupid fool, before they see you!" the man snarled, and peeked out of his hiding place to make sure no one had.

"Will you fix my bird? I've lost my wand and can't do it myself."

The man just looked at him like he was crazy, and then looked at his hospital clothes and then behind him at the mess that used to be the hospital, and realized he really was.

"Oh, Merlin, you're a nutcase," he muttered in disgust. "Go back to the hospital."

"I don't want to," Horace said stubbornly, and seeing as the man wasn't going to be any help at all, he walked off to find someone who would. He tried several different people, but they all either ignored him or ran away or yelled at him. He didn't remember people being this rude before, but then again maybe the bad people had stolen those memories. Or maybe they had stolen all these people's good memories and that's why they were all cranky.

He tried the library, because librarians were always helpful, but it was locked tight.

"Don't worry. I won't stop until I find someone who will fix you," he promised his little friend.

He walked for several blocks looking for help, but the once crowded streets were now deserted and it wasn't until he reached a neighborhood of cheerily burning houses that he met anyone at all. There were a dozen or so witches and wizards busily dousing their burning rooftops, but none of them were likely to stop to help him he decided. There were also several children standing out in the street, looking morose and nervous, but they of course didn't have wands either. There was, however, a somewhat familiar looking giant man who was helping calm several teams of horses who were moving about skittishly outside of what had probably once been the neighborhood livery*. Perhaps he could help.

"Excuse me, sir."

The man turned to him, and he had the nicest expression of anyone he had met so far today despite wild facial hair. He thought he might get lucky this time.

"Yes, lad?"

"Sir, I found this bird and its wing is torn. Will you help me?"

He showed the man the bird, and he stared at it blankly for a long time and then at Horace.

"Well...I don't know much 'bout paper birds. If it were a real bird, I might 'ave some advice, but I can't think of none."

"Maybe a repair spell?"

"Sorry, lad, I don't have a wand meself."

Horace felt a wave of despair. Could no one help his little friend? It shouldn't be that hard. He knew lots of people who could do it! He

could do it himself if he had a wand! Why wasn't anyone helping him? If he could only remember what had happened to his wand he was certain he would understand these things.

Hagrid looked at the young man and felt a stirring of pity. He was obviously not right in the head, and had no idea what was happening. He must have wandered out of the hospital and gotten lost in the confusion. He was skinny as a rail with dark circles under his eyes, but the tenderness with which he treated that charmed piece of paper touched the half-giant deeply.

He recalled what Harry had asked of him that day in the library. He had asked him to help someone who was in trouble, even if he didn't know how to help and at least that person would know someone cared. It became quite obvious to him that this confused young man needed someone to care, even if it was just over his silly paper charm.

"Tell you what; as soon as I'm done helping here I'll help you find a way to fix yer bird. My names Hagrid, by the way. Rubeus Hagrid."

"I'm Horace McGunny."

The young man smiled, happy and relieved, and Hagrid felt he had already accomplished something important. Harry had been right.

The battle in York was already half over, and the Italians had been dropping like flies thanks to some rather clever and nasty spell work. They had already seen some Culties flying over, which meant reinforcements were on their way to drive out the enemy completely. Once the danger had passed, he would take Horace back to the hospital and see to it that he was taken care of. Someone there would probably help fix the paper bird as well, since it was obviously comforting to him.

That was Hagrid's plan at least, but it didn't turn out as he had hoped. It was an hour before the all clear siren was sounded, and when he did take Horace back to the hospital it was to find the entire building had collapsed. The scene was in chaos as rescue workers magicked away piles upon endless piles of rubble, digging out the dead and the trapped, and lining up the injured in the open street for treatment with

the rest of city's injured and dead. Hagrid was loath to bother anyone as they raced to save and sooth the dying and the injured.

After fifteen minutes of lingering about uselessly, and Horace becoming increasingly distressed, the half-giant gave up.

"Tell you what, Horace," he said, putting a comforting hand on his young friend's shoulder. "Why don't I take you home with me? My friend Charlie can fix up yer bird just fine, and then we can get things sorted out in the morning. How's that?"

"Is Charlie nice?" Horace asked innocently, because he didn't know very many nice people except for Hagrid. His parents were nice and his Charms professor was nice and the lady who sold flowers outside his dorm was nice, but those were the only ones he could think of and none of them where there right then.

"Charlie's the nicest fellow I know. Except fer maybe 'Arry Potter. 'E's a friend of mine too, ya know? Saw him just today," he said proudly, but then frowned thoughtfully. "'Ope he got out before the fight'n started."

Harry Potter was indeed a nice person, although Horace couldn't remember how he knew that. If Hagrid thought Harry Potter was nice then this Charlie person must be too, even if not quite as much.

"Okay."

The giant man grinned and patted him on the back, and though Horace was tired and hungry and that pat had actually hurt a little, he found himself smiling back. The bad place with the nasty door and mean people who stole his memories and put them jars next to the pickled dragon fetuses and pinned butterflies were gone, and he would never have to see that mean man who rattled his brain around to see what felt out either. Now he had a new friend who was nice and had nice friends and liked animals. Horace liked people more than animals, but lately he had been thinking about changing his mind.

"Good, lad. Say, do you happen to like dragons?"

~ Author's Notes~

1. Animancy is a completely made up branch of magic. It refers to the art of making non-living things behave like living things. Think of Disney's Beauty and the Beast and all that enchanted Tupperware...only without faces and less singing. Not to be confused with necromancy which is the art of making dead things behave like living things (not to be alive just to behave something like it). Zombies without the brain-eating obsession. :P

2. In case you forgot, after the Sword of Gryffindor was destroyed, Harry had a series of scars left on his hand. They are remnants of the sword's magic imbedded in Harry's own body, and can perform in similar ways to the sword as well as a warning of danger. Harry's very own 'spidersense'.

Book VI

Chapter 6: Entanglements

"Aah!" Harry cried out, bolting upright from where he lay, and for a moment he could feel the heat of the fires from his dreams follow him into the waking world, hot against his skin and yet refusing to burn him away as it had everything else in nightmares. He thrashed in his panic, kicking away his sheets away and knocking over the bedside table.

The metallic clang of a tray striking the stone floor woke him completely, ruthlessly drawing him back into reality. He froze, staring wide eyed ahead of him. The fires were gone, and what was left was the blurry but familiar layout of a hospital room. He started to shiver. A shadow moved, and he recognized it immediately.

"Professor?"

"Yes, Potter," the Snape replied, his tone to painfully normal, Harry was simultaneously terrified and amused. "You are in a private hospital. You've been unconscious for two days with fever, which has finally broken."

The potions master allowed him to absorb that bit of news while he cleaned up the mess he had made during his violent awakening. Harry took a quick inventory of his person. His feet and legs were the first to bear his scrutiny, and aside from bruised knees they looked just fine. Next he checked his hands, which were bandaged and ached, but his fingers moved easily enough. He recalled they had been burned badly, although he couldn't remember how. The rest appeared unharmed, but he was sweating profusely and wracked with shivers. He gathered up his discarded blanket and wrapped it around himself.

"Aren't you supposed to be in Paris?" he asked, trying to put more strength into his shaking voice than he felt.

"Hmph. And so I would be if you would avoid this bad habit of rushing off to fight hordes of Aurors all of the time," Snape said, acidly, the

effect somewhat dimmed when he put Harry's glasses on his face for him. It took a while, but his eyes finally adjusted so that he could see the other man clearly.

The honeymoon had been doing the caustic man some good he noted. His normally sallow complexion was flush with beginnings of a tan and the shadows under his eyes had receded, leaving him looking, if not exactly handsome, at least younger. .

Harry wondered how long it would last.

"They started it," he muttered, and then hung his head when he realized how stupid that sounded. The older wizard snorted.

"Indeed, and you ended it. Do you remember what happened?"

"Yes," he said, recalling the events that had transpired... with relative certainty. He couldn't quite remember the order of things, but he remembered the individual parts. He remembered the first explosion and Kinglsey bleeding on the ground and paper birds and the chase or was it the escape? No, he had done both. He remembered the explosions and the Canon Fire spell and the wandless magic with the broom and the hospital collapsing. He remembered killing all those people. He remembered everything.

"Good, because no one else seems to have any clue what you did and did not do during the fifteen minutes you were engaging the invaders, and I've been charged with obtaining your version of the event. Do you require a calming draught?" he asked as he pulled out a quill and parchment from somewhere on his person.

"I don't think so."

"Tell me if you need to stop," he said firmly, and dispassionately. Harry was grateful for his cold and clinical manner. He didn't know what he would do if Snape suddenly started treating him as if he were broken. His sanity wouldn't tolerate another question it. Not right now.

Harry told of what had happened in York as best he could, although he had to stop several times and re-order the events in his mind, and

fell silent for minutes on end as he tried to sort through it. His guardian did not push him or rush him or criticize his lack of mental organization. It only took about half an hour total and half of that was spent explaining the transfigured bird spell, which none of the investigators had yet been able to replicate. Snape didn't seem particularly pleased with Harry's description of the spell either, but decided against interrogating his ward so soon after his fever had broken.

When Harry had spoken everything Snape needed to fill out his report, the man put away the parchment, leaned back in his chair, and stared at the young wizard for a long time in complete silence. Harry didn't speak or avoid his stare, but matched his gaze in unwavering solemnity.

"You're not scared," he said after several minutes. "And you're not mad. Not much, at least."

Harry blinked, and then smiled, relieved.

"That's good. I was worried. I think a lot of people must be thinking that this would be the final blow, and I'd just fall to pieces," he said, a touch of self-mocking. "It's funny though. I feel more certain of myself than I have for a long time. All that worrying, and it was over nothing."

He ran a hand through his hair and grimaced at the greasy, wet feel of it. He turned to Snape to tell him he was going to take a shower, but hesitated at the cold, hard look the man was giving him.

"So it finally happened."

"What finally happened?"

The dark wizard closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and opened them.

"Do you recall, Mr. Potter, that night at your relative's house when I brought you into the wizarding world?"

He tensed, wondering at the seeming randomness of the question, but nodded.

"I had been bullying your giant walrus of an uncle-"

Harry's lips twitched into a smile at the memory, but he quickly clamped down on it. This was supposed to be serious.

"- and you asked me how I was able to do so. Do you remember what I told you?"

The young wizard thought for a moment, and although his thoughts were cloudy from his dissipating sickness, he could recall that moment with a strange sort of clarity. The living room had been sparkling clean and too bright for the ominous gathering, the air was hot and thick with humidity and tension and fear. Snape had towered over Harry, his eyes as dark and piercing as they were now.

"... you said... you said something about men of violence. How there were men who strived for violence and those who lived it. And they were completely different... no, they were on completely different levels."

"Yes. It's good to know something I taught you actually stuck in that mass of tapioca you call a brain."

"Hey!"

"You are now a man of violence."

Harry stared at him. He was already sick, weak, cold, and trembling, but if he hadn't been all these things already he thought for certain Snape's words would have made him so. There were implications he was afraid to look at. Ideas were being cemented into a harsh terminology rather than being allowed to float in the back of his mind as poorly constructed notions, felt but unnamed and therefore unreal.

"Don't be afraid," the man said, forcing the issue even as he saw his ward physically withdraw deeper into his blankets, like a turtle huddling in its shell. "It is not something so terrible all its own. Modern

man is born into a dichotomy. He is both naturally violent and artificially afraid of violence, taught to fear it to an irrational extent from infancy and shy away through rules and laws and social integration even as he as he recognizes the weakness left in its absence. You have been freed of that dichotomy, Mr. Potter. You have killed men, many men, in fact, and while they certainly received their just desserts, it should be noted if you were not a man of violence, that the act that you have committed would surely have driven you insane."

Harry was now fairly certain that at least some of his shaking was not because of the fever.

"I'm...evil?"

Snape glowered.

"You're exceptionally dense, is what you are. Pay attention. I said you're not afraid to kill someone, and I only mean that in a very limited sense. More specifically, it means that you are able to kill someone when you believe it's necessary. That is far more than most can claim to be capable of. You would be amazed at what the average man and woman will allow to happen before they can be harassed into defending themselves, and once they do defend themselves they are traumatized afterwards. You saw it yourself in York, how all those people ran around like dumb sheep rather than defend themselves."

Indeed, Harry had seen, and he felt a certain amount of anger that he had been the first to counterattack, and that it wasn't until he had the enemy on the defensive that anyone had dared to come to his aid. Even if the people there hadn't been 'men of violence', they should have at least had some sense of self-preservation or at least a spine. Surely, the entire city was not occupied by cowards? Even as he thought this he felt a wave of guilt. The others had been victims, and they had been caught off guard and panicked. It wasn't their fault they weren't as freakishly aggressive as he was.

"You can now do what needs to be done under the most dire of circumstances. You have always been a fighter. This is a natural step in your progress, albeit a premature one."

"Merlin, there's nothing natural about this. I killed... dozens of people. How does that make me any better than those soldiers? I'm-"

"Silencio!"

Harry was hit with the silencing charm and struck mute. He blinked confusedly for a moment and then angrily threw his pillow at Snape, who tossed it aside easily.

"As fascinating as it is to listen to your maudlin, teenage angst, I am trying to impart some worldly wisdom right now and have only so much time. Once we're through, my godchildren are outside and will be more than happy to point out the obvious flaws in your demented logic."

The Gryffindor glared angrily at him, and mentally estimated the possibility of getting away with flipping the bird at the man.

"I'm glad we understand each other. As I was saying, this paradigm shift in your personality is to your benefit, but there are always some inherent dangers with the removal of a psychological restraint. You will need to develop self restraint, to discipline yourself so that you may function within society and maintain your sanity. If you fail to do so, then what you fear will come true. You will, indeed, become 'evil'. Finite incantatem."

"You. Are. A. Jerk," Harry stated, as soon as he was released.

"Well, I am pleased that your boundless conceit has prevented your mental development to the point where you feel the need to debate endlessly on the concepts of good and evil. I'm going back to France now. If you feel the urge to invade Italy while I am gone, please run it by the Dark Lord first."

"Yes, because there's the epitome of self-restraint and moral fiber."

Snape smirked.

"Touché. The Malfoys have agreed to look after you for the remainder of the week. Your condition is not serious, and with Lucius' position, he will be able to keep you apprised of the situation. Otherwise, I recommend avoiding him as much as possible."

Anger bloomed inside of Harry at the mention of Lucius Malfoy, and it must have shown because Snape paused at the door and then added.

"I am aware of the situation with Hermione, and I will deal with it when I return. Do not complicate matters by provoking him or attempting to solve it yourself. Even with your change in status, you are not in any position to confront him head on. He is a master of his own game."

Harry nodded, even though the concession felt bitter. He would try not to... provoke the Malfoy patriarch, but that didn't mean he wasn't going to search for a solution with Hermione. Snape might care about Hermione's wellbeing, but he was also Lucius' friend, and he didn't want to risk being caught unprepared if the man's method of dealing with the betrothal were less than satisfactory.

"Say 'hi' to Ira for me."

"Mr. Potter, I have every intention of forgetting I ever saw you today as soon as I walk out that door," the man said pointedly, smirked, and left.

"And here I thought married life might have improved him some how," he muttered under his breath.

A few minutes later, just as he was starting to feel strong enough to try taking a shower on his own, he received a second set of visitors. Hermione appeared at the door, a tentative smile on her face that grew when he smiled back at her. Draco strode in as she was giving him a hug and grimaced.

"Eh. Stop that, Hermione. You'll get all wet," he grumbled, taking in Harry's sweat soaked form.

"Draco!"

"He's right, Hermione, I'm totally gross right now. I was about to take a shower."

"You'll stay in bed until the healers say otherwise! You're weak as a kitten and shaking like a leaf!"

Thanks, Hermione. Emasculation much?

"It's just the fever breaking," he insisted. "I'm fine. Well, except for the hands. I don't know what gives with those."

He lifted his bandaged hands and wiggled his fingers at her, trying to make her laugh but she just looked at them sadly. Draco found his pillow on the floor and tossed it back to Harry.

"Fighting with Uncle Severus, again?"

"Fighting implies some sort of retaliation. He's a bully picking on little ol'me."

Draco snorted. "Yeah, pull the other one."

"Are you alright, Harry?" she asked, staring earnestly into his eyes as if she were a legilimens. He smiled back, and while it was weak it wasn't entirely fake.

"I really am okay. I'm not going to go crazy or anything. It wasn't the same as the last time."

And wasn't it sad that he had been through several similar experiences before? Hermione seemed to think so if her expression was anything to go by. Draco, however, was oblivious.

"Definitely not like last time, I hope. You totally wiped the floor with them. It was in all of the papers, and even father and mother wouldn't stop talking about it. You're like...the greatest wizard of the generation! Do you have any idea how depressed that makes me?"

Harry laughed. They talked a bit more about York, skimming over it lightly, refusing to delve into the darker aspects of what he had seen and done, in favor of discussing what had happened after Kinglsey had apparated him to safety, and his subsequent collapse.

Hermione and Draco were not fully informed of all the consequences of Harry's actions and much of it would likely have to discuss with either Lucius or Voldemort or Morgan, but they were fairly up to date on public reaction. There was of course the grief over the partial destruction of York, particularly the hospital which was seen as the greatest tragedy of the entire event as most of those inside had been unable to escape the building's collapse. There were over two hundred dead, more than 2/3 the total fatalities, and it would be weeks before all the bodies were recovered.

It could have been much worse if Harry hadn't been there, however, and already the city was hailing him as a savior and rest of the nation was following suit. The press were having a field day spouting stories left and right based on what very little information they could gather so shortly after the battle, and Harry was always the hero of the day, albeit wavering between a dark lord and a white knight depending on which paper was read. Some of the papers had even claimed Harry had been killed or critically injured in battle, and that the Court was trying to cover it up. There were several departments in Bristol flooded with inquiries and howlers demanding information on where he was and what had happened to him. It was unlikely he would be able to walk out in public for a while without being mobbed.

Not that he would be walking much. His collapse after the battle in York was the result of shock, the result of his unnaturally rapid fluctuation in magic that left his nervous and immune system shot to pieces. The healers had treated what they could and left him to sleep off the rest. They were certain there would be no long lasting side affects, but they didn't want him exposing himself to large crowds for at least a week while he was vulnerable to further infection.

The burns on his hands were another matter altogether. They were saturated with magic, but traditional measures had been unsuccessful in draining it from his wounds. The healers had given up

on it when it became apparent that tampering with them only worsened his condition, and they finally just bandaged them and let them be.

It was going to make letter writing a misery, Harry lamented. He was going to have to write to friends and family to let them know he was okay regardless, especially if newspapers were trying to pass him off as dead. Sirius and Remus, of course, the twins and Ginny, Natalie, Hagrid (he hoped his friend had gotten out before the fighting), the Reichers, Clyde, maybe a few others. He would have to make a press appearance now too, of course, although he didn't know what he was going to say and resented that he was going to have to explain himself. Why didn't anyone else have to explain? He would have liked and explanation himself of why the other witches and wizards hadn't tried to defend themselves. Snape's interpretation wasn't going to cut it.

"Mother is talking with the healers right now about getting you out of here," Draco said. "With all the craziness out there, it's only a matter of time before someone leaks your whereabouts to the press. I'll go see if she's made any progress."

Once alone, the two remaining Gryffindors fell into an awkward silence.

"Er...so... I heard about the... thing... with that Crouch guy..." Harry started awkwardly. He considered offering to kill the man, but that joke probably wasn't in good taste at the moment. She might think he was serious.

"Don't worry about that, right now. It will hold for a while."

"Have you told Draco about your plan to get emancipated, yet?"

"No, I wasn't..." she paused, considering what he just said and then rolled her eyes. "Oh, I'm so stupid."

"If that's the case there's not much hope for the rest of us."

"I didn't even think about... He'd really side with me on this now, wouldn't he?"

Harry smiled at her. "Yes, he would. So would Snape, maybe, sort of. If he thought he can get away with it, which you know he might be able to do. He's quite clever in an amoral sort of way."

She shook her head.

"I don't want to involve him if I can help it. He just got married, and promoted, and wants to start a family... now's really not the time to get on Lucius' bad side. Just, don't worry about it right now, Harry. We've got time to figure something out later. You just need to worry about getting better and making it through the week."

This was true enough. He didn't know if he could handle Hermione's drama on top of his own at the moment, and she looked as if she could use the distraction his own ill fortune had brought. She looked tired, although she was trying valiantly not to show it. Her eyes were red, and her hands were cool where she touched him... or maybe that was just his fever.

She was still beautiful, however. Tall, proud, and righteous in a manner that was simultaneously grating and comforting, she was certain of herself in ways he never had been. She thought in facts, and facts alone were not necessarily good or evil, but they could be transfigured into such after some mysterious arithmetic equation was performed on them. He thought in feelings, and that was unfortunate because he was horrible with feelings, his and everyone else's. He had done incredible things driven on anger, terror, hope, love, and madness, but the quieter feelings were where he had trouble. Guilt, pride, curiosity, affection, depression... these things led him to strange places and he was often lost on what to do with them. He didn't trust them and he didn't trust himself.

"Hey, Hermione," he said after a moment, uncertain of his question and if it should be spoken or buried.

"Yes, Harry?"

"Do you think..."

He paused to moisten his lips, his mouth felt suddenly dry.

"Do you think what happened in York... was it okay to do what I did?"

"What do you mean?"

"I killed people."

She flinched. Not a good sign.

"I killed a lot of people," he continued. "Over thirty. Intentionally. I think I would have done it again too, only quicker... Might have been able to save the hospital then."

"Harry..."

"But I know it's wrong. To kill people. It sounds really obvious, but it isn't sometimes. I know you're not supposed to want people dead even if you hate them, and I really did...do hate them. They killed all those people for no reason and were going to kill more, and they were just sheep, just like Snape said. They just ran around like stupid sheep waiting to get cut down and I was the only one doing anything and I don't know why. Why didn't they defend themselves? Why'd I have to do it? I'm not even sixteen yet and I killed all those aurors, because they were too goddamn scared or stupid or something and I hate them for it too. But I didn't what them to die. But I did want those aurors to and I don't understand the difference, but there is one or at least I think there's one, but I don't know what it is. Maybe Snape was wrong and I really am crazy and I can't tell what's real anymore. God, Merlin, Jesus... it should be so obvious, but I don't get it at all."

She was hugging him again, like he knew she would, and it was as wet and gross as the first time, but he was happy too. You didn't hug a crazy person. You avoided touching them like their insanity was contagious, and talked soothingly to them at a safe distance across the room.

"You didn't do anything wrong," she insisted, holding him tightly as if he were physically about ready to fall to pieces. "I don't know why they didn't fight back themselves. There was probably some sort of group psychosis or something. I bet I could find entire books on the subject. Maybe some of them did fight back and you just never really saw them. You did the right thing though. You were brave and strong, and you did the right thing. I'm proud of you."

And that's all he really needed to hear.

~ Page Break~

Bobby made it a point to hide when Voldemort walked into the aviary. This was not cowardice on his part, but at a rather childish act of rebellion. If the Dark Lord wanted his company he would have to work for it. He sat amongst the shadows of the vegetation and watched as the man-like creature entered and pulled from his sleeve what appeared to be folded pieces of paper. Within moments the folded paper suddenly started to fly, not like the charmed parchments that float around the Court offices but like real birds, flapping their wings and diving this way and that around the aviary.

He counted six of them, but there may have been five or seven, it was hard to count with them moving about so quickly. Curiosity got the better of him, and he sailed through the tiny flock to get a better look. They moved out of his way, then circled as if curious themselves. This close he could see they truly were paper and they had no eyes, even though he could sense they saw somehow.

He can also see that several of them were stained with blood.

"What are they?" he found himself asking, despite his initial conviction to ignore the wizard. He sensed the magic around them, and it was familiar and yet not. He knew they are not of the Dark Lord's design. It only took him half a minute to figure out who they belong to and it filled him with an unspeakable dread.

"Surely you recognize them?" the Dark Lord said, smug at having drawn his captive in so easily. "Admittedly, they are not quite the same as Carrigan's animus*, but the similarities are there. Very

organic movements, pseudo-conscious behavior, unusually curious and friendly towards people... when they're not tearing them to pieces. I think our old teacher would have been quite impressed. Harry's magical development is far more advanced than I realized."

Bobby said nothing, turning back to watch the birds, fixating now on the blood splattered across their white and text-dappled bodies. He did not like the implications.

"Did you see it yourself? When you started following our young friend's magical career? Raecellos is a god after all, and he must have whispered things to you."

The raven had known of course. He had learned of Harry's existence within days of his entrance into Hogwarts and his first encounter with the Dark Lord, and he had listened closely until he felt the time was right to approach him. Since then he had been privy to many of the boy's magical acts that Voldemort had not been, and he felt a sort of pleasure that was simultaneously proud and vindictive at knowing more of Harry than his would-be mentor. He had also known an absurd amount of jealousy over the fact the young Gryffindor was still closer to the dark wizard.

"Or did he remind you of Carrigan, I wonder?"

Bobby stiffened.

"He must have reminded Brennan, for the man to teach him that spell. Perhaps the two of you even conspired on it."

This false assumption should have relieved the raven somewhat, but instead he felt a swelling anger. He had never been particularly close to Brennan, but the man had been a loyal student and had carried on their master's teachings as best he could. His murder was not something he would forget or forgive, and evidence of Harry's possible corruption flitting overhead was already fraying at his last nerve.

"It is a pity. If Carrigan had half the killer's instinct Harry does, perhaps he would have lived long enough to see it himself."

Even as Bobby transfigured, he knew what he was doing was stupid. It was magically wasteful, pointless, and exactly what the bastard wanted. It didn't stop him from smashing his fist into the Dark Lord's face and feel a bone deep satisfaction as it connected. Voldemort stumbled, and Bobby hit again, this time with the other fist, knocking his enemy to the floor. The third and fourth punch contacted as well, and for one savagely happy moment the raven thought he might just be able to kill him. He was not a heavily built man, but his lean arms were pure muscle from endless flights around the world even after months spent in captivity, and he had seen humans capable of smashing another's skull to pieces if properly motivated.

He felt motivated enough to smash an ogre to pieces.

The Dark Lord, however, wasn't an ogre. He was far worse.

Bobby's fifth attempted blow was halted by Voldemort's hand catching his fist, mid-swing, and he pulled the transfigured raven downward as he surged up, smashing his forehead into the other's. Bobby fell back, stunned, and the Dark Lord followed the movement until he had him pinned beneath him. Instantly, the dark wizard's hands were wrapped tightly around his throat.

Voldemort, his mouth and nose smeared with blood, looked down on him in obvious surprise. Bobby took the opportunity to spit in his face.

"You fucking monster," he snarls in ways he can't as a raven. "You fucking stupid monster. You can't just repeat history you have to mutate it into something as twisted and deformed as you are! He could have been Carrigan! He could have been every god damn thing that made him remarkable, but you had to ruin it! I hope he kills you! I hope he takes these stupid birds and cuts you into a bloody fucking pulp!"

Voldemort held the strength of ten men when he put his mind to it. It was not a spell so much as a byproduct of the magical tampering he'd done on his no-longer-human body, and it takes very little effort to hold Bobby down, even with his fists and legs smashing at him with every intention of causing harm. It would have taken even less to

crush his captive's neck in his hand for both the insult and the injury he'd attempted.

He could taste his own blood in his mouth, and it tasted more like phosphorous than copper. He should be enraged, but instead all he feels is enthralled. A similar scene flashed back in his memory of his murder of Tom and the subsequent consumption of magic poisoned flesh, but the imagery was more ironic than anything.

He felt less inclined to kill Bobby than ever before.

"Well, aren't you just full of surprises?" he said between shaking breaths. "I didn't know you could do this without our master's help. A reverse animagus. How deliciously clever. Is this how you looked before you died or is his face the only human face you can hold clearly in your head*?"

The man that struggled beneath him was far younger than Voldemort had ever had the opportunity to see Carrigan in life, but it was clearly recognizable as his old mentor. In his thirties with thick, wavy brown hair, sharp blue-green eyes, and a strong jaw that belied his smaller frame; he was noticeably handsome. Or would have been if he weren't baring his teeth like a mad dog.

"Go ahead and rage," he laughed. "Blame me for all the ills and woes of this world if it makes you feel better, but you said it yourself last time. Carrigan believed I was worth risking his life for. Remarkable as he was, and yes even I will admit that, he knew I was more suited for this world than he ever would be. That my will and my power would bring our kind back to our magical roots as all his kindness and his craft never could. And Harry, kind, remarkable, and angry child that he is, will be his legacy and his evolution, a perfect blend of spirit and strength, compassion and violence. A blend of the best of both of us, a metaphorical son. In this brave new world, he will thrive."

Beneath him Bobby's struggles took on a new violence as he began aiming his blows at joints and unprotected flesh and any vulnerable place he could reach.

"I'll kill you! I'll kill you, I'll kill you!"

And Voldemort just laughed, because he's had a victory and until this moment he'd had no one to gloat to over it. He felt as if he had defeated destiny, wrestled it down so that he could take all that he desired from it and thrown the rest away.

"It wouldn't make the slightest bit of difference."

He isn't alone, and he knows he should be. Men at his level of power were always alone, but no man had ever had the love of the Earth as he did. He was gifted. He was blessed. Harry was bound to him now, irrevocably, their mutual strength would ensure they could never be free of the other, could never ignore or forget or put aside. Who else could possibly understand the violent grandness of their existence like they did?

No one could take this away from him.

~ Page Break~

It didn't take long for Narcissa to negotiate for Harry's release from the hospital, and within a few hours of waking he was showered, changed, lectured extensively about taking care of himself and watching out for medical complications, and checked out. They made a brief stop at the cottage, and while Mrs. Morgan entertained Lady Malfoy, Harry, Draco, and Hermione quickly gathered his things from his room. Forty minutes later he was standing in the parlor of Malfoy Manor, ready to sleep for another two days and wondering what to do with himself.

It would have been a simple enough matter of asking Hermione or Draco, but both had been sent away so that he was left alone with family matriarch, a woman he knew only in passing. She seemed in no hurry to start the conversation either, and studied him quietly for some time in complete silence. It was uncomfortable, but he didn't fidget. He had lessons on not doing so, and here was the moment they would prove their worth.

Eventually, her visual assessment was completed, and she smiled pleasantly.

"I can see now why our Lord is so fond of you. I admit I didn't understand it at first, but you really aren't afraid of anything, are you?"

"If I were," he said, "I would at least know better than to tell you so."

"Ha! You're going to make my husband's hair turn gray," she said, amused and snapped her fingers. Immediately, a house elf appeared and bowed so low its large ears brushed the floor. "Tell my husband Mr. Potter is here."

"Yes, Mistress!" it said obediently, and disappeared again.

She turned back to her guest.

"The house elves are at your disposal. Use them as you see fit. When you're done here, they will take you to your room to rest if you would like or anywhere else to your preference. Dinner is at seven. I hope you'll enjoy your stay with us."

With that, she swept from the room in with royal grace, leaving Harry more than a little confused on whether their encounter had gone well or not.

He was not allowed to ponder the matter for long, as moments later, Lord Malfoy swung open the door and stepped inside. He was as sinister as ever with his black uniform and cold, hawk-like gaze. Harry was struck by a surge of hatred for the man, and wondered very quickly what his chances were of killing him in a duel. He knew himself to be the more powerful of the two (he might be sheltered or even deluded but he suspected his involvement with pagan magic had left him among the magically strongest in the world next to Voldemort and Dumbledore), but he also knew the other man was far more experienced, and technique more than strength was what won duels.

His thoughts on the matter were cut short when a familiar figure followed Malfoy into the parlor.

"Robert?"

The man froze, his eyes widened, and then he seemed to fight with himself to either smile or shout.

"Harry! You're okay!" he said, and surged forward to take his hand, as if confirming he wasn't a ghost. "We've all been terribly worried about you. The girls have been frantic!"

"I just got out of the hospital a little while ago, but I'm quite alright. Robert, what are you doing here?"

The lawyer's expression tightened, and he glanced nervously back at Lucius.

"I..."

"Mr. Reicher is currently in my employ," the aristocrat volunteered, smugly. "He just came by to pick up some paperwork to change Hermione's official birth date. Lots of paperwork and legalese to wade through with her betrothal, after all. You've heard of her impending nuptials? I do hope you will be able to attend. As her best friend, we'd welcome you as family."

Robert suddenly went pale*. Harry himself couldn't stop himself from suddenly pulling his hand free, his eyes revealing the betrayal he felt. Robert opened his mouth, to explain or to deny, but was interrupted yet again by Lucius.

"Why don't you go to my office and get the paperwork yourself? It's in the red file on top of my desk. I would like to speak with Harry for a little while."

"Of course, Mr. Malfoy," he said, and moved to the door, casting apologetic glances at his young friend as he went.

Once alone, Lucius moved closer, and Harry nearly backed away, but caught himself. The man stared down at him, his smugness made demeaning by his considerable height advantage. His body wanted to retreat a safe distance, overwhelmed by an instinct of an impending attack, but Harry held his ground and stared up at the other, hoping to

convey with his eyes alone what would happen if he moved any closer.

"My what a look. If one didn't know any better, they might think you wanted to kill me. In my very own home no less."

"Perish the thought."

The man's smile only broadened.

"You truly are not afraid of me, are you? Not even here, where all the magic of my ancestor's is at my fingertips."

"I have delved into the magic of gods, Lord Malfoy. Your ancestors mean nothing to me."

Lucius' smile faded just a little and he took a more respectful step backwards, and adopted an impressed expression that Harry didn't believe for a moment.

"I would call you a fool not to appreciate the power within these walls, if I had not seen for myself how little it must truly mean to you. I saw what you did in York. If you were a member of the British military, you would hold the record for the most enemy killed in a single battle during this war so far. You must be very proud of your achievement."

Harry couldn't stop the involuntary grimace, even knowing the words were designed to hurt him... or maybe not hurt him. Perhaps he truly believed his attacks had been worthy of praise. The Malfoy patriarch would likely have been gloating if he had achieved a similar feat.

"In fact, there's been a movement within the ranks to award you a Merlin's Medal of Valor. The highest honor that can be awarded, but again, it's only awarded to members of the military. I don't suppose you have any ambition to join?"

"And have you as my boss? No thank you," he said, pointedly. He didn't give a damn about medals.

"It would be no worse than having Severus as your guardian. We are both men of ambition, beholden to the same master. Besides, we have been allies in the past."

He was referring to the time Harry willingly informed him of Headmistress Lestrangle's illegal attempt to legilimens him and made an alliance to blackmail her so that she would never try again. That had been years ago, however. Lestrangle was gone, and that alliance had dissolved without mention with her disappearance.

"That was before you lobbed my best friend off onto Crouch, and used another personal friend to help you do it. I don't believe for a second that your use of Robert Reicher was in any way coincidental."

Lucius tilted his head in acknowledgment.

"I admit his association with you was what brought him to my attention. There are few you are attached to and of those, half are beyond my reach. At the same time, the other half is readily available to me. To help or to... harm as I see fit."

"So what, this is all just some big, power play?"

"Exactly."

"What's the point? What are you punishing me for, Lord Malfoy? Why drag Hermione into it?"

Lucius chuckled, and walked across the room to the liquor cabinet.

"Do not let your newly explored power delude you. Hermione's marriage has nothing to do with you. It is a private matter between us. Nor am I punishing you. I am merely making a point. In case you've missed it, I'll spell it out. Your friends and acquaintances are vulnerable to me. You may think yourself very powerful, but standing here before me do you believe there is anything you could do to stop me if I decided to oh, I don't know... have Mr. Reicher investigated for tax fraud? Remove Severus from his position as headmaster? Bankrupt the Weasley twins business venture before it even started?"

Harry could say nothing to that. He had no idea what Malfoy Sr. could or could not do, but many considered him the most powerful man in Britain after the Dark Lord. There was no doubt that he would do such petty things if he believed it was to his advantage, regardless of whom or how badly he hurt others in the process.

Lucius appeared pleased by his silence, taking it for acknowledgment. He took two glasses from the liquor cabinet and poured some brandy into each, then joined his guest back in the center of the room and handed one over to him. Harry accepted the glass reflexively, although once he had it, he wasn't certain what to do with it. Alcohol was not new to him, but nor was it familiar.

"I don't want you to take this the wrong way, Harry. I have no intention of making you my enemy. You have a great deal of potential, but at the moment it is unrefined. Your magic is great, no one doubts it, but until you know when and how to use it to its greatest effect, it is little more than the tool of a brute trying to smash his way to desired ends. Meanwhile, your level of celebrity grows and you neglect to utilize it properly. So many missed opportunities, and I am sure you never even realized when they passed."

"So you're trying to threaten me into reaching my full potential? Offer your hand and bear your teeth at the same time? If this is your 'level of play' I want nothing to do with it." He set his drink down on a nearby table and made for the door, knowing if he stayed much longer there was going to be a real fight and nothing good would come from it. He wanted nothing to do with this man, and the sooner he could get Hermione free of him the better. What he said next, however, froze him in his tracks.

"Not even to save your precious little mudblood?"

The derogatory term was almost enough to have him spinning around and sending a curse at the aristocrat, but it was the implication of all his words together that stayed his hand. Very slowly he turned back around.

"I understand that you cannot accept my offer as things stand," Lucius said. "You have that ridiculous unspoken code of a Gryffindor

to put your friends before yourselves, and you hold closer to it than most. You can't accept anything I have to offer until I release your dear friend from her undesired nuptials. Am I correct?"

Cautiously, Harry nodded. He had an idea where this was going, and while he didn't want to follow along he had to at least listen.

"In the spirit of cooperation, I am willing to make a compromise with you. I will release her from her obligation, disinherit her completely if that is to your preference, and call off the marriage, if you will agree to be heir to my military career, to be obedient and respectful to me as you would your own father, and carry on my legacy after my death."

Harry stared at him blankly for a long moment, trying to process what was being said to him.

"Draco-"

Lucius broke in.

"-Is heir to the Malfoy family legacy. The estates, the ancestry, the titles, and responsibilities. I have no intention of allowing him to pursue a military career and risk his life in the field. His obligation is to uphold our family name by marrying well and siring the next generation."

"And I am little just cannon fodder."

"Yes, and judging by your past behavior, you seem to agree. Severus laments on the matter often enough."

Touché.

"Why would I risk putting myself under your command? Why would you even want me there? We have never gotten along."

Lucius snorted.

"Gryffindors. As if I needed to be your friend to understand your value. You hold a position of respect with the Dark Lord, you are popular with the proletariat and the aristocracy alike, and you have a knack for battle. My position is not so secure that I can risk missing opportunities, nor allow potential threats to go unsupervised. At the same time, while I can take advantage, I can not destroy the protection these things provide you. Our Master would not allow it."

"What makes you think Voldemort would even allow me to join the military? I am not his heir, but that doesn't mean he likes me getting into trouble all of the time."

Although, he probably thought it was pretty damn funny by now.

Lucius wasn't deterred, and if anything seemed more confident knowing that Harry was taking his words into consideration. He moved towards his prey, picking up the Gryffindor's abandoned glass as he went and handing it back to him. Harry reluctantly took it.

"We've discussed it on occasion. He believed it was too early to determine if you would be suited to this sort of career, but after what happened in York I doubt it will take much to convince him. Think of it merely as a transition, maturation from Severus' rough tutelage of a school boy to my own instruction of a young man. You need more than he can now provide, and the Dark Lord's mentorship is sporadic at best."

Harry was starting to feel increasingly uncomfortable. He had never entertained the possibility of joining the Sentinels or the Culties, despite his strong inclination to protect his homeland and protect it, and he was feeling trapped by the idea. He didn't want to have anything to do with it, but nor could he ignore it.

"And you'll just let Hermione go? Scott free?" he asked skeptically, looking for a way out.

"I wouldn't say Hermione would walk away from this untouched. After all, she would have to live with the knowledge that her closest friend sold himself into my service in order to rescue her. It is a far milder

punishment, I think than what Crouch has in store for her if you should choose to refuse, but-"

The glass in Lucius' hand suddenly burst, startling him from his dialogue. Most of the glass fell to the floor, along with the amber liquid it had been holding, but tiny shards had splintered and imbedded themselves into his hand. He looked down stunned as tiny rivulets of blood welled up in his palm. Looking up, he found Harry's toxic green eyes burning into him and felt a momentary fear.

"If anything happens to Hermione, I will kill you both."

Fear was replaced by anger, and suddenly Lucius had his bleeding palm wrapped around Harry's neck. Shards of glass dug deeper into his hand, but also into his captive's throat, tearing away the veneer of confident hostility from his youthful continence. Harry dropped his own glass, and clutched at Lucius' arm, but his position was bad and he was weak from sickness.

"Don't even think to threaten me, little boy. I am not some random schoolyard bully or plebian soldier on a broom. I will make you bleed in ways that defy explanation."

He removed his hand, and Harry fell to his knees, coughing and sputtering. A ring of blood and forming bruises curved around his neck where he had been held. They stared at each other hatefully for several long seconds before Lucius straightened.

"Think on what we have discussed here, Harry. It would be to your benefit. Find me when you have made up your mind."

His message delivered, the Malfoy patriarch strode from the room, leaving the recipient to decide for himself.

~ Page Break~

Harry did not see Malfoy Sr. after the scene in the parlor for several days after, but the man's presence was inescapable within the manor. His portrait hung in several hallways, sneering whenever he walked passed, and the house elves went about their daily task in trembling

fear of his brutal reprisal. The very brick and mortar of the estate hummed his magic, and it grated on his every nerve. Desperate to buck the memory of their last meeting, he turned to Hermione to begin making plans for her emancipation, but she explained to him bluntly why it would have to wait.

"This is Lucius' house. It is his eyes, his ears, and his will. Nothing but our thoughts are private here," she said pointedly, as they made their way down to breakfast the first morning of his stay. He did not like having to wait. The Malfoy patriarch's offer cum threat was at the forefront of his thoughts, and the longer it was left unchallenged the more insistent it became.

Not that he had any intention of discussing Lucius' offer with Hermione. As far as he was concerned, it was a private matter that he would not burden her with. Conceited, he acknowledged, but it was a decision he did not want her to influence one way or the other. She had a sort of self-righteousness he didn't want to crush, but he had lived through many decisions done for the right reasons that turned out badly. He knew that 'right' decisions could not only turn out badly but did not always absolve one of guilt either, regardless of the morality behind it.

However, he was loathe to let the old dragon win. His Gryffindor side chafed at the idea of being frightened into servitude. The servitude itself made him want to gag. If the Dark Lord had not managed it, there was no way he could stomach one of his minions doing so.

For now, he had resolved not to accept the deal, but it still hovered in his brain and would not be brushed aside no matter how much he tried to distract himself. And there was much to distract himself with. Lady Malfoy, for all of her faults (marrying Lucius being the biggest in his opinion), put forth a genuine effort to keep him occupied.

He attended tutoring lessons with both Hermione and Draco (about the only time he got to see the other boy who was still grounded for his 'outrageous' behavior during the announcement of Hermione's betrothal), mingled at a garden party, went horseback riding, was provided plenty of materials to sketch and paint with, and was introduced to several important people he had never even heard of at

every meal and tea time she could squeeze into a day. There had even been a brief interview with a handful of reporters on the third day of his stay, long overdo in his estimation, but they had barely a half dozen questions between them before Lady Malfoy was escorted them from the manor again as if they were merely a horde of smelly children.

It made him very much want to be back in his own little cottage, holed up in his bedroom studying animagi, tending the garden, or bickering with Snape over breakfast. As much as he enjoyed Hermione's company, they were given little time together and never left alone so they were left playing meaningless, proprietary roles that left them feeling lonelier than ever. If that was what it meant for him to accept Lucius' offer and adopt a life of shallow relationships and frivolous pastimes, he was more resolved than ever to avoid such a fate.

For nearly a week, he lived restlessly; going through the motions of a polite house guest during the day and struggling to sleep at night. His dreams were short, and his awakenings violent. He had been offered sleeping draughts, but he didn't trust his hosts enough to take any. He was irritable, but left little opportunity to express it, and the thought of all the other things he wanted to be doing at the moment only served to aggravate him more. He was ready to strangle Lady Malfoy and her menagerie of politicians and socialites when the Dark Lord finally arrived.

Harry was in the parlor reading a book on animancy (he had been asked several times by visitors about his peculiar bird spell and had found himself embarrassingly inadequate at explaining it in the academic terminology they seemed to expect), having successfully managed to beg off a meeting with the Court Minister of Education's wife and some well-to-do land owner from Wales. Hermione was also studying, but in her own room (now that she was affianced, they weren't allowed to be alone together for an extended amount of time), and Draco was at a fencing lesson. The Dark Lord walked straight into the room with two very terrified house elves floundering after him

"Please, Sirs..." one of them tried, but then couldn't seem to force out whatever it was trying to ask. The second one was even more useless, running in circles and occasionally stopping to bang its head

into a door frame. Luckily Harry had given up his studying or else it would have been very distracting.

"Thank Merlin you're here," Harry burst out, jumping to his feet. "I'm bored out of my mind!"

Voldemort looked pleased by this reception, although a little taken back.

"It's good to know I offer you some form of entertainment value," he greeted, smirking. "Has the esteemed Lady Malfoy not been keeping you busy? Most unlike her."

"Busy, yes, but shaking hands and smiling vapidly at people who think they're so terrible important and clever is not my idea of fun. At least living with Snape, the conversations were brief and mildly dangerous. These other people are just tedious. I don't know how you put up with them!"

The Dark Lord was even more amused then before. He had been somewhat worried that he would find Harry in a depressed slump, like he had been during his recovery after the Battle of Berlin. Instead he found him lively, albeit agitated, and eager to engage in a rather colorful rant.

"I don't. People learn to speak very briefly, very plainly, and as little as possible when they reach a point where they must interact with me. If I weren't so terribly impressive I should think I would be extremely unpopular," he said, immodestly, and with a touch of irony. Harry, caught in his own annoyance, barely heard him.

"And Draco's grounded and they won't leave me alone with Hermione, so we can't talk or do anything interesting. You heard about Hermione's betrothal?"

The way he said 'betrothal' made Voldemort feel as if he were being accused of something, which was delightfully novel. Most people just assumed he was guilty and didn't bother (or dare) accuse him of anything.

"Lucius informed me, yes. I'm assuming it's a scheme of his. The union makes no sense otherwise."

Harry looked at him intently, as if weighing his options.

"I don't agree with it," he said. "It's bad for Hermione. It's just petty revenge."

Voldemort wasn't the least bit surprised.

"And you want me to put a stop to it?"

His protégé hesitated. Good. It wouldn't do for the young man to develop brat-like tendencies and assume he was going to give him whatever he asked for. He hadn't yet, and had no intention of starting.

"I don't know what I could give you to do so. I don't know if it would be any better than what Lord Malfoy asked for."

"Aaahhh... so you've tried making bargains with Lucius? You really are getting deep into the game," he said, and took a chair. He turned to the two house elves who were now fidgeting helplessly in place. "Inform Lady Malfoy of my arrival. I will require privacy and a room of my own for the night. Go."

They seemed happy enough to go and do something, and disappeared quickly, leaving them alone. Once they were gone, Voldemort muttered another spell. The room shifted, or so it seemed, though nothing moved and Harry felt a momentarily motion sickness, like ascending too quickly on a broom.

"What was that?" he muttered, and found a chair before he fell over.

"A privacy spell. A very powerful one. There useful in these old family estates, particularly, when you wish to discuss something you don't want the head of the family to know about. Tell me about your bargain with Lucius? What did you offer?"

Harry wanted to ask more about the spell, which if he could learn he might be able to speak with Hermione more openly, but it would have to wait.

"I didn't offer him anything. He came up with the deal. He said if I joined the Culties after I graduate and worked under him, he'd let Hermione out of the betrothal."

Voldemort nodded. "A fair enough deal. It is not as if you would not benefit from his patronage. There is much he could teach you that I can not."

Anger and helplessness flitted across the young man's face, and a touch of betrayal just to keep things interesting. He hoped Harry never learned to hide his emotions as effectively as his other Slytherins had, it was much too fascinating to watch even if it did take away some of the challenge.

"You think I should take the deal," his protégé said, without question.

"I could not care less one way or another. I am more interested in how you handle Lucius than on how Lucius handles you. There is nothing here I cannot undo if I eventually find it's displeasing to me."

"Even Hermione's betrothal?" he asked, leaping from hopeless to hopeful instantly.

"I could care less about your Hermione as well. She is your ally and thus your responsibility. I have no intention of meddling in my most trusted general's familial affairs on her behalf. And before you ask, there is nothing I want from you at this moment that would make it worth my while to do so."

Harry looked down, and ran his hands through his hair, neither hopeless nor hopeful now, but weighted with the responsibility of it all. It was a cold attitude to take, but not unfair or unexpected. The Gryffindor made no attempt to argue the point.

Voldemort decided to grant him a small boon.

"I have no intention of helping you directly," he said, "I think this is too good of an opportunity to test yourself in a battle of wits and wills against a master player, but nor will I'll help Lucius. If you wish to speak to me on the matter, you may do so in complete confidence and as long as you do not stray from acceptable boundaries I will not interfere."

"... acceptable boundaries?"

"You cannot attempt to kill him. I am rather fond of him, and more importantly Britain cannot afford to have her most talented general removed from the field at this critical juncture. The same goes for Crouch."

Harry snorted and shook his head.

"Then you better hope I win, because I think they mean to hurt Hermione, and if they do I am going to kill them both. I know I am capable of it now."

Had he a heart, Voldemort was certain, it might have clenched in that moment. Not because of the words, they were only words and he heard men speak of things both nobler and more tragic, but because of the tone. Firm and touched with sorrow. Carrigan had spoken like that, and he tried to brush the thought aside. He had visited Bobby recently, and in the course of his taunting, he stirred up memories. He was simply being nostalgic.

Best of both them, he had told the raven. He hoped that was true.

"You must love this girl a great deal to make such a bloodthirsty promise," he said idly to cover the discomfort of his own thoughts. Harry blushed.

"Not like that. She's like a sister to me. You know there's very little I wouldn't do for family."

Which was just fine so long as it remained that way, Voldemort thought, pushing aside his melancholy in favor of pragmatics. He didn't mind Harry maintaining a friendship with a muggleborn, he

knew she had plenty of useful attributes he could benefit from, but a romantic liaison was out of the question. If he saw such a thing developing, he'd marry the girl off himself. Yet another reason to monitor this game closely. It wouldn't do for either of them to get carried away in the highly emotional atmosphere.

"Then you have plenty of motivation to succeed. No doubt Severus will be of some assistance, if you feel you can trust him. I would be cautious, however, he will not be so emotionally adverse to you allying yourself to Lucius. I believe he thinks you have grown beyond his ability to handle, and if he can hand that responsibility off to his old friend and spare his goddaughter at the same time, he may work to those ends regardless of your intentions. Especially now, when he can benefit so heavily from being in Lucius' good graces."

Harry remembered Malfoy Sr.'s threat against those close to him, among them Snape, and Hermione's own insistence to keep her godfather uninvolved.

"Best to keep him out of the situation altogether if possible," he said, mostly to himself. "He might figure something out on his own anyway. He's not exactly happy about this either."

"Severus may believe his responsibilities as a godfather more important than his friendship with Lucius. Ironic since it was that very friendship that had Lucius allot that title to begin with. He's always been a bit fanatical in his traditionalist views of family. Not that different from you I imagine in some respects. It's probably a result of his lousy childhood. Or maybe he's just tired of parents not raising their children properly before dumping them at Hogwarts. Hard to say with that man."

Harry never thought of Snape as having a childhood. In his mind, Snape had come fully formed from the dark abyss of ambiguous attitude that existed between nightmares, cleverness, and the Room of Requirement on the seventh floor of Hogwarts. Although, now that he did think of it, he couldn't imagine it had been very good. The potions master did seem like the kind of person who hadn't been hugged nearly enough growing up.

Alright, not something he really wanted to think about at the moment.

"You're staying the day?" he asked, switching rails. Now that he had discussed Lucius' offer with someone else, and had been provided a certain level of encouragement and support in his defiance of it, he was now ready to put it in the back of his mind for a while. He had been obsessing on it for too long already.

"I am. I wanted to see how you were doing, and make sure you were taking proper care of yourself before I leave. I have to leave for Warsaw tomorrow."

Harry nodded.

"Negotiating with the Polish Minister of Magic?" he asked, tiredly, as if even he were bored of that particularly song and dance.

"Negotiations are over. We're signing a treaty. The spread of the attacks in England have given me the leverage to push my agenda there. The public is sympathetic to us. They have no love for the Italians and their Catholic-state. Their attempts to turn the conflict into a religious war and discard the basic ethics of warfare by doing so are deeply offensive to them, and too many others. The Germans were desperate when they allied themselves to them, and it may prove to be their undoing."

"Good," Harry said sharply. Voldemort smiled at his vehemence. It was best not to linger on it too long, however. His young friend was certainly harder than he had been before, but he was not unflappable, and he didn't want to push him into dark thoughts at the moment. He wanted to enjoy his stay and would prefer that Harry did too. They had so few opportunities to see each other, and when they did Harry was usually not in the best of conditions.

They talked a little more about the fight in Europe and the movement of Britain's troops (he was calling back two battalions to secure England once again) and his relations with Queen Ophelia. Harry had a general idea about all of these things based off of what he had read in the paper, discussed with various Court officials over the last few

days, and his own experience, but was eager to delve deeper, not just into immediate actions but what they would mean in the future both during and after the fighting.

At least in one aspect, Harry had not changed. Hardened he might be, but a warmonger he was not. He still looked forward to the end of the war more than anything, and the chance to rebuild was his primary concern. Voldemort was careful to avoid mentioning to him that it would like be many years, maybe even decades, before the war was over and that the rebuilding may prove just as violent in its own way. He was no fool; he knew his protégé would not approve of his plans to install his own regime within Europe, uniting it into one glorious empire.

Not yet, anyway. Once the truly serious fighting broke out and the nations turned on each other like starved wolves, desperation for peace would trump the abhorrence of its source. When the final pieces fell, history would look back on him as the savior of Western Wizarding Civilization. Ha. Ha.

Eventually, however, Voldemort moved into a more pressing matter.

"Are you ready for tonight?" he asked.

Harry just looked at him. The Dark Lord sighed, fighting a smile.

"I had a feeling this would happen. Do you know what today is?"

"...Your birthday?"

"No."

"...Lord Malfoy's birthday?"

The battle against smiling was lost soon there after.

"It's nobody's birthday... that I know of, at least. It's not even a holiday."

"It did seem a little early for the solstice- oh! Oh, crap!"

"We really need to work on your language. You never used to swear before."

"Oh my Goddess, she's going to kill me. She's going to induce insanity and make me eat poisonous spiders. I'll be torn apart by angry horses*."

"I would have gone with werewolves, but it's your fatalistic fantasy."

"Uuuugggg..." he moaned, and buried his head in his hands.

Voldemort laughed and climbed to his feet, pushing Harry up as well.

"Come on, we still have time. It's an hour until moonrise."

Over the next hour the Dark Lord exercised his sadistic love of authority by ordering everyone in the estate around like they were servants, including Lady Malfoy herself, who tolerated it with a resigned sort of good humor born of familiarity with the man's eccentric behavior. Draco was just happy to be out of his room, even if it was to participate in an hour's worth of Dark Lord directed craziness, and dragged Hermione off with him to set up the sacrificial altar in the back lawn. The estate's house elves busied themselves gathering supplies, and Lady Malfoy evacuated the few wizarding staff and house guests, skillfully implying it had to do with a top-secret meetings between Lord Voldemort and foreign ambassadors (it really wouldn't do for them to start spreading rumors about strange rituals performed in her home during the full moon).

Meanwhile, Harry showered (as close to a ritual purification as he was going to get on such short notice) and changed into a clean pair of pants, memorized the short prayer Voldemort gave him (the man seemed awfully prepared for all of this), and then followed him to the armory. The Malfoy armory was a truly frightening collection of weapons spanning from contemporary to medieval; Highland Claymores and Roman gladius, war hammers and quarterstaves, halberds and crossbows, lances, axes, shields and armor. He was mildly impressed when upon closer inspection almost all of it appeared to have the Malfoy family crest, in some form, imbedded

into it. It would seem that the Malfoy family had a history as warriors as well as refined aristocrats.

Out of all of it, Voldemort selected for them some of the few items that didn't have the crests or any obvious significance to the family; a recurve bow with arrows for Harry and a pair of hunting knives for himself. When all was ready, they met with Lady Malfoy, Draco, and Hermione in the foyer.

"I am beholden to you, Narcissa. You keep your home in excellent order and Harry might have found himself in a bad way if you did not," Voldemort said, generously ignoring the wide-eyed look the hostess was giving them. The Dark Lord did not look so strange, having merely discarded his outer robes which was perfectly acceptable in a friend's home, but Harry only had his pants on and in his half naked state his scars and markings and weapons made him look like a heathen come to burn the house down and carry off the womenfolk.

"Yes, thank you. I'm sorry about springing this on you last second," Harry said, with as much enthusiasm as he could muster. He could tell right at this moment that the woman was questioning her sanity in letting him inside her house, bizarre creature that he appeared to be. Draco and Hermione took his strange appearance in turn; having grown used to it over the years, and were even somewhat impressed with it.

"That is quite alright. Harry's a friend of the family," she said at last, smiling tightly. "The Malfoys always take good care of their friends."

"..."

He quickly walked towards the door before he let her know exactly what he thought of that statement. Voldemort followed at a more sedate pace, informing them that it was unlikely that either of them would be back until late and that no one should wait up for them. Outside, the sun had just set and the full moon still hung low in the sky. A horse was waiting, and they led it along quietly towards the woodland a quarter of a mile from the Malfoy estate. There were several acres of woodland at the southern side reserved for hunting,

although the sport was not currently fashionable, and they would make use of it that night.

When they had not quite reached the forest, but were far enough from the manor they stopped and faced each other. Voldemort drew his hunting knife.

"Are you ready?" he asked.

"Are you sure about this? Shouldn't I make the sacrifice first? What if Greyback tries to take me again?"

"You are not so vulnerable to Greyback without the Du'on nadi. Even if he tried, he would not be able to exert the same sort of control as before. Even Rhiannon cannot make you do anything you do not truly wish to do, even if she does lower your inhibitions and removes your fear of doing so. Conversely, what self-control you do lose is part of your sacrifice to her, not merely whatever creature falls to you. It is a matter of trust and a matter of lust, passion without modesty or fear of consequence."

If anything, Harry looked more concerned than reassured by his words. He placed a hand on the boy's shoulder.

"Trust me? You are under my protection tonight."

His protégé met his gaze uncertainly, but nodded and reached behind him. He pulled out his wand from his back pocket and handed it the Dark Lord. Voldemort stared at it, surprised. It was no small thing for a wizard to willingly hand their wand to another, and no one had ever offered him theirs without him prompting it first.

"It's not you I'm worried about. Just don't give it back to me until this is all over. I might burn the entire place to the ground otherwise," he said, smiling ruefully, and then handed over his glasses as well.

Once the he had carefully stored Harry's wand and glasses in an inner pocket, he approached his protégé yet again. The young man was shivering now, his bare flesh goose pimped from the cool evening air. He placed his hand on Harry's side to keep him from

flinching away as he brought the tip of his blade to his navel and very lightly drew it downward until slipped just below the hem of his pants. Harry hissed but didn't flinch away, and after a moment the cut began to well with blood.

For just a moment, the ward that rested on his lower abdomen became visible as a series of ancient symbols in brilliant red ink, the meaning of which was known only to the most powerful sect of Shinto priests. Just as quickly the symbols faded, leaving only the thin line of blood.

Harry slid out of his grasp and fell backwards onto the ground, looking up at the sky as if stunned. After a minute, he lifted his head to look at the Dark Lord with a pair of faintly glowing green eyes.

"What a rush."

Voldemort tilted his head curiously.

"What did it feel like?"

"Like coming up to breath after being under water for a long time. Only tingly."

He grinned up at the man hovering over him.

"Wanna try?"

"Another night perhaps," he offered. "Are you ready to hunt?"

Harry's reply was to jump to his feet and run towards the trees, quickly disappearing. The Dark Lord quickly mounted his horse and gave chase. He didn't have to go in far before he found Harry, now in a tree and looking out into the shadows of the quickly darkening forest.

"There's a lot here to choose from," he said. The Dark Lord could make out nothing in the oncoming gloom, but he believed him. "What should we hunt?"

"It is your choice. What do you think would please the Moon the most?"

"The most?" There was smirk that he could just hear there. "That would be you. You would be most worthy prey, GodEater."

"I'm flattered," he said, adopting the same ironic tone, although he kept track of Harry's hold on his bow.

"But I bet you taste awful."

Voldemort stifled a laugh so as not to scare away the game, and led his mount deeper into the trees while Harry followed after. They passed the night as neither of them had before. Both had known the role of hunter in their lives, Harry amongst the werewolves and Voldemort amongst his Death Eaters, but never with each other. Theirs was a dynamic that had no precedent, and yet formed into a natural harmony the same way their magic had over time. They did not speak and aside from a few basic hand gestures, required little else to communicate their intentions.

With his superior night vision, Harry climbed the trees or scouted ahead in search of prey, and once spotted, pointed it out to Voldemort who moved into position as silently as possible (which was very silently after a few simple spells on his horse) and then herded it back towards Harry, who would then shoot at it when it came in range. They tried this maneuver three times, adjusting their technique each attempt, before succeeded in killing a young buck on the third try.

Successful at last, they gloated; each claiming themselves the better hunter of the two, and Voldemort laughed until he cried when Harry narrated the entire hunt in ballad form and sang it to the Moon. Already, the Dark Lord knew Rhiannon was pleased with her wayward son, for nothing short of divine inspiration could have created such song, no matter how nonsensical, so promptly. Yet form still needed to be upheld, and they took their offering to the altar that had been prepared and paid their respects in blood and prayer.

It was only a few hours until dawn, and though the night had been long and they were both sweaty and covered in blood, neither felt like

ending it. They wandered the grounds, Harry running and climbing everywhere he could like a mad child, tossing riddles and poetic madness back at his companion, as he followed leisurely behind on horseback. It was only a few hours until dawn, and the moon was hovering just above the horizon when they finally came to rest at a large oak tree not far from the road leading to the front entrance of the estate. The moon-maddened young wizard still had a bit of energy left, and climbed part of the way up, slithering about like a snake or a faerie might around each limb.

"This is a wonderful tree," he sighed, resting his cheek to the roughened bark. "They used to make love under her and their children played amongst her branches. The plague took them all and now they play amongst her roots, and she loves them like a mother. Her name is Pasephola. She's scared of you."

"Dryads usually are," the Dark Lord agreed. "Tell her I mean no harm."

"Are you telling the truth? I've seen you take dryads captive before," he pointed out, recalling in a distant foggy memory when he had been small and still frightened of this man...devil... god.

"If you she stops seducing you, yes. I understand you're a teenager, but you really should set standards somewhere closer to your own species, Harry."

"You're just jealous," he chuckled, but sat up so that his faced no longer rested against the tree. He thought he heard a sigh if disappointment, but maybe it was the wind.

From his vantage point, he suddenly caught sight of a light on the road. He called down to Voldemort about it.

"It's probably Lucius," he said. "He must be returning home early so that he can speak with me before I leave tomorrow."

An elegant black car passed by them on the way to the mansion, the beam of its headlights falling short of their position in the oak tree.

"Do you think he saw us?"

"The moon is low and we are shaded beneath the tree. It is unlikely."

"Let's go give him a scare!"

"Shall I write that as your epitaph?"

Harry ignored him and jumped down from the tree, landing like a cat and slinking off into the shadows. Voldemort shook his head, and moved his horse towards the front entrance without attempting to conceal himself. It was best if he reached Lucius before Harry, or else there really might be an accident.

He canceled the silencing charms he had placed on his horse for the hunt, so that his general could hear him as he approached. Even without being subtle, it wasn't until Lucius stepped out of his car that he noticed him and gave a sudden start.

"My Lord?" he said, nervously, no doubt baffled and unnerved to see the man riding alone in the darkness. Chances are he looked quite sinister, Voldemort realized, trying not to be amused at the thought.

"Yes, Lucius?"

"Why are you out riding in the dark?" It was a somewhat impertinent question, but he would let it slide because it was very late and his friend was likely tired.

"Keeping Harry company," he explained.

"Harry?"

"Yes?"

Lucius spun around again to find a pair of glowing green eyes and a leering grin standing a handful of inches from his face. He gave a frightened yelp and stumbled backwards. If the car hadn't been to his back, he likely would have stumbled into an undignified heap. His

wand was in his hand a split instant later, but Harry had already fallen to the ground, howling with laughter.

"Oh, you should have seen your face!"

The Malfoy patriarch stared down at the little demon who had dared to sneak up on him, shocked and mortified and still a little shaken. Even from here he could see the boy's naked limbs writhing about and his eyes glowing like lanterns, making his rather inappropriate good humor unsettling. Suddenly, the boy leaped to his feet, making him flinch back a second time before he caught himself and straightened. It made no difference. Harry had already lost interest in him.

"That was hilarious! I'm going to go scare Draco!"

Lucius could only watch helplessly as the little monster ran inside of his home to track down and terrorize his son. While he was standing there, Voldemort dismounted and came to stand beside him.

"Don't worry, he's harmless. Like a very happy, somewhat obnoxious drunk," Voldemort lied, easily. There was no point in trying to explain his protégé's lunacy was both divine and potentially dangerous. "Come morning he won't even remember any of this."

Lucius was aware of Harry's 'moon madness' of course. Draco had given him a rather simple explanation of it and Severus had expounded upon it as a great aggravation (which applied to just about everything when it came to his ward), but neither had mentioned how... eerie it was.

"Is it always like that?" he found himself asking.

"No," Voldemort admitted, but didn't elaborate. "I hope he didn't frighten you too badly. I'm told others find his appearance quite unnerving during the full moon."

"No, of course not. He just... startled me."

"He does have a habit of doing that. It is fortunate you stayed your hand from cursing him out of 'surprise'. I know you have a finely tuned killer's instinct, and I should hate to have been forced to punish you for it."

Lucius was looking uncertain yet again. Good. The Dark Lord rarely had a need to frighten his right-hand man, but this seemed as good a time as any to set some boundaries that had not been so clearly laid before.

"Harry told me about your offer."

"... You object?"

"No, my friend, I do not, but I do not endorse it either. If you wish to play this game with Harry, so be it, but understand I will not assist you and if it becomes blatantly detrimental to either of you, I will call it off and settle the matter as I see fit. Is that understood?"

Lucius nodded respectfully, although Voldemort could see his displeasure. He must have believed he would side with him with moving Harry into the general's sphere of influence, and that wasn't unreasonable. They had discussed the idea of shifting the young Gryffindor into a military career after he graduated Hogwarts, and he had been supportive of his man's interest in pursuing Harry's company. Much of their talk about this had been waylaid after the traumatic events in Germany and the discovery of Harry's potentially crippling anxiety and stress issues, but with the display of confidence and skill at York no doubt he thought Voldemort would once again be as receptive to the idea as he had been before.

In a way he was, but more significantly, he thought allowing Harry find his own path might be even more rewarding. He was coming to accept he could not truly control where his protégé went in life, fate had its own plans for him, but he could learn to appreciate the outcome as he had this night. The Mother Goddess had not allowed anything to happen that he could not find benefit from. Even Harry's infuriating reconstruction of his soul was something he was slowly coming to acknowledge as beneficial.

He couldn't remember a day where he'd had as much fun as he had tonight. He didn't know if such a day existed, or if it had, whether he had been whole enough to treasure it properly.

He was roused from his thoughts, by a blood curdling scream issuing from inside the mansion.

"It would seem Harry found Draco," he noted idly, trying not to smile as Lucius' darkening expression.

Oh, yes, this was definitely a night to treasure.

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~ Author's Note~

An 'animus' is the product of animancy. In this case, the paper birds are the animus, but there are wide variety of different animus that can be created through different animancy spells and applications.

Carrigan and Bobby look very much alike. They may or may not be twins, I haven't decided. It's not really relevant to the plot either way. For those who forgot, yes I did mention that Bobby is Carrigan's reincarnated brother.

3. Robert didn't know that Hermione was Harry's best friend until this point. He has really no idea how much Harry's life intersects with the Malfoy family.

4. Horses are one of the symbolic representations of Rhiannon.

Book VI

Chapter 7: Rebel

Albus stared down at the map of Europe, watching the movement of little colored dots shuffle around and fighting back the awed horror of what their movements represented. On a purely intellectual level, he could not help but admire the Tom's strategies and the unwavering discipline he exhibited in carrying them out. Tom had come a very long way from his days as an underworld tyrant.

"There's rumors the Dark Lord is coming to Poland in person to sign the treaty," one of the commanders said softly to another in the shadowed corners of the room. His hands were fidgeting around a cigarette he couldn't light. No one smoked or talked very loudly when their head general was obviously thinking.

"He'd be mad. We have spies and assassins all over Poland," another hissed, obviously irritated and wanting a cigarette himself.

"He is mad. He led the battle straight into Berlin surrounded by aurors. He does not fear death, he invites it to tea on Wednesdays," the commander laughed nervously.

The influx of yellow dots from Italy into England did not have the disruptive effect either Dumbledoreor Italy's forces had hoped for, and on the frontlines in Germany there was barely a twitch in the movement of the green pegs. They were not falling for the bait, though it must have cost them dearly. He tried to imagine for a few moments the damage the Italians inflicted and if he would recognize the cities they claimed to have laid waste to. The religious zeal of the Italian aurors was vaguely nauseating to think about, and he wondered if this war would not finally stamp the delusion of divine providence the government had been fostering since their successful defiance of Grindelwald. Certainly, their complete defeat in York shook their confidence, and while the Italian Minister of Magic claimed it was the work of the devil, it was hard to stare at the news photographs of Harry Potter and find the supposed evil lurking behind his tired eyes.

"You know they started school again in Dresden and Chemnitz? The citizen resistance's almost stopped there. I wonder if it's the attempt at normalcy that did it or if the kids are hostages."

"Depends if it's mandatory or not. The kids are the only ones left with wands, so keeping an eye on them and keeping them obedient has to be a priority."

"It'd make my father sick to see kids getting intentionally dragged into this. Whole thing started with the tournament thing. Never should have gone down like that. This war might have been inevitable, but it never should have started that way."

Dumbledore kept a photograph of Harry where ever he went, whatever secret safe house the German Aurors can find and move him to on short notice. Whenever he feels particularly tired and depressed, he took it out and stared at it for a few minutes and it made him feel better. It didn't make much sense to anyone else, and more than likely some of them thought it was downright creepy, but the image of Lily and James' child staring back at him set his mind whirling with possibilities. He thought of the prophecy, and knows it can't apply to Harry but the connections won't break free, and his thoughts circled constantly around a single thought.

This boy has affected the course of the war more than any other individual save Voldemort himself.

"You hear about York?"

"Who hasn't heard about York?"

"Some professor in Stuttgart says he figured out how to replicate the Potter Bird Spell. He says it's 'old' magic."

"Old magic. Dark magic. I don't care. I don't want it in our schools. It's unnatural," the commander muttered, and stuck the cigarette in his mouth and chewed at the end.

"That boy is unnatural."

The prophecy didn't fit at first, second, or third glance, but perhaps he just wasn't seeing all the pieces. Maybe he's interpreting it all wrong. He can't make it fit, but he's positive it relates to Harry some how and that gives him hope.

And he needs hope. He just received word Romania and Transylvania had ratified a treaty with the Dark Lord and Poland was very close to doing the same. Germany's own potential allies in Austria, Hungary, and Bulgaria were hesitant to be associated with the Italians and their murderous policy against civilians and Dumbledore couldn't blame them. He couldn't afford their stalling either though.

He's running out of time and he knew it. This was not like the previous war, fought in the shadows with intelligence and cunning and discretion. This war was public, political, and brutally explicit with heavy arms and heavy losses. Dumbledore knew he was wasting his energy beating the shell of a great viperous beast with no hope of breaking it open and no way to get inside. There was no fighting for victory as things stood now, only for time.

"Gentlemen," he said at last, looking up from the study of his map to the two aurors. They looked unduly nervous at being addressed directly. He didn't think he was a very scary looking man, but who knew these days? "It would be safe to assume the Dark Lord is going to use his new allies to strengthen his hold on the Eastern front and push his way west. I will need to speak with the other commanders about preparing for their advance. Please arrange a meeting as quickly as possible."

The commanders each gave him a sharp salute and went to do his bidding. Once they were out of sight, he summoned Tonks who appeared within moments dressed in civilian robes. Her expression was fierce, but she waited patiently for her instructions.

"I want you in France. A treaty is almost inevitable there now, and I want our people there to stall their involvement in the fighting for as long as possible. Try to be subtle for as long as you can."

She nodded sharply and turned to leave.

"And Nymphadora..."

She paused, reluctantly.

"Be safe."

Her reply was the sharp snap of the door behind her as she left.

~ Page Break~

"Harry, it's wonderful to see you! Your timing is perfect," Ira greeted as he entered the cottage. They had apparently arrived at approximately the same time, and Snape glanced back at him blandly as he started carrying their luggage up the stairs to their bedroom. Harry gave him an equally unimpressed look, but secretly he was glad to see him again. In small doses, he was tolerable company.

If Snape had gained a little color since the Gryffindor had last seen him, Ira looked like a completely different person. Her skin was several shades darker, her hair several shades lighter and she had clearly been shopping in Parisian boutiques. She didn't have the foxy flair Vesper Larousse had had, but there was a definite Parisian chic to her new hair style and she smelled sweetly of fine perfume. She was radiating enough positive magic he was amazed flowers weren't springing up beneath her feet as she walked. Ira gave him an enormous hug, which was sort of nice and really embarrassing at the same time. He was glad Snape was upstairs at least.

"I've got souvenirs for later. I know you've been to Paris already, but I don't think you've ever brought anything back."

"I rarely got off of the palace grounds, and they generally frown on visitors wandering off with all their shiny baubles," he admitted. "Let me put my stuff away and you can tell me about Paris."

By the time he was done putting his things away and sorting through his list of things he was going to have to start working on, Ira was in the process of making dinner, insisting that both Severus and she were stuck in Parisian time and starving. His souvenir turned out to

be a tea set of all things, made elegantly of black porcelain and trimmed in gold.

"The pot is charmed to heat the water automatically, so you don't have bother heating the kettle. I noticed you've developed a fondness for making your own tea," she said, and he very nearly choked. He seriously hoped Snape didn't suspect anything suspicious from his new 'hobby'. It wouldn't take much for the potions master to figure out what he was doing if he put his mind to it.

His paranoia proved unfounded and an hour later Snape was sitting at the dinner table with them, discussing nothing more interesting than their schedule. The new headmaster would be in and out throughout the summer preparing the castle for the upcoming school year and Ira had a few projects of her own to help keep her busy. Harry kept his own plans to himself, aside from the occasional mention of Dueling tournaments and visits to the werewolf colony, which he would have had to inform them of eventually anyway.

Dinner passed in quiet, domestic tranquility.

Ira yawned.

"Why don't you take a nap, my dear," Snape suggested. "We'll clean up here."

Harry refrained from pointing out that 'we' meant him.

"Thank you, Severus. I am a bit tired."

Once she had retired to her room, something in the atmosphere shifted and the young Gryffidnor stiffened before the man even turned to look at him. Snape regarded him with cool expectation, tapping his long spidery fingers on the table. Harry was instantly on guard.

"There are going to be a few new house rules, Potter. An acknowledgment of our change of status if you will. Me as a husband and you as... homicidal fiend in the making."

Harry gave a bland look at his new 'status'.

"Ira is now the lady of the house, and you will respect her as you would me. If you don't, I will take it very personally," he said, his even tone laced with warning. "This is particularly true when out in public. I know you think yourself very important, but even you have those you must answer to and she is one of them. If she asks you to do something, do it. None of your sarcasm or backtalk."

"I respect her just fine without your input," he snapped, but Snape ignored him and continued.

"For safety reasons, all of your spell books are to be placed in the study, including your school and library books, unless you are using them. You are at a level where experimentation with magic is common, and I refuse to be caught unaware, particularly with your propensity towards more powerful spells."

Harry instantly bristled at the idea. It was an incredible breach of privacy and one he had never had to suffer through before. It certainly didn't help that there was a great deal he didn't want to share with the man, particularly his plans to help get Hermione out of her betrothal and his animagus lessons.

"Finally, you are to inform either Ira or myself of your comings and going over the summer. I don't care if you're going to visit the Malfoy estate or stepping out to grab the post, you will tell us of where you're going and when we should expect you back. Don't even think about arguing with me about this," he snapped when he saw his charge rallying a protest.

Harry snapped his mouth shut, anger and frustration burning in his eyes.

"That is all I have... for the moment. How was your visit with the Malfoys?" he asked idly, as if he hadn't just turned the Gryffindor's home into a prison in which he was the warden.

"It was fantastic," he hissed, and almost went off into a rant but stopped himself. He wasn't exactly pleased with his visit for a lot of reasons but he was even less pleased with Snape and had no

intention of forgetting one source of anger for another. Instead, he stood up and stalked towards the door. "I am going for a walk."

He grabbed the knob, but it stuck. He fiddled with the lock, but still it wouldn't open. Frustrated, he drew his wand, only to have Snape sigh in an irritating, put upon fashion.

"You haven't told me when you intend to be back. It won't open until you do."

"Aaargh! God, you're annoying!" he shouted. "I'll be back when I don't feel like throttling you!"

Amazingly, the knob twisted under his grip and he stumbled through as it opened. Seriously, he thought in disbelief, that counts? Of course, it wasn't the end of it and Snape called after him.

"Oh, and curfew is at eight. If you come back after that you won't be able to get inside unless I let you in myself, and don't think I won't let you sleep out in the garden."

"You suck!" he called back as he stomped away, knowing it was one of the worst dramatic exits ever and feeling like an idiot. He didn't look back as the door swung shut behind him, but he could imagine Snape smiling smugly over the entire thing. At least he had gotten out of doing the dishes he tried to console himself, rather unsuccessfully.

He had somewhat more success consoling himself by thinking up insults to lob at his guardian the next time he saw him, and then further distracting himself by trying to think of ways to get around putting all his books in the study. Maybe if he kept the books outside the house? Perhaps he could find the counter charm. His thoughts busily plotting against Snape, he failed to notice he was not alone on the road until someone called out to him. He gave a terrible start and spun around with his wand drawn.

Robert and Kyle both jumped back, equally as surprised as he had been.

"Merlin, you're fast!" Kyle blurted out, looking from the wand to Harry's stunned expression. "I knew you had a reputation as a duelist, but my goodness!"

"What are you doing here?" he asked sharply. Robert looked down in embarrassment. As well he should, Harry thought darkly.

"Looking for you, obviously," Kyle said, unperturbed, and dragged his husband after Harry. "We knew you were coming home today, so we were hoping to catch you on the road. This works just as well. How are you, Harry?"

"Not that great to be quite honest."

He considered walking back into the garden and ignoring them both, but honestly he was mad at Robert, not Kyle, and if they were both here he didn't know how to be rude to one and not the other.

"Yes, we heard about York... and your friend, Hermione. That's actually why I'm here. Can we buy you a butter beer?"

Again, he considered declining. He was hard pressed at the moment not to punch Robert in the nose. After a dark look at the man, however, he finally nodded and they changed directions and headed back towards town.

It was Sunday, and everyone around the town was still dressed in their church robes and dresses. Harry was rather plainly dressed in comparison, but villagers tipped their hats or curtsied with a respectful 'good day, Mr. Potter' or 'welcome back, sir' as they passed. The pub owner greeted them himself at the door and ushered him to a private booth immediately, then got them each with a round of butter beer.

"I've got a sister and nephew in York, lad. This ones on the house," the man said with a wink.

Harry smiled and nodded politely, smothering his foul mood long enough for him to disappear before his expression soured.

"Oh, don't give us that look, Harry," Kyle chided, playfully. "We've come to make amends. Robert isn't any happier about this situation with Ms. Granger than you are. It's absolutely distasteful."

Soothed somewhat, the Gryffidnor allowed his expression to become more neutral.

"First, I want an explanation. From you," he said, staring pointedly at Robert, who was fidgeting with his wedding ring. "Why in the world did you get involved with this in the first place? I thought better of you, especially as a father of two girls of your own."

The man grimaced, but managed to look him in the eye.

"That isn't fair. I didn't intend to get sucked into this... unpleasant business. I was hired to settle a civil suit. I can't talk about it, since its client privilege, but it certainly hadn't started out as ... this! I never would have taken the case if I had known."

"Why not quit?"

Robert snorted and rolled his eyes.

"Quit? On Lucius Malfoy? That's career suicide, and I can't afford to be a righteous martyr these days. I've got two mortgages and a family to feed, and times aren't cheap. Besides, it wouldn't make a wit of difference. He would just hire another lawyer, one even less scrupulous than I."

Harry's ire towards the man settled. He supposed he could understand. Lucius had backed him into a corner, and Robert had more to worry about than just himself. That bastard. Of course, it also meant that whatever he did to help Hermione, he would have to be careful to make sure the Reichers were not caught in the backlash. He sighed and leaned back in seat. Kyle reached across the table and patted his hand sympathetically.

"Don't be glum, lad. We didn't come empty handed."

Robert nodded, and moved out of the booth. "I'm going to go buy the Sunday post. I'll be back in about fifteen minutes."

Confused, Harry watched him disappear out the door... right past the pile of news papers stacked beside the door. Kyle just smiled.

"Don't worry. He can't involve himself in this conversation because of his position as Malfoy's lawyer, but I... well, let's just say legal aids have considerably more leeway."

Immediately, Harry perked up. Had Kyle found some legal maneuver that could help Hermione?

"Now, I want you to know I'll help you in any legal way I can. That's somewhat limiting, but you're clever and you have resources that neither of us do, so perhaps that will be enough. Right now, the only I can offer you is options, and once you and your friend decide on which one you want, we'll see what I can do."

Harry nodded. "Any help we could get right now would be appreciated."

"Alright, as I figure it you have four ways of getting your friend out of this wedding. The first, and least likely, is to have Lord Malfoy call it off himself. Fat chance."

Not as fat as Kyle thought. Harry did have that bargain with the wizard after all, but he wanted that to remain a last resort.

"What about Lady Malfoy? Could she call it off?"

There was a slightly better chance he could convince Hermione's foster mother. The woman didn't really like him much, but she did seem to have an honest affection for her foster daughter. The fact that she had agreed to the wedding in the first place, however, suggested something wasn't quite right with her.

"No, she couldn't. If Hermione were her biological daughter, she would have more say, but adoptions fall under the authority of the head of the family. The whole issue is a bit convoluted, but that's law."

The second option, of course, is to have Crouch call off the wedding, but the only way I can see that happening is if the debt he has with Lord Malfoy were to suddenly absolve itself. Highly unlikely. The third option is for Hermione to be legally emancipated and then call off the engagement herself more than thirty days prior to the wedding date. Any time after that, and she'll be financially responsible for expenses rendered unless he's caught in violation of the betrothal... cheating or assault are the most common examples."

"What if he's caught cheating or assaults her before she's emancipated?"

He thought he (or rather the twins) might be able to set something up to that effect if necessary, preferably the cheating over the assault.

"Entirely up to Malfoy Sr., unless it is proven that she is in imminent danger from her fiancée and he demonstrates reckless disregard for this fact. That's hard to prove unless Crouch leaves evidence. He has a reputation for violence, but since he's never been convicted so I doubt he's that careless. Still something to keep in mind, however."

"And the fourth option?"

"Well... honestly, the fourth option is the riskiest, and I wouldn't even suggest it except the situation already seems... dire," Kyle said, looking vaguely disturbed. "According to wizarding law, a marriage requires a magical ritual to establish the union as legitimate so both parties and a licensed marriage practitioner, usually the priest, has to be present. If she's not at the ceremony, she can't legally be married in absentee."

Well, that was definitely a noteworthy option, despite what Kyle seemed to think. Not exactly subtle, but they weren't Slytherins. They could live with that.

"So what's the problem there?" he asked.

"For one, she'll have a lot of very angry people after her. Running away would be an insult not only to Crouch and all his relatives, but the Malfoys as well. She's already betrothed, so that's a contract unto

itself, meaning she could potentially be sued or even jailed for fraud, especially if it's obvious she ran off against her family patriarch's will. Then there is the simple fact that if she is caught, she could still be forced to marry Crouch anyway if he doesn't call it off. The only way Hermione could win in this scenario is if she disappeared completely and forever. Or was pardoned by Lord Voldemort, of course. I suppose that actually makes him a fifth option. He can do pretty much anything he damn well pleases, including call off the marriage."

"I tried that already," he admitted. "He won't interfere with Malfoy's familial affairs, but he promised not to get in my way either."

Kyle just blinked at him.

"I am trying to imagine all these conversations you have with that man, and I just... can't. It's like trying to imagine a conversation between Jesus and Merlin."

"That's probably sacrilegious in at least a dozen different religions so I think you should stop now."

"Stopping."

Robert returned shortly after, grumbling that Wizing Weekly hadn't been the since their London office shut down, and they continued their visit on a much more congenial note. Soon, however, they both had to head home to the girls, and after setting up a day for Harry to come and visit them, they parted ways. It was still a few hours before eight, so Harry walked the surrounding fields of the village, thinking of what Kyle had told him, about his godfathers and the animagus lessons, and about his latest battle of wits and wills with Snape.

When it was finally time to head home, he had thought all he wanted to about those issues and moved on to others, like what if anything he should do with his growing celebrity status, the next Dueling competition in Kent, the war, and what Voldemort was doing at the moment.

~ Page Break~

There was no parade or cheers from an adoring crowd to greet Tom as he stepped off the train and on to the platform, but he nevertheless felt triumphant in his return to England. Bristol was transformed from a minor wizarding city into a military metropolis, witches and wizards were the picture of industrious dignity, moving purposefully through the streets in immaculate uniforms and stern expressions. Even those personnel who were obviously on break, maintained an air of pride and grace that the uniform commanded.

It was certainly an improvement over the frontlines, where you were lucky if you had the time to change your uniform after a week let alone get it cleaned, and everyone was running and shouting at one another in semi-hysterical military precision. Most of his squad was still back in Chemnitz, brutally wiping out resistance and restoring the city with a veneer of order. He had been the first commander to reopen the local schools as a tactical maneuver, and the resulting decrease in local resistance had pushed the name 'Stratus' through the ranks.

Which was why he was back in England, preparing to participate in the campaign to retake London and thoroughly humiliate the Italians in the process. He suspected he would thoroughly enjoy himself.

Headquarters was a hive of activity as Intelligence officers, aids, administrators, bureaucrats, and soldiers gathered, sorted, and moved information and orders through the military chain of command and back again in the daily shuffle of war behind the battle lines. He made it a point not to duck and dodge everyone else, but forced them to move around him, to acknowledge him, to remember him even if it was only as an obstacle.

Recognition was the lynchpin of ambition after all.

He made his way to the top floor without asking for direction, stopping only where security check points demanded, until he found himself in a small lounge with the military aid sitting behind the desk and screening incoming documents. The aid acknowledged him with a curt salute, and tossed a red marble and a green and white marble into what looked like a fish bowl. The red marble turned orange and the other black.

"It should only be about ten minutes," the aid said politely, and then hurriedly when back to work. Sure enough, ten minutes later, a Sentinel marched out of the office with an expression that promised murder and went straight passed him and into the hall. The aid didn't even look up. "He'll see you now."

Now came the important part. He could impress the peons and pawns all he liked, but if he could not impress this wizard he wasn't going to be able to move his plans forward within the time frame he had set. He spared a glance over his robe, making sure it was spotless and the medals were all perfectly aligned. Straightening, he marched straight into the office and up to the desk of the man whose command he would be 'serving' under directly for the duration of the London operation.

He saluted the man smartly.

"General Malfoy, Commander Stratus reporting for duty, sir."

~ Page Break~

"Ugh! That just makes me want to scream!"

"I think you already are, luv. People are starting to stare," Clyde warned Natalie, gesturing for her to quiet down. Indeed, the entire book store seemed to be turned to their little group, practically leaning in to catch what they were saying.

"That's just because Harry's here." She wrapped an arm around the Gryffidnor's shoulder, and turned gestured to the occupants of the store. "This one's ours, get your own!"

"Natalie! Honestly!" Hermione protested, but Harry was already laughing. A year ago this might have had him ducking his head in embarrassment, but his confidence had grown considerably. He supposed after fighting and winning an entire battle almost completely on his own, a little public scrutiny wasn't anything to be nervous about. Draco on the other hand was trying to hide behind his sister from the brazenness that was Natalie.

"Don't honestly me, Hermione. I'm not doing anything shameful. It's your foster parents who should be ashamed. This whole marriage business. I mean you're not even graduated yet and they want you going off to pop out some kids with a guy whose like what... twenty, twenty-five years older than you? It's completely disgusting, and don't you dare try to defend them, Draco. You'll be barfing slugs for a month!"

Wisely, the Malfoy heir shut his mouth, and pretended to go back to scanning the shelves for his books and Ginny bit her lip to keep from laughing. It was late July now, earlier than they usually went school shopping, but Snape had warned them that school supplies were going to be harder to come by with the major printing presses in London having shut down and basic potion supplies being snatched up by charities and hospitals. Ginny's mother visited several different markets across England to sell her farm's produce and knew where they could find just about anything.

They had been to Oxford, Kent, and Dragons Bow (a wizarding village in Southern Scotland) under the watchful eye of Kingsley, whose rather conspicuous uniform served to keep the overly curious away as well as the potentially dangerous. At the moment, the Sentinel was at the front of the store scanning the street for potential danger, and not paying much attention to them. Harry, for one, was very glad for the man's presence, because if it wasn't him then one of their parents would have had to escort them and more than likely would have paid closer attention to what they were doing rather than what everyone else was.

"I agree with you," Hermione sighed, "You know I do, and I'm not going to take it lying down." She shook her head. "If I could just make Narcissa understand that... I don't know. Maybe it wouldn't even make a difference, but I'd feel better if she did. I honestly thinks she believes this is all for the best."

Ginny patted her on the shoulder comfortingly. "I know. Moms can be really weird like that. They love you, but they don't really understand you most of the time."

"Well, maybe if you all weren't so half-assed about it, she'd take you seriously," Natalie said, unsympathetic. "In fact, I think we should make it clear tonight exactly how much you're against this wedding. Do it right, and Crouch might just call it off himself."

Immediately, she had all of their attention. Hermione, ever pragmatic, threw up a small silencing charm so no one else around them could hear their conversation, even Kingsley who had actually glanced over at them.

"What did you have in mind?" he asked.

"My first suggestion is that Hermione get a lover." Once everyone looked suitably scandalized by the suggestion, she offered her real suggestion. "But since you're a prude, I think a sullied reputation will work just as well. I'll help. It'll be fun!"

She looked disturbingly pleased with the idea. She was the only one. Harry, however, was used to her quirky humor and her subtle mind and decided to hear her out.

"And what would this involve exactly?"

Seeing she had at least one bite, she grinned. "It's simple. We'll all go out to a bar or some clubs or some kickass party, get down with our bad selves, take some incriminating photos of Hermione, send them off to Crouch anonymously, and *snap* he'll call off the wedding himself. Works every time."

"Every time?" Hermione asked, skeptical.

"Alright, it worked for mummy. And that girl in The Witching Hour, although she technically didn't-

"Okay."

They all turned to Hermione. Her expression was fierce, resolved, and perhaps even a little bit excited.

"I doubt it will work," she said, "But I'm willing to try. Even if it fails, at least Narcissa will know I'm being serious."

Natalie actually clapped and threw her arms around Hermione, perhaps the very first genuine and enthusiastically friendly gesture she had ever given the other girl in their lives. No one else looked as certain, but Harry thought as far as scheming went this was fairly tame. Like Hermione, he didn't think it would work either, not with Lucius holding that lawsuit over Crouch's head, but that didn't mean they couldn't aggravate their enemies and have a little fun in the mean time.

"I'm in. Someone has to watch your backs if we're going to do this."

"Very true," Natalie said, looking pointedly at Draco. "We're going to need protection. Unless you think you're not up to it?"

Immediately, the young Malfoy's uncertainty transformed into haughtiness.

"I'm game, if you are. Yeilson bragged himself blue in the face last year about these supposed 'raves' he snuck into. If that simpleton can manage it, I'm certain we can exceed at it."

Natalie was practically vibrating with maniacal glee. She turned to Ginny and Clyde, and lifted a single brow as if in challenge. Clyde looked more than eager, but their redheaded friend didn't look so enthused.

"My mum would kill me..." she said.

"Of course she would," Natalie agreed, "If she found out. Which is why you're going to tell her you're spending the night at my house. Which you are, since we'll both probably be too drunk too."

"Oh my god, we're drinking?"

"Absolutely! We're all going to crazy town! Aren't we, Harry?"

He grinned.

"I've partied with werewolves. I don't know if wizards could come up with anything to compare."

"I'll take that as a challenge!"

They hurried through the rest of their shopping, conspiring on their plans for that night. Ginny had rather reluctantly been pulled in, but when Harry offered her an out, she stubbornly refused. This was, after all, an adventure that they were all sharing together and she wanted to be a part of that. Harry too wanted a bit of adventure... the normal kind that teenagers were supposed to have, and if that involved a little rebellion against Snape's Gestapo routine then all the better.

They each separated and returned home to make their subsequent stories to their parents and guardians, each explaining they were going to spend the night at a friend's (thank Merlin Snape was in his lab and Harry only had to lie to Ira or else the whole plan would have been over before it began). Kingsley had already left, but since he had said he was flooing directly to Clyde's house, there hadn't really been any need for an escort, and after grabbing a few things to make his ruse convincing he left without obstacle. He met up with everyone at Natalie's, the last to arrive.

"Alright," Natalie began, addressing everyone now gathered in her living room. It was a far cry from what Harry was expecting, having become used to Natalie's complete ease in the most luxuriant of environments, but the eclectic collection of Bohemian art and exotic furniture was somehow indescribably Natalie, mysterious, colorful, and bold. "My mums are off on a couples retreat for the weekend, so we won't be bothered. My friend Mary is part of band and knows all the best party scenes and she's going to show us the ropes in exchange for free cover charge and drinks. You all remembered your dosh?"

They all nodded, except for Ginny who looked rather embarrassed. Harry leaned in next to her.

"Don't worry about it. I need some new clothes, so we'll call this an advance, okay?"

She sighed in relief and nodded. He wasn't lying, he did want her to make him some more clothes, but even if he hadn't he would have covered for her. While he was by no means rich, he was making an adult's salary as an ambassador and with neither rent or food expenses he had plenty to spare.

"Good," their host continued. "She'll be here in a few minutes. We'll pick out where we want to go first, then we'll get some clothes, come back here to get ready, then head out. When we're done, we'll all crash here. Any questions?"

Everyone had a hundred questions, but they had to wait for Mary to answer them. Mary was a twenty year old university student, taking the summer off to tour with her band Baskerville Coven, to raise money for refugees in Ireland, and had met Natalie while volunteering at Dunnan Hill. They had hit it off immediately, and kept in touch.

"Hey, lil' sista," Mary greeted, hugging the smaller blond, careful not to get her any of her dozen rings or over sized hoop earrings stuck in her hair. She was like no one Harry had ever seen, with luscious violet robes cut above her knees and leather boots that laced up even higher than that. Her black and violet streaked hair was a study in designed chaos, spiked into tufts that flew in every direction and yet somehow remained aesthetically appealing. When she smiled at all of them, her top lip black and the bottom a wine red, she radiated dark sexuality. "So this is them. I've got my work cut out for me then, but I think I can swing it..."

"Don't let the little school boy and school girl expressions fool you. They're a wild bunch," Natalie assured.

Mary's eyes quickly settled on Harry. She smirked. He smirked back.

"I bet."

~ Page Break~

"Stop fidgeting, you look great!" Harry laughed as Ginny tried to pull her skirt down another inch for the thousandth time.

"My mom is going to send me to a convent if she find out about this!" she whined, her cherry painted lips sticking out in a pout. He just grinned and stuck his arm around her shoulder. She turned bright red at his closeness, but did stop fidgeting. It was nine and just entering true night, the air still warm and inviting, and Harry couldn't deny he was feeling good. For the first time in a month, Hermione was laughing and smiling, and everyone was giddy as they had been for their first day at Hogwarts.

Only sexier.

Yes, there was definitely a air of sexual confidence about them that wasn't present in their eleven year old selves. Harry blamed it on the leather, which Mary had insured there was copious amounts of, and the firm press of it against the contours of their bodies. He had in fact, worn leather occasionally at the werewolf colony, but out in the 'civilized' world it felt like the mark of a predator. Certainly, they didn't look or feel like 'school boys and school girls'.

"You all look great!" Mary assured them, "But remember it's not just about looks. It's about attitude. You got to think and act like you belong here. It don't matter if you're twelve, twenty-one, or two-hundred and one, if you got the confidence then you're in. Got that?"

"Loud and clear, luv," Draco drawled in an accent no one had ever heard him use, with a wicked grin to match. It startled a laugh right out of Natalie and Hermione.

"Yes, yes! Just like that! Alright, the club is just around the corner. Get your game faces on, and what ever you do, don't look desperate. Blood in the water, it is."

"I think I'm going to vomit," Ginny muttered under breath.

"Well, at least you don't look desperate, except perhaps to get away," he offered as they brought up the back of their party. Immediately upon turning the corner, they found the line to their club, Djinn, and it

stretched back for almost another block. A large crowd of young witches and wizards idled on the sidewalk, smoking cigarettes and making conversation. Harry immediately felt his enthusiasm wane. Lines were the very opposite of fun in his opinion.

"Don't fret, I know the bouncer," Mary assured them, "But I'm still going to need your help, Harry, Draco."

The two boys glanced at each other uncertainly, but she had quickly grabbed hold of both their sleeves and dragged straight to the entrance, earning her some very nasty looks from those still waiting. There were two bouncers at the door, one of them a large man who reminded Harry a bit of Kingsley only not as smart and a smaller, shrewd man with lazy dark eyes.

"Looky, looky what I brought you Johnny-boy! The finest young meat in Britain, and as fresh as it comes!" Mary said, wrapping her arms around either boy's necks and grinning like a loon. The shrewd man, 'Johnny-boy', took a step closer.

"Well, if it ain't Contrary Mary, herself. What you on about? Ain't these boys a bit young...." his admonishment trailed off as he got a better look at them. Draco managed to collect himself enough to smirk coolly back him. Harry just stared back evenly, somewhat warily. "...Aren't these..."

"Yep. Celebrity status a solid 9.8 between the two of them. And they're both single."

The man seemed to consider for a moment, and Harry was certain they were going to be turned away. If they were recognized, then it should have been obvious that they were way too young to there. Surprisingly, however, Johnny-boy simply nodded and gestured to the large bouncer to let them inside.

"Alright, haul your asses in here. Your drinks are free if you stay for more than two hours. I'll let the boss know you're here," he said.

Mary waved to the others to follow and together they hurried on inside to a dark hallway. Harry shook his head.

"What just happened?" he asked.

"Oh, luv, you're so naïve it's adorable," she laughed and kissed him on the cheek. "That was good advertising. The heir of General Malfoy and the infamous Harold James Potter? You're both bloody famous! Of course they're going to let you and the entourage in."

"Entourage, eh?" Clyde said, not sounding particularly impressed with the position, but wasn't given time to complain as they reached the end of the hallway and set of large wooden doors opened.

Harry had never been in a wizarding dance club before, and part of him had always assumed it would be something like those clubs he saw on television when he was young; dark and seedy with scantily clad girls, a bar, and really loud music. About the only thing he had right was the really loud music. Djinn was like walking into a Persian palace built into a fairy hill, a mix of the most beautiful of both words, the familiar and the alien.

Chandeliers hung from the ceiling, containing not candles but brilliant bouquets of glowing yellow and white flowers interspersed with Chinese lamps. White tigers roamed between the tapestries of ancient forests and distant mountains, startling white peacocks into the upper balcony. Incense pots had been lit, and in the fragrant haze of smoke, figures danced in time to the throbbing beat of drums, guitars, and violins.

Along the walls were the large branches of trees growing straight from the carpet, piled with pillows and cushions for witches and wizards to lounge upon and tiny one legged tables stood holding their drinks in strangely shaped glasses and little bowls of alcohol soaked pieces of fruit. At the center, the crowds danced to the music, alone, in pairs, in groups, however, they wanted and with whomever they wanted. There was kissing and touching and flirting, entire conversation spoken in the language of the body. All of it in the warm, ambient glow of the flowering chandeliers.

For several long moments, all they could do was stare.

"We're definitely going to have get ourselves some drinks first!" Mary said knowingly, taking in their rather flabbergasted expressions. "Come on, ducklings!"

They found themselves a booth of tree limbs and had barely sat down for a moment when a waitress, dressed entirely in gold from her skimpy robes to her lipstick, presented them with a round of drinks in dark blue glasses shaped like sea shells.

"Compliments of the owner," she tittered, and scampered away with a flirtatious wink. Natalie just rolled her eyes at her, and picked up a blue glass.

"To your night of rebellion," she toasted, and tossed it back. Her eyes shut tight for a moment and she gave a little shiver. "Ooohhh... you have to try that."

With a bit more caution, they did. At first it burned like acid, but a moment later it was as cold and refreshing as a snow fed stream. Harry could feel the magic buzz sliding down his throat and into his stomach where it settled into a calming pool. He definitely liked it.

For the first hour all they did was drink and laugh and try to get each other to finally brave the dance floor. The little glasses appeared and disappeared, always in different colors and shapes and always with something different. Harry settled into something a little stronger Mary called a Dragon's Bite, that quickly burned away the happy like pool from his first shot, while everyone else tried a variety of the smaller mixed drinks. Ginny, in particular, seemed to taken a shine to the fruity drinks and her earlier anxiety had soon melted away.

The resulting conversations were hilarious, or at least they certainly seemed that way to them.

"You're a god damn cunt, Natalie," Ginny accused, pointing her find at Clyde, who just laughed and pushed her finger over enough so that it was actually pointing at the right person. Natalie joined the game and moved her finger so it was pointing at Draco.

"Do you even know what that means?" Hermione asked, least drunk of them all but still tipsy enough not to be as scandalized as she normally would.

"Yes," she said resolutely, then frowned. "No. Yes..."

"Well, as long as you're sure," Harry said, and then slowly got to his feet.

"Where are you going?" Natalie whined.

"I..." he paused to let the moment of disorientation pass, "... am going to go dance. You're all welcome to join me... except for Clyde. He dances like a troll."

"Hey!"

He wandered away onto the dance floor and into a crowd, his body falling into the rhythm of the music. Dancing here was not unlike the dancing done at the werewolf colony, close and intimate and frenzied, more about energy than finesse. He wasn't in the group for long before he found himself pulled away by a giggling brunette, several years older than him.

"Are you really Harold Potter?" she asked, her dancing slightly off kilter from his own. "I wouldn't have figured you for a dancer. You always look so serious."

He just smiled, and when she put her hands on his shoulders he put his hands on her hips and just went with it. And before he knew it they were pulled apart and he found himself dancing with another girl, this one dark skinned with eyes like a wild cat. After that, he lost track. Sometimes he was dancing with one girl, sometimes with two, sometimes he wasn't sure his partner was a girl at all, and other times he found himself moving through the crowd looking for someone specific. All around him he could feel the magic of the crowd thrumming in time with the band, and that mixed with the alcohol left him feeling like he was caught in the mad throws of the full moon.

Mary was right. It was all about confidence, and he had hunted among those infinitely more savage and dangerous.

Eventually, he happened upon Ginny dancing with a group of girls, her flaming orange hair flying this way and that as she swung her head to the music. He pulled her away for a private dance, and she wrapped her arms around him and laughed.

"This is great! I'm never going to a convent."

"Of course not! You're going to grow up to take the fashion world by storm and go to wild parties every night!"

"Damn straight!"

Natalie found him next, slinking up to him and pulling him away from a curly haired blond with all the skill of a hunting panther. She didn't bother speaking, just kept him close so that he could feel the heat of her straight through his clothes. For almost half an hour they remained close, and no attempt to pull them apart succeeded, until they were both sweaty and breathing hard and decided to stop and get something to drink. They returned to their table where Clyde and Draco who were now entertaining three girls he didn't recognize and Mary was touching up Ginny's makeup.

"Hey, where's Hermione?" he asked, forgoing his spicy Dragon's Bite for Mary's cool mint Leprechaun.

"Easy, luv!" she laughed and pointed out to the dance floor. "Princess finally found her dancing legs."

Sure enough, Hermione was dancing... sort of. She was clearly very drunk, and happy to be that way thank you very much, and flailing around the dance floor with a rather bemused wizard in lime green. Natalie was practically crying she laughed so hard, and dug around her pockets.

"Oh, oh, I have to get a picture of this!"

"Weren't you supposed to do that anyway?"

"Oh yeah, I forgot about that. Oops."

He rolled his eyes. Frankly, he didn't think a picture of Hermione at the moment would be very incriminating. Embarrassing yes, but hardly evidence of licentious behavior. That was okay, though. They had all night.

Or rather they would have, if the balcony doors hadn't swung wide to reveal a dozen Sentinels.

"This is a Court ordered-"

What ever it was, Court ordered or not, Harry never got to hear because suddenly the club broke out into screams.

"IT'S THE UNCLES*!"

The music died and suddenly people were running. Harry froze, faced with a moment of displacement to another time and place. It was only for a moment, and then Natalie was grabbing him and shaking him hard.

"Snap out of it, Harry! We've got to get out of here! If we're arrested for underage drinking we'll be expelled!" she snapped at him, pulling him towards where the rest of people were attempting to escape. He pulled back suddenly, grabbing her arm and taking her in the opposite direction, his mind racing.

"Not that way. We'd never make it," he said. "Where's Hermione?"

"Draco's handling her."

"Okay. Where's Mary?"

"Here! Shit! They're coming."

"Where's the kitchen?" he asked.

"What?"

"There has to be a kitchen, a service entrance, something the employees use. Where is it?"

"There's one under the balcony and behind the stage."

"Perfect, come on! Don't run, just walk, eyes down."

It was one of the hardest things Harry had ever done, not drawing his wand. The Sentinels had started throwing out Stunning Hexes at the crowd that was trampling itself in an attempt to squeeze hundreds of bodies through one small door, and his hands itched to throw back a curse or two that would really make a difference. But this wasn't a battlefield, this was just Sentinels doing their job and Harry and his friends acting stupidly and getting on the wrong side of it. He held onto Natalie and Ginny's hands tightly, forcing them not to bolt, even though he could feel their desperate need to escape but knowing sudden movement would attract fire from above. Draco had found Hermione, who was looking dazed and frightened. One of her shoes was missing and he had to half carry her. The Malfoy heir locked eyes with Harry long enough to for him to point out their escape route. The only thing keeping him from running was Hermione, who obviously couldn't.

Finally, they slipped into the Sentinel's blind spot underneath the balcony and sped up into a brightly lit kitchen. It was completely empty, the service staff having wisely fled, if they could just figure out where.

"Shit, what now?" Draco swore, Hermione still clinging to him tightly.

"Excludo hostis!" Harry shouted at the door, locking it and hopefully buying them some time. "Now we get out of here. Mary, where's the exit?"

"I don't know!" she shouted, her entire body shaking with nerves. "I don't know if there's even one back here!"

"There has to be. They have to take out the trash and they're not going to drag it through the entire club to do it. Look for-"

"Found it!" Clyde shouted, appearing from seemingly no where and pointing. "Hurry up!"

"Don't run out yet, there could be Sentinels out there!" he warned, even as he herded everyone after him. Behind him, he could hear banging on the door. He cursed under his breath. Clyde hadn't listened to his advice and ran straight into the alleyway, and everyone panicked and followed after including Harry himself, who threw up another spell to seal the door behind them.

The alley was empty. They were lucky or the Sentinels were not very bright or both. They hurried as fast as they could down the back and out into the neighboring street. Here there were several restaurants but only the pubs were still open. With no where to go, they simply kept moving, trying to look simultaneously inconspicuous and still move as quickly as possible and failed at both. Ginny cried softly, drunk and thoroughly frightened. Harry stuck his arm around her and held her tight.

He wasn't scared. Far from it.

He was angry. Angry Natalie for her idea. Angry at Hermione for agreeing. Angry at Mary for picking the wrong club on the wrong night. Angry at the Sentinels for ruining everything. Mostly, however, he was angry at himself for not realizing how stupid they were all behaving and how much trouble they could have been in.

They hadn't gotten far, however, when Hermione suddenly started to laugh. It started softly at first, nothing more than a little giggle, but soon enough she was laughing loud and hard, almost hysterical.

"Shit, Hermione, be quiet!" Draco hissed, looking around desperately for any sign of danger. She wouldn't stop though, and if anything she only got louder. Then Natalie started in, quieter, but just persistent. Moments later, so was Clyde, although he tried to hide it. Draco looked to Harry, desperately, but he was as lost as the other. Mary turned to them, grinning, and pointed to a pub with red shutters and a Chudley Champions emblem hanging in the wind.

"Come on, let's duck in here for a while. Ben'll let us sit in the back for a while."

Draco looked at her as if she'd spouted a second head.

"Are you kidding? After what just happened at the last booze joint you brought us to?"

"Would you prefer to wait out here for the next patrolling officer? Cause I warn you they come by here every thirty minutes or so, and we're not exactly the sort they let by without a second glance."

Mary's friend Ben did let them in and sat them in a quiet corner booth, but refused to serve them anything other than butter beer, water, or lemonade. This suited Harry just fine, because he was in survival mode at the moment and not 'lets be stupid and have fun' mode. Ginny had settled down and remained tucked safely under his arm, staring morosely into a glass of water.

"It was fun while it lasted," she said, softly. Hermione choked on a laugh and fought it back down; knowing if she started it would be hard to stop again. Natalie grinned.

"It was. A little bit more exciting than I had anticipated, but... yeah. Overall, I think it was a raving success. Thanks in large part to our two rather sour looking heroes. Lighten up, boys, you saved the damsels-

"Hey! I found the exit!" Clyde protested. "And I'm not a damsel."

"-and we all had a great time there for a while. Don't say you didn't."

Mary clapped Natalie on the back.

"Girl after my own heart. Sorry about all of that nonsense with Sentinels. Djinn doesn't usually have to worry about that sort of thing, but they do have a reputation for letting minors in sometimes and... well... other stuff. The local Court has to keep up appearances by hosing down the club every once in a while. Just a bit of bad luck it was tonight, is all."

Harry disagreed. They had been lucky. Very, very lucky and that was it. It could have easily gone the other way. They could have been caught by the Sentinels. Hermione or anyone else for that matter could have been trampled by the panicking crowd. He could have gotten too drunk and had a psychotic episode in the middle of all that screaming and running. If Natalie hadn't snapped him out of it, he could have-

But Hermione was smiling. Hermione who was always so serious and pragmatic and insightful was giggling into her butter beer, looking happier than he had ever seen before or after the betrothal. It occurred to him that he didn't understand Hermione as well as he thought he did. He had always simply assumed she was just naturally driven and thoughtful, but what if that wasn't the case? What if she was that way because she felt she needed to be?

Lucius Malfoy terrified her, her foster mother treated her like a well loved poodle, and she was surrounded at all times by pureblood men and women who did and likely always would look down on her for being a muggleborn. He could never doubt her intelligence, that wasn't something a person could fake (at least not for very long), but the rest of it...? Growing up on the defensive at all times, constantly fearing that somehow she would prove everyone right about muggleborns, about her...

Merlin, he couldn't even imagine growing up like that. It would be a nerve-wracking nightmare.

Which was perhaps why she could laugh now, after behaving as she had never dared to before. Abandoning the caging pretense of sophisticated young lady in one of the most respected families in Britain, if only for one night, to just be a silly teenager must have been an incredible relief.

So, even though he didn't feel particularly happy, he managed to bury his anger and fear and smile for her.

~ Page Break~

It was ten in the morning, when Harry stumbled into the cottage, hung over and cursing the already sweltering summer heat. His head throbbed with every step he took and his stomach rolled as if filled with bile. These things he expected, but not the dry, wrung out feeling that left him feeling skeletal even if he didn't look it. In any event, he had been banking on Snape being suitably distracted in his lab this late in the morning and hoping Ira would assume he'd just stayed up late (or perhaps wouldn't mention his condition to her husband if he appeared suitably contrite).

Which meant he was in no way prepared when his guardian glared death at him the moment he walked in the door.

"I see you enjoyed yourself in the usual reckless manner adolescents prefer. Is it too much to hope that you didn't set something on fire in your inebriated state? It's rather more cliché than I had come to expect of you."

Harry bit back a snappish remark, and immediately went to the cupboard for some tea. He wouldn't put it passed Snape to make the duration of his hangover both longer and more miserable.

"No, there was no fire involved. I met some people when I went shopping and they invited me to a party. I'd drunk a little before... as you well know, but... it got a little out of hand."

As he predicted, his guardian looked neither impressed or like he believed him.

"Magnus salvus."

The kitchen was suddenly filled with a riot of banging and crashing and shrieking and whistling; all of it slamming into his brain like nails and a hammer. He doubled over and fell to his knees, covering his ears desperately with both hands and still trying to keep his balance as he dry heaved onto the floor.

"Stop, god and Merlin, stop!"

With a flick of Snape's wand, the quiet once again descended, leaving Harry shaking on the floor.

"Are you ready to tell me the truth now?"

Frankly, he wasn't. If he told him the truth he would have to tell him about the others, and while he was rather frightened of what would happen if the man found out his godchildren had been involved, he was even more worried about Natalie, Ginny, and Clyde who did not have the sort of protection that would keep them from getting expelled if Hogwarts' headmaster discovered what they had been doing.

"Why do you even care?" he grumbled instead. "I'm not dead or injured, so you're off the hook."

"Don't be a jackass, Potter. You are not an adult, despite what you've convinced yourself, and your lack of good judgment reflects it. I give you rules for your own benefit-"

"The hell you do! Every thing you've ever done for me was either because you had to or because you got something out of it. You're my guardian, not my father. You suck at 'for your own good'," he snarled, frustration and physical agony lacing every word with poison.

Snape was momentarily stunned by his outburst, as much by what was said as how it was said, and didn't recover until Harry was already halfway to his room. Flustered, he barely managed a retort.

"You're grounded till you're dead!"

Somewhere upstairs a door slammed shut.

"Little prick. If only you knew exactly what I've done for you," he muttered, and tried to figure out what to do with himself. He hadn't been down to the lab that morning, and frankly he didn't feel like brewing after his run in with his wayward charge. Good God, if this was Potter's 'rebellious phase', he didn't think he or the cottage would survive it for another month. He already knew the young man was hiding things from him. His collection of books, while impressive,

seemed somehow incomplete in the study, and Harry's frequent sojourn's to town made him suspect he was hiding things either there in the surrounding countryside. Much of his copious free time was spent in his room studying and drinking tea, and yet he was always evasive about what exactly he had been studying when either he or Ira asked. Additionally, his silence in regards to Hermione's betrothal was suspicious all its own.

If Harry were any other wayward teen he would have legilimens him for answers and doled out a suitable punishment, likely involving something tedious and necessary that he didn't feel like doing himself. Punishment was still an option. Legilimens was not. He had grown too powerful for him to risk it.

And frankly, he wasn't sure if he wanted to know.

What if Harry was already starting to plot against the Dark Lord? Was he witnessing the seed of the boy's rebellion or were his own fears clouding his judgment?

"Are you done shouting at each other already?"

Snape gave a violent start.

"Woman!" he snapped in annoyance, but Ira just smiled knowingly and sat across the table from him.

"So he wasn't at Clyde's house?"

"Who knows? He might have been, and they both managed to scrounge up a bottle of something. Or the Weasley twins might have been involved. Honestly, he could have been up to anything. All I could determine was that he was extremely hung over, before he flounced out of here like a drama queen."

"No doubt he went to lick his wounds. You're painfully direct with your accusations, dear. The Noise Charm was a bit cruel."

He didn't like her coming to Harry's defense, particularly since Snape felt as if he was wronged party in this instance.

"He lied to me, straight to my face, and he lied to you yesterday, as well. He deserved more than just a headache."

"Can you blame him?" she asked.

"Well, obviously, I can," he said shortly. She just smiled at his defensiveness.

"I'm not saying what he did was okay, and yes, he deserves to be grounded, but you can hardly blame him for his reaction. You have a very nasty habit of treating him like an adult and then punishing him like a child whenever it's most convenient."

He almost protested. Almost. Before he could even mount a plausible defense against the gentle accusation, he realized it was true. He did treat Harry like an adult and then like a child. Everybody did. He had adult jobs, he fought adult battles, and had very adult interests in magic, the war, and werewolf politics and no one who knew him seemed to find this particularly strange until something went wrong or he failed in some way to meet expectations. Then they stopped treating him like an adult and resorted to scolding and disciplining or coddling him like a child. It was hypocritical and wishy-washy, and he despised the notion that he had been playing into it like everyone else.

But honestly, what else could be done?

For all his maturity, Harry wasn't an adult. He didn't have the necessary experiences nor was he allowed many of the necessary mistakes that he needed to take of himself. He was floundering towards adulthood, and didn't trust anyone (not unreasonable) to guide him due to the bizarre circumstances that defined his life that no one except perhaps the Dark Lord could relate to in any way.

It made Harry frustrating for him to deal with, and he doubted the boy enjoyed it any more than he did.

"I don't know what to do with him. I'm responsible for him, but he doesn't trust me," he finally said, more than a little resentful at being made to say it. Ira nodded, sympathetically.

"I know. I wondered how to treat him too, at first. It's too late to treat him like a child though. He's too old, and would resent it. I found treating him like a roommate in a dormitory works best for me. We respect each other's privacy, but we still talk and help each other out in the more neutral areas of the house, like the kitchen or the garden."

"He lied to you too," he pointed out. "And I have no intention of living in a dormitory. Especially, when he doesn't even pay rent."

"I think he lied because he cares what I think of him and he didn't want me to be ashamed of him. That, and he didn't want me to tattle to you. Otherwise, he's always been very polite and respectful, and not because you've threatened him to be. Anyway, I don't expect you to treat him the same way. I think you have to find something that works naturally for the both of you. Believe it or not, he's closer to you than he is to me. In fact, you might be the person he's closest to in the entire world*."

That was perhaps the most ludicrous and vaguely terrifying thing a woman had ever uttered to him. Her obvious amusement at his stricken expression did not help matters. She stood up from the table and kissed him on the cheek.

"Food for thought. Remember to stop by the school sometime today and pick up your paperwork. We have our appointment with Healer Jacobi this Saturday, and you won't have time to do it this weekend. If you go now, I'll have lunch ready for you by the time you get back."

He nodded, distractedly. He liked it better when he was only concerned his ward was plotting treason.

~ Page Break~

McGunny scanned his notes, debating whether he should file them under the chapter for the 'courtship behavior' or for the 'diet' of dragons. Perhaps he should put it under courtship and leave a note to reference diet for more information. Or perhaps the other way around.

After trying to muddle through to the most logical solution, he decided to take a break and come back to it after lunch. He stood up from the heavy wooden table, and started rummaging through Hagrid's cupboards for some cooking oil to fry up some vegetables and some left over lamb from last night. It was almost one now and his friend still had not returned, which meant he had likely forgotten about eating lunch again and he should go out to the rookery to feed him.

He was just finishing dicing up some eggplant, when a knock at the door drew his attention. Underneath the table, Fang lifted his monstrous head and let out a booming bark. Blizzard fluttered around in the rafters, startled out of its resting place, before settling again, looking rather annoyed and indignant. Quite an achievement since paper did not ruffle nearly as well as feathers did.

"Come in," he called, and a moment later, a young man with brilliant orange hair strode in wearing a plucky grin. Fang lumbered over him, and the man rubbed the mastiff's* head with a familiar affection. McGunny relaxed. No stranger would have been at ease with a giant of dog like Fang, no matter that he was really just a big teddy bear.

"Eh, lad, he's got you doing the cooking now?"

"You ever tried to eat what he cooks?" McGunny remarked, and then paused, frowning a bit. "I'm sorry, but I forgot your name again. It begins with a 'W', does it?"

"Charlie Weasley. And don't worry about it; it'll stick one of these days. How's the book coming?"

"Steadily. Hagrid's been busy with the new hatchlings, so I haven't had a lot of time to review my research with him." He paused, looking down at his cutting board and quickly browning eggplant slices. "What was I doing again?"

"I think you were making lunch. Don't ask me what exactly. Mum never cooked an eggplant in her life," Charlie said easily, keeping his tone light. It was important not to react negatively around McGunny. He was sensitive and even the slightest rebuke tended to send him

into a fit of nerves. After a brief investigation around the kitchen, the confused young man seemed to remember or at least figured out what he had been doing and lit the stove with a match.

He didn't have a wand, which was perhaps one of the few things he had in common with Hagrid, and it definitely simplified their living arrangement. Charlie had known his large friend had a soft spot for strays, but he hadn't known that extended to people too. Hagrid didn't tell him where or how he had picked the forgetful fellow up, but it wasn't hard to figure out when they had come to his door one night with the little origami bird and McGunny crying to 'make it better'. He wasn't a bad guy as he figured it, really almost as gentle as Hagrid, he was just really confused a lot of the time because of the memory thing.

Hagrid said things were so bad in York, he didn't want to take the young man back until it had calmed down enough where he knew he would be properly taken care of. That had been two weeks ago, and what ever memory affliction he had seemed to have spread to the half giant, because he still hadn't taken him in. When Charlie finally confronted him about it, he simply said that 'Horace' liked it better with Hagrid than at the hospital and that he had been steadily improving. He was even helping Hagrid write a book on caring for dragons, and they were both very excited about it.

After that, there really wasn't any talking to the man about it. He was certain the hospital was making his new friend sicker, and what he needed more than anything was a peaceful place to rest and something interesting to do to exercise his mind and his memory, which was gradually improving, albeit in bits and pieces. His attempts at multitasking were a completely different matter.

"Would you like some lunch too?" he asked, looking up from the prying pan.

"No thanks, I've already eaten. I just wanted to check to see how you two were doing. Remember anything important lately?"

McGunny paused to consider for a moment, then blinked.

"What was I doing again?"

"Frying vegetables," Charlie offered helpfully.

"And what's your name again?"

He sighed. It might be doing McGunny some good living with Hagrid, but he couldn't help but wonder how long it would be before a moment of distraction eventually resulted in his guest burning down his hutt.

~ Author's Notes~

'Uncles' is a nickname for Sentinels. Like 'cops' or 'the fuzz'.

Please don't rant at me about Voldemort being the person Harry's closest to in the entire world. Believe me, no one knows this better than me, I wrote their relationship for Pete's sake. This is just Ira's impression, and honestly, it's not that unreasonable. Snape has been with Harry since he first discovered he was a wizard and has practically raised him since then, albeit in a rather cool and calculated way. He's saved Harry's life on multiple occasions, given him meaningful advice, known and followed him through many of his adventures, and even shared a home with him. Their relationship isn't typical or easy, often it's antagonistic but they still have a strong bond that neither is entirely comfortable admitting to. Ira, who lives with them and observes the subtle fondness in their unique dynamic, can see it more readily than most. Voldemort, however, just freaks her out and Harry's relationship with him is just baffling (and probably unhealthy).

Factoid. Fang is called a boarhound in the HP books, which is not a true breed but a term often used for Great Danes, but sometimes other large hunting breeds, including the Neopolitan Mastiff, which is the breed used in the HP movies.

Book VI

Chapter 8:

For three days the Snape household was a place of silence. Snape sequestered himself in his lab, hardly unusual, and Harry hid in his room, also fairly common. Mealtimes, however, normally a time of congenial mocking that passed as conversation, now consisted of the clinking of dinnerware and the scrape of chair legs against the floor. The two male residents said not a word, nor did they look at each other, or acknowledge each other in any way except when Harry collected the dishes after dinner, long after the elder wizard had left for his study or the lab.

Ira held her peace through all of this, smiling in amusement at their childish behavior. She didn't try to make conversation with either of them, but her cheery disposition seemed to make them both all the more sullen.

The fourth day started a pessimistically as the other three, but Snape came up from the lab early and found Harry making tea... with basil of all things. He couldn't let it go without comment.

"I think you've confused tea with soup, Mr. Potter."

The Gryffindor stiffened at the jibe.

"I'm experimenting. It's actually quite good when I get the right combination, which is more than I can say for potions."

"I'll have you know there are several potions that taste quite good. Most of them are poisons, however, so I would thank you not to become too familiar with them. Besides, the purpose of potions is decidedly different than tea."

"I don't know. Different types of teas aren't unlike potions. They have their own sort of magic."

Snape watched him for several seconds, as he carefully measured out tea leaves, seasoning, dried flower petals, and sugar on the little

kitchen scale with all the precision he had seen in his potion's class. Harry's strange hobby suddenly took on a new perspective.

"I trust this isn't your latest attempt at pharmacology?"

Harry gave him an annoyed look.

"Shall I start an inventory of the ingredients I use? Just so you have an idea of what kind of mischief I'm getting into?"

Touché.

"As long as it doesn't involve my potion's cabinet, or my liquor cabinet for that matter, I am willing to overlook it."

Harry snorted. "As if you don't add a little nip now and then."

"Only when you drive me to it, Mr. Potter," he said, grabbing a wine glass from cabinet and headed for the study.

And with that, the universe fell into alignment, and Harry and Snape resumed their relationship as verbal antagonists when dinner rolled around. Ira said nothing of the sudden renewal of conversation at the kitchen table, but she bit her lip several times throughout the meal to keep herself from giggling.

"This is truly ghastly," the potions master said, glaring down into his tea cup and then at Harry.

"No one asked you to try it," the young man replied, and pointed took a sip from his cup. His cheek twitched a bit, but he managed not to grimace. It really was awful tea. Not that he would admit it to Snape. The taste wasn't the purpose of it in any event. He had made a great deal of progress over the last week in narrowing down his animagus form, and with any luck this last cup meant he would be able to actually start learning to transmogrify with Sirius when he visited for the weekend. Also something he didn't want Snape finding out about.

"Did Ron Weasley ever write back to you?" he asked, changing the subject. "We have a tournament on Thursday, and its bad form for the vice captain to miss three in a row."

Snape looked mildly irritated. He too, was growing impatient with the duelist irresponsible behavior.

"No, but I informed him if he did not attend or at least provide a valid excuse for his absence, he would be cut from the team. His behavior sets an unacceptable precedent. You seem to be holding things together well enough in his absence."

Harry snorted.

"Sure, for as long as I'm allowed to come. Mr. Flintus on the gaming board has been receiving complaint letters about me participating. Parents think I'm too advanced a duelist to participate on an amateur level."

"Imagine that," the man said, vaguely amused.

"I get the part with me not participating in the duels themselves, but I don't see were they can tell me not to help the other duelists with training and advising. They don't have the right to bar me from the sport altogether. Merlin, I miss Quidditch. No one gave me nearly this much grief."

"Memory of a goldfish," Snape muttered under his breath. "Lucius wished to have a meeting with you some time next week about a PR campaign. It'll keep until Wednesday, at least. The Dark Lord is still in France, so I recommend playing nice."

~ Page Break~

Saturday afternoon found Harry sequestered in Sirius' hut, pouring over animal encyclopedias to narrow down his selection of animagus forms. Or at least that's what he should have been doing. The fact of the matter was, however, his mind was flitting between a half dozen other things.

Lucius had apparently gotten bored of waiting for his answer or perhaps he had discovered something of Hermione's night of rebellion, and was now going to demand Harry make a decision. His first and strongest impulse was to refuse an alliance. It made him feel anxious and unclear to even wonder what such relationship would entail and what it would ultimately lead him to surrendering.

But the more time that passed, the more anxious he became about the consequences of refusing. What if Hermione was unable to escape her marriage to Crouch? What if Lucius decided to punish Harry's defiance by harming those he cared about? The Reickers? His school friends? Maybe even Snape and Ira, although he couldn't be certain.

He wasn't as worried about himself. Voldemort's favor afforded him a certain level of protection, but even that had its limitations. The Dark Lord was a powerful guardian, but he wasn't an indulgent one. He had proven he would allow Harry to flap in the wind for a while before coming to rescue him if he thought he could get away with it. Normally, this worked to Harry's favor, as he preferred getting himself out of his own messes and leaving himself beholden to no one afterwards.

That was fine. He could handle that. It was everyone else that he was worried about. The best way to resolve the situation was to get Hermione out of her betrothal without any hint that he had been involved, directly or otherwise. Perhaps he could make a deal with Crouch, but seeing as he didn't know the man he didn't know what to offer or if it would be any better than a deal with Lucius. Plus, even if that marriage got called off, there was no way to know that the Malfoy patriarch wouldn't throw his foster daughter at some other maniacal Pureblood asshole. Hermione's emancipation was the best bet, but it was time sensitive and risky if word leaked back to Lucius, and didn't get her completely out of danger. He didn't doubt the dark wizard wouldn't want his revenge for being thwarted by a couple of adolescents.

His musing were knocked from his mind by a slap to the back of the head.

"Ow! What was that for?" he protested, ducking away from his irritated godfather.

"Have you been listening to a thing I've said or have I been talking to myself like an ass for the last fifteen minutes?" Sirius snarled.

Outside, Harry could imagine the guards cringing as their Head Alpha's irritated tone reached them. The day was muggy and gray, with storm clouds threatening to open at any moment, adding to the tense atmosphere. It was a well known 'fact' that Blackbone and his godson had a falling out, that the former shaman's defiant attitude grated on the alpha's nerves. Harry and his godfathers were careful to foster this illusion, and they were so successful that the other residences of Goddess Clan gossiped about it constantly. The young wizard couldn't walk a hundred paces without three or four men or women offering him a comforting pat on the back or a scolding to be more respectful.

"Sorry," he grumbled, rubbing his head. "I'm just a little distracted. Some stuff happened since we last talked."

Sirius' annoyed expression melted into honest curiosity.

"Like what?"

"Maybe we should wait for Remus so I can tell you both..."

"He won't be back until evening meal, and you're just wasting time until you at least vent. Come on, I'll tell him when he gets back if I can't help you sort it out."

Harry hesitated. He loved Sirius, he really did, but delicate and subtle were not his forte. Then again, this might be one of those circumstances where his godfather's forthrightness was what was called for.

"Alright, so it's like this..."

Despite how complicated it seemed to Harry, it only took him about ten minutes to explain the situation to Sirius, who listened intently,

neither asking questions nor making comments. When Harry was done speaking, his godfather remained silent and considered for several minutes.

"Send her to France."

Harry just looked at him.

"Um...okay. Maybe. That's sort of a last resort, but if we have to..."

Sirius shook his head.

"It's your only viable option. If Malfoy can't win this little game he's got going, he'll make sure the both of you can't either. Meaning, he'll marry her off or he'll kill her. You need to move her off the board altogether, and then start playing offensively."

"If she runs, she'll always be running."

"She'll only be running until Lucius is dead. If she's lucky he'll get his comeuppance soon enough."

"And if she's not?"

"What has she got to lose? Nothing you weren't willing to, when you escaped to Germany."

Harry shifted uncomfortably at the reminder of his time in Germany. It had all been so confusing and lonely and frightening, and he could not see himself knowingly sending Hermione to that same fate. Sirius could tell the idea disturbed Harry, so he revised his plan a bit.

"If you don't want to hide her, then move her to France legitimately. Get her emancipated, and have her legally transfer to Beauxbatons. You are good friends with Delacour, who has an in with both the school and Queen Ophelia. If you can convince the queen to put her under her personal protection, the Dark Lord will prevent Lucius from doing anything to her that would jeopardize their diplomatic relations."

Harry ran the idea over in his head, looking at it from several different angles. He saw a lot of potential. Outside of Britain and under Queen Ophelia's patronage (if he could actually swing it), Hermione might not have Malfoy's vast resources but she would have the connections she needed to make a life for herself that she could be proud of, and Lucius would have no way to retaliate. She would be safe. She could be happy.

"Sirius, that's very politically savvy of you."

The alpha just rolled his eyes.

"No need to get insulting."

"I'll have to run it by Hermione at the next time I see her, and see how she's coming along with that whole emancipation thing. Maybe, I can even get Snape in on this...no, probably not. I want him to have plausible deniability..."

"Why?" he asked, sounding genuinely confused on why that would be important. Harry tossed him an annoyed look.

"Despite being a general prick, he has been a good guardian and saved my life a couple of times, so I owe him that much consideration at least. Besides, I like Ira, and don't want to see her dragged into this if it can be avoided."

"Which you might not be able to do. You're going to need an adult to make some of these arrangements. One you can trust not to rat you out to Lucius... which now that I think about, is just another reason not to tell him. The buggers were tight as thieves last I checked. I don't suppose you know anyone willing to run your errands? Discreetly?"

Harry thought for a moment. He couldn't involve anyone particularly close to him. His teachers, the twins, the Reichers, Snape, Voldemort... all of them had conflicting interests or vulnerabilities. Otherwise, he didn't know of any adult who had the resources or the trust necessary for... wait a minute.

"I think I know just the person."

"Great, now stick your nose back in the book and don't pull it out again until you know which one you want to be."

~ Page Break~

Tom strived to keep his face blank as he handed off the latest reports to General Malfoy. Even with a face as bland as Lt. Stratus', he was hard pressed not to smirk as evidence of his handiwork had finally started to manifest itself. The blond wizard didn't bother looking from his paperwork, hardly uncommon, but where normally this would have been a sign he didn't acknowledge his visitor as important, he was muttering out loud rather vicious things that suggested he didn't even realize he had an audience. In one hand he held a quill and in the other his forehead, massaging gently to relieve some sort of headache that had been bothering him for at least a week.

Nothing overt. Nothing anyone couldn't or wouldn't attribute to perfectly innocent sources. Stress, no doubt. The result of too little sleep, too much work, a poor diet, and a great deal of responsibility during highly volatile times. Lord Voldemort was finishing his treaty in France, leaving his general to hold down the fort while he carried out a political seduction on the opposite side of the channel. In addition to coordinating his own troops and their foreign allies in Germany, he was also busy organizing the operation to oust the Italians from London, something Tom was eagerly assisting him in.

No one suspected anything.

In this instance, it helped that Lucius was such a heartless, temperamental bastard. Everyone who did notice that their head general seemed to be unwell refrained from commenting or else was viciously rebuffed. The dark wizard hadn't been home in a week due to his busy schedule. No one was there to notice him getting sicker and sicker.

At least, no one who cared enough to do something about it.

Which was why he was now enjoying the angry mutterings of a man, slowly but surely, going insane.

"Bloody Italians couldn't leave well enough alone... had to bring God and garlic bread and their stupid haircuts into London. Take their damnable Hail Maries and drown themselves, the lot of them. Should have sent the dementors to wipe the whole place instead of just leaving them to make fishing lousy in the Northern channel. But does he think of that? No, he's too busy humping that French whale. Come back and play house with that Potter wretch... son of a mudblooded whore and that man-bitch Black. God, what's the matter with this country?"

Don't worry, Lucius, I'll fix it up for you, Tom thought. Too bad you won't be around to enjoy it.

And he did intend to sort out this nightmarish mess the Dark Lord had been creating over the last several years. The werewolves had been given entirely too much independence, the Italians should never have been allowed to enter England, and their relationship with France was that of a lovesick panderer rather than an equal... no... superior, and this nonsense with Harry... Merlin, the boy was growing into something truly magnificent, but he was being handled far too carelessly. When he took his rightful place, he would ensure his dear friend received the proper education, respect, and protection that he deserved.

And have that interfering fool Snape and his entire family torn to pieces and fed to pigs. And possibly that stupid Hermione girl. Or maybe he could convince Lucius to kill her. It shouldn't be hard, not if his current string of murderous ramblings was anything to go by. Two birds with one stone.

The time for his own ascension was drawing nearer as Malfoy slowly succumbed to the toxic magic woven into the paper reports he handed to the man everyday, multiple times a day. Individual papers held too little to set off the dark arts sensing wards, already set high due to Lucius' naturally dark signature, but over time they were successfully being absorbed a little bit at a time.

Tom knew he should be thanking someone. It was all far too convenient to be the turn of an ambiguous fortune. His too easily acquired position in such close and consistent contact with his target, the ease of slipping the cursed papers into one of the most heavily fortified buildings in the world, his target's distraction, the absence of the Dark Lord or anyone else who might take note of Lucius' condition... too many ways that it all could have gone wrong, too many contingencies he had not been forced to engage. He could feel the pull of another's interference. A curse on a much older, much more powerful scale than modern wizards practiced today.

I wonder if Harry might not have a grudge against General Malfoy, Tom mused, finally slipping out of the office. It would be rather amusing and ironically appropriate if his friend weren't helping him yet again to reach his goals without even realizing it

~ Page Break~

"Maybe we should wait another day or two," Ira said, fidgeting with her wedding ring. Her husband's potion lab was dark and cool, but she could feel herself sweating from nerves. Beside her, Severus looked as calm and collected as always. No, he looked even more collected, which was a dead give away that he was anxious too.

"This potion is very accurate to within thirty-six hours of conception. There's no point in waiting. We can retest in a week if it would make you feel better, but I would like to know as soon as possible."

"If I am... you know... will it be able to tell if it's a girl or a boy?"

Severus smiled very faintly.

"That is a different potion that requires forty-two days after conception to be accurate. You'll be able to cling to your anticipation for a bit longer, as you seem to enjoy it."

"I'm nervous. Can you blame me? Healer Jacobi said our chances were just a little above half..."

"You're right," Severus suddenly agreed, setting the last ingredient- an eye dropper of Ira's blood- back into its little storage wrack. "We should wait until we're both calm. You're much too excitable right now. It can't be good for you."

She looked startled, her eyes flickering to the cauldron, the eye dropper, and her husband in quick succession. Then again. And again.

"I'm better now."

He smirked. Her eyes narrowed.

"This is because I teased you about Harry, isn't it?"

"Not at all, I'm merely concerned over your wellbeing."

"And I am concerned over your wellbeing as well... if you don't finish the potion in the next five seconds."

"Then for the sake of our mutual wellbeing," he agreed, and added the two drops of blood to the potion.

They both leaned over the cauldron, and held their breath. The red droplets gradually dissolved into the shimmering grey solution, before suddenly turning black, then a transparent dark purple. Ira looked to her husband hopefully. He continued to stare at the potion intently until it finally changed to clear dark red.

He looked up.

He smiled.

~ Page Break~

The Dark Lord was in a rare good mood when he returned to Bristol. Not that the war really put him in a particularly bad mood, but the victories were rarely meaningful enough for him to feel truly satisfied. This was one of those rare occasions. He had his treaty with France, at last, and the support of the local parliament. He would need both to

secure his foothold on the mainland, and more importantly if he ever wanted to be acknowledged as a royal sovereign in Europe.

It didn't hurt that the sex was fantastic.

If he did land himself in Unholy Matrimony with her Majesty, he entertained the notion of not killing her for at least a few decades.

Well, no need to commit to a plan of action just yet. Wedding bells were a long ways off if they ever happened, and he had more immediate concerns. Soldiers and aides saluted and got out of his way as he passed, a few of the more bold tossing out a compliment over his success in France, as he made his way to his private office. He listened with half an ear as one of his personal aides gave him a run down of what had happened in the last two weeks and what needed his attention.

The London operation was progressing according to plan, with minor skirmishes along the edge of the city used to lull the Italians into a attitude of overconfidence while their positions within in the city were being ascertained for true attack. Morgan had unearthed a plot by German spies to assassinate him that weekend, and wanted to know if they should be executed immediately or put on public trial. That might actually be a bit of fun. Ireland was complaining of food shortages in the North, and Scotland was complaining about the dementors off the coast. A riot had broken out in Summerset, Wales, possibly due to political unrest but more likely due to a canceled Quidditch match. Oh, and Headmaster Snape had sent him an invitation for a little get together that Wednesday.

He took the invitation from his aid and reviewed it personally; quite curious as to what would inspire an avid recluse like his surly potions master to host a soiree. His new wife's idea, perhaps?

He looked at the small mountain of missives piled on his desk and the aid's appointment book peppered with meetings and conferences, and calculated his choices. There was no particular reason for him to be social while in the middle of several delicate military operations, but at the same time he did want to speak with both the new Headmaster of Hogwarts and his young protégé for personal and

professional reasons. He could do that at a later time in private, however, when it was more convenient. Chances are he had been invited as a courtesy rather than with the expectation of actually appearing.

He sorted through more of his mail to get a better idea of what needed his personal attention and what could be given to someone else, when he came across a short memo from a Lt. Stratus. The name was vaguely familiar, although he couldn't say why, and he scanned the contents then frowned. The memo was painfully formal and correct, but the essence of the message was vaguely seditious or perhaps that was just his inner Slytherin talking. Lt. Stratus was expressing some vague concern over General Malfoy's health. These sorts of letters were fairly common, and usually indicative of officer attempting to gain favor by undermining a superior. However, the memo gave no indication that Malfoy's work or judgment had suffered any, and the lieutenant was too far down in rank to benefit directly from undermining a general. Perhaps this was a legitimate concern?

Unlikely, but it would only take a few minutes to confirm one way or another.

Lucius' office occupied the neighboring wing across from his own, and he was strolling through his door within moments of passing through his own.

"Knock damn you, can't-!" the office's occupant snarled at the unexpected interruption, then abruptly broke off when he saw who had disturbed him. "My Lord, I-I'm sorry. I wasn't expecting you so soon."

"It's fine, Lucius. I would be quite irate if some rank soldier strutted into my office unannounced, as well," he said, dismissively, eyeing the wizard critically. The general's face was pale and swallow, his eyes deeply shadowed. He looked tired and thin, and stressed. Lucius hadn't exactly been bright and shining when he left, but clearly things had deteriorated far quicker than he had anticipated.

At least it didn't appear to have gotten too severe. A few days of rest or at least of lighter duties would likely do him a world of good.

"You look terrible, my friend. Have you been sleeping alright?"

The man waved the question away, as if insignificant.

"I'm fine. I heard things went well in France."

"Yes. We'll be able to start moving into their fortresses along the border within the week. I've assigned Sharpe to hand it."

"My Lord, I am-"

"You're over extended enough as it is. Don't tell me you've forgotten how to delegate since I left?"

Lucius started at him witlessly. That was mildly concerning.

"You really do look awful. I'm ordering you to take a few days off. Finish what you need to and hand the rest to someone else to do."

"My Lord, London-" he protested.

"Won't be ready for a final attack until at least Saturday. Let the other officers handle the scuffles in the mean time. I mean it, Lucius. I want you out of here by 7:00pm tonight and not to comeback until 7:00am on Thursday. Get some sleep, eat a full meal, make love to your wife. Oh, and come to Severus' house on Wednesday night. Drinking his brandy always puts you in a congenial mood."

"My Lord-"

"That's an order, General," the Dark Lord threw over his shoulder as he made his way back to his office, shutting the door on any protests the other might have made. The man would thank him later. Honestly, he thought he knew better than to run himself ragged. He wasn't a young man anymore, and should understand the value of pacing oneself.

Good deed done for the decade, he entertained the notion of heading to the aviary and tormenting Bobby for a while. The raven had to be

terribly bored at this point. While busy weighing the pros and cons of procrastinating on his reports, he passed a soldier in the hall who stopped and saluted him. There was nothing remarkable about the man, but something about him suddenly made him stop and turn to him.

A glance at his uniform revealed the wizard to be a decorated lieutenant, and none other than the questionable Stratus who had alerted him to his general's fatigue. After a second, it clicked. He had awarded this man a medal at some point. The second siege of Berlin if he remembered correctly.

He mentally shrugged off the sense of familiarity and moved on without comment. He'd send a memo commending him for bringing the matter to his attention. There was no point in creating a sense of personal interest in the hallway for such a trivial matter.

As he turned a corner, as if on instinct, he tilted his head to catch one more glance of the soldier, but the hall was already empty.

~ Page Break~

For a 'small gathering', Harry didn't much see the purpose in dressing up, especially when he knew everyone there, but Snape had insisted and he didn't feel like disrupting their current peace over something so trivial. Didn't mean he was going to pretend he liked it though.

"Will you stop fiddling with your collar? It's not choking you," Hermione scolded gently. Harry, Draco, and she were loitering in the hall for as long as possible. Once they went to the parlor the 'children should be seen and not heard' stigma would rear its ugly head and they'd have to sit around and be bored while the adults made conversation.

"It itches. Silk always feels itchy to me when it's warm," he whined. He glanced over his shoulder, and into the parlor to make sure no one was paying them any attention. Malfoy Sr. seemed to be suffering from a headache; effectively distracting him from what otherwise might have seemed highly suspicious. Snape and Ira were

acting like newly weds again, paying little mind to anything but each other, and Narcissa and Susan were gossiping with them about something. The only one who seemed to notice them at all was Morgan, but then very little escaped his notice.

"Let's go to the study," he suggested. "I think one or two more people should be showing up, so we won't have to hang around until then."

"What is this all about, anyway? Uncle Severus never hosts parties," Draco asked, as they entered the sheltered seclusion of Snape's private office. He took the chair behind the desk, while Hermione claimed the one nearest the Southern window. Harry remained standing, pacing slowly around the room.

"He's making some sort of announcement."

"About what?"

"They haven't told me, but I can make a few guesses. Never mind that, I wanted to talk to you both about the emancipation. Are you making any progress?"

Hermione let out an irritated sigh.

"I've got the paperwork just fine, but I haven't had a lot of luck finding a sponsor. I don't even know where to start."

"Not that it would matter anyway, since administration is so far backed up I'd be a legal adult before she ever got approval," Draco sneered in disgust.

"That might be a good thing. Doesn't a betrothal contract need to be approved?"

"Father pushed that through weeks ago. It's not that these things aren't getting done; it's just there's a lot of backlog and confusion since they evacuated London. Higher ups get precedent. Anyway, we need to time this just right or father will hear about it and find some way to throw a wrench in the works."

Harry nodded.

"I think I know someone who can help. Did I ever tell you about Skeeter?"

Both of them gave each other a confused look.

"The reporter?" asked Hermione.

"Yes, her. Anyway, she might have some connections we need to push the paperwork through. She's a big shot reporter, she's got to have friends in the Court and she might know someone willing to stick it to Lucius by sponsoring Hermione."

"Are you mad?" Draco all but shouted at him. "She's a reporter! She'll report this! It'll be a circus!"

Harry waved him off.

"Don't worry about it. I've got something on her. She won't dare say anything or else I'll air her own dirty secret."

"What? When did this happen?"

"A tale for another time. I don't know when we're going to have to go back to the parlor, so I want to run this by you first."

He told them about what he had discussed with Sirius that weekend with the possibility of Hermione moving to France to finish her education and find a career. Draco didn't like it. The idea of his sister being so far away and fleeing the country like those British refugees in the last war did was in no way appealing. Harry suspected he didn't understand or just couldn't accept the level of danger his father represented, and was becoming very cross with his denial but kept his voice down incase someone came to check on them.

Hermione didn't say anything. She sat in her chair, hands in her lap, and face pinched in intense concentration. She was considering it, but there was no way of telling if she would jump on the idea or dismiss it. Draco could see she was thinking about it and tried to

convince her it was a bad idea, but they were interrupted before he could get very far. The door to the study opened.

"Harry, dear?" Susan queried, as she poked her head inside. When she saw them there, she smiled. "Oh, good, you're here. Lord Voldemort and Miss Victoria have arrived. You all need to come to the parlor now."

She hurried all off to join the party, and they all moved to follow with a bit more reluctance. Draco was the first out the door and threw back, "It's a stupid idea."

Yes, well, he wasn't the one who got to decide that. He turned to his friend who still held her considering expression.

"Hermione?"

"I don't know, Harry. A part of me is screaming 'yes', but it's so loud I can't think. It just seems too good to be true. I can't plan my life around a daydream."

"But you can plan to live a happy life," he insisted. Her eyes widened, part wonder and part fear, at the possibilities she had never dared entertain. "Just think about it. You don't need to decide right this minute. We can talk about it more, later."

They had no choice but to talk about it later, because they had reached the parlor. They were a rather motley party. A Dark Lord, a pureblood Aristocrat and family, their defiant muggleborn foster child, a master sentinel, a housewife, a headmaster, an entomologist, a squib servant (except he rather suspected Vicky wasn't really), and himself. The interactions weren't altogether smooth or easy. Vicky hugged him rather audaciously, and Harry was surprised Lady Malfoy didn't faint on the spot. Hermione was maintaining her distance from General Malfoy and as a result was stuck on the otherside of Voldemort, who couldn't seem to figure out what she was doing there, and Susan was puttering around Draco like he were four years old and the cutest thing in the world. Despite the seriousness of the conversation he had just been having only a minute before, he was struggling not to laugh.

Unfortunately, Snape had far less tolerance for his guests' absurdity and drew their attention after only a few minutes of their social floundering.

"If I might have your attention for a moment, please. I have an announcement to make," the dark man said, drawing their attention. He placed his hand on Ira's shoulder, and she smiled up at him encouragingly. "I am not generally a social individual."

There were a few tittering laughs at this confession.

"I generally find social gatherings tedious and frivolous. However, I... we find ourselves the recipients of unusually good fortune, which we wish to share with those whom we are closest to. Ira and I are going to have a child."

Susan cry of absolute delight probably woke babies in the neighboring village, and she rushed to envelop her daughter in a hug before anyone else had managed to absorb the news. After a moment, the shock wore off, and the soon-to-be parents became the recipients of a volley of congratulations and questions and parental advice.

Harry stood on the outside of it, uncertain. He had suspected all along that this was what they had been so excited about. Although they never talked about it in front of him, he knew Ira had been going to a healer routinely for several weeks now, and since she always seemed cheerful after these visits he knew she wasn't sick. To have it all confirmed, however, left him somewhat disoriented.

There was going to be a baby in the house. Snape and Ira's baby.

The idea left him uneasy, and he couldn't think why. It wasn't jealousy. He had never had that sort of relationship with either of them, and honestly, he would only be around the baby for a summer before he finished school and started making his own way in the world, out from under Snape's domineering glower.

It might even be fun to have a baby in the house. He liked kids. At least, he liked Morgana and Alyssa, and this shouldn't be too terribly different, right?

He wasn't so sure. He managed a smile for Ira, and a half joke about knowing all along, but spent the evening on the sidelines of the conversation, trying to sort out his own feelings. It wasn't until Lucius suddenly stormed out of the room that he realized he hadn't been following along with what was happening. He turned to listen to the angry tread of the man's retreat and flinched when the door suddenly slammed. Looking back to the gathered crowds, he could see everyone looking either confused or else angry. Among the angry was Snape, which did not bode well for the rest of the evening.

"I'm sorry, Severus," Narcissa apologized. "He's been short tempered for weeks now. Migraines."

Snape smiled tightly at her, but did not pursue the matter and after a few awkward starts the conversation resumed. Harry looked to Hermione, whose unforgiving glare was still transfixed on where her foster father had just exited. He would have to ask her what had happened later then. While it was sort of selfish to think it, if Lucius and Snape's relationship was already souring, he might be able to enlist the man's help with Hermione after all.

An hour passed, and eventually the men grew tired of baby talk and moved on to other things. Voldemort was curious as to what Snape's short and long term plans for Hogwarts were and encouraged him to be ambitious, even during these financially tight times. Everyone was curious about Voldemort's work in France and his plans now that he had secured an alliance with such a powerful nation. Morgan was not much of a conversationalist, but he did manage to carry on fairly interesting discussion about an upcoming trial against a crew of German assassins.

Harry still didn't have much to say, his mind was too full with too many things, and he allowed Draco to handle most of the talking when it came to their impression of children's lives during this time of war. Draco's life was a bit more sheltered than most, but he managed to convey the sense of self-determination that seemed to permeate

their generation that even Harry had been conscious of. They were all anxious about fighting and attacks, but they were ready to do what they needed to for their country and were certain of their eventual victory. Perhaps they were both a bit optimistic, given that a majority of their experience with other young people involved dueling club or their own houses, all of which were known for having competitive go-getters to begin with. Their replies seemed to confirm what the other men already knew, but were nevertheless pleased to hear.

Eventually, the evening began to wind down. The Morgans and Narcissa left. Victoria helped Ira take the wine and liquor glasses to the kitchen. Snape took his godchildren to his study to talk with them in private. And Harry found himself sitting alone with Voldemort.

"You've been unusually quiet this evening," the Dark Lord commented. Harry smiled sheepishly at him.

"Sorry. I have a lot on my mind."

"Were you surprised about the baby?"

"Not really," he said, but didn't elaborate. He didn't know if he could without rambling nonsensically.

"Any progress with your friend's betrothal?"

"I... yes. I think we've established that she's going to be emancipated. There are some problems with getting a sponsor and pushing the paperwork through. I don't suppose you know any heavy hitters willing to take a poke at Lucius by helping me out?"

Voldemort smirked.

"None that wouldn't turn the entire thing into a media circus. It only benefits them if they use it to publically humiliate Lucius. Something I am not entirely sure I would approve of. He is the lead commander of my armies after all."

"Could you at least push the paperwork through?"

"No, that would be direct interference."

Harry gave an irritated huff.

"Can I at least use your name to push the paperwork through?"

Voldemort grinned.

"Now you're catching on. You could do so, but only at your own risk. I would deny any involvement if asked to verify the request. Besides, why would you need my name? Your own should suffice."

"I don't want Lucius to be able to blame me for this. I'd prefer it appear that Hermione got herself out of this mess all by herself."

"Self preservation? Harry, I never thought I'd live to see the day."

"Hey! I'm plenty self-preserved... er...or something. Although, that's not what I meant. I can handle Lucius one-on-one, but he's threatened people I know and I don't know if I can protect them, so yeah... I'd rather he have a singular target that had nothing to do with me or mine."

"And Hermione does not fall under this category?"

"If she accepts my plan, I'm hoping I'll have her moved from out of his shadow of influence forever."

Voldemort considered his words, staring at him thoughtfully.

"Very ambitious, the best sort of plan. Care to elaborate?"

"Care to push through the paperwork?"

"Are you trying to bargain with me?"

"I'm fairly certain 'James' means 'ambitious' somewhere."

"It does not, you little wretch. Forget it. Surprise me. It should be fun. Any other requests I can preemptively shoot down?"

Harry glared at him. "You're a lot more fun when I'm crazy, you know that?"

"It works both ways, my friend."

"I'd like to visit Queen Ophelia."

Now that did take Voldemort off guard. He quickly tried to analyze the feasibility of such a request, and what such a visit might pertain to.

"Another part of your plot?"

"Maybe, maybe not. I have other things going on besides my personal campaign against the blond menace."

That was very true. He knew Harry was still visiting his godfathers, and that he was still maintaining at least some of his duties to Blackbone. A friendship with France assured the continued expansion of his werewolf colonies both within and outside of Britain, and Harry still played an important role there. The attack in Berlin by the rebellious werewolves had shaken the public confidence of the French, and only Harry's popularity and loyalty to his cause kept the colonization programs from being disbanded in parliament. Whether it was simply to maintain his reputation or a new program he wanted to run by the queen on Blackbone's behalf, it was to his benefit to visit every so often. Truthfully, it benefitted Voldemort, as well, since Harry's good reputation tended to lend itself to the Dark Lord, at least to a certain extent. His personal rescue of Harry from the Berlin Underground had done wonders for improving their opinion of him there.

Or perhaps it was something less political. Harry had friends in France, including the queen herself, Miss Delacour, and probably few others he wasn't aware of. Snape had just returned from there, and it wasn't completely without reason that Harry might be a bit jealous about the vacation.

Honestly, when it came to Harry, it was probably something he couldn't even think of.

"... Oh, and can I wander around Ireland aimlessly for a week or so without supervision?" Harry tossed in.

"What?"

"Just thought I'd ask. You know, make the first request seem more reasonable. Although, if you want to go for the second one, there are some things I wanted to do there."

"I'm sure the fairies would be more than welcoming," he pointed out. "If you want to go to France in some official capacity, I can arrange it, but if this is something more personal there will be time constraints."

"Oh... well, I guess it's personal, so what are the constraints?"

"The queen is a very busy woman. She only schedules a few days out of every month to entertain socially. Additionally, school starts in another four and half weeks, and I have no intention of pulling you from your studies, so it will have to be on either a weekend or holiday. Then of course, you'll need an appropriate guardian."

"Would you like to come to France with me?"

"While I am charmed that I would be the first person to pop into your head, I too have my own time constraints that are not so easily foreseen this far in advance. It is still a possibility. Then, of course, you would have to convince your guardian."

Harry grimaced, but nodded. If things were going badly with Lucius, Snape might very happily assist him in his plan to go France. Assuming he wasn't too busy running the school or preparing for the new baby. Ugh.

"Do you still want to try it?"

"Yes. I should make time to visit her anyway, even if I didn't have another reason. I can probably get Snape to agree."

"Very well, it might be a month or two before something can be arranged. Even her Highnesses social calendar is quite full."

Harry nodded.

"Thank you."

"Hhmm... consider it your birthday present... somewhat delayed."

He managed a smile at that. "It's the thought the counts, you know."

The Dark Lord rolled his eyes.

"What a perfectly muggle notion."

~ Page Break~

"Here ye, here ye. I declare this the second annual meeting of the Anti-Betrothal Society. Has the president made any progress with the current project?"

"Do shut up, Natalie," Hermione groused, flicking a chocolate frog leg at her. The other girl simply caught it in midflight popped it into her mouth, smiling smugly. Harry, Draco, Clyde, Ginny, Natalie, and Hermione, co-conspirators all, had not seen each other for several weeks since the brief get together on his birthday, which had been more of a planning session than an actual celebration, but they were definitely making headway.

Hermione had decided to give Sirius' idea a try, and agreed studying abroad would probably be the best thing. Draco was still adamantly against the idea of her being so far away, especially in a time of war where no one would be able to help her or even know if something had happened to her and he was not at all happy with Harry for giving her the idea in the first place. She wasn't going to change her mind now that she had made a decision, and he was left to sulk over the matter and make a general pessimistic nuisance of himself.

Meanwhile, Natalie had been looking for sponsors for Hermione through the rather long list of feminist friends her mothers knew,

hoping to find someone genuinely sympathetic to the girl's situation rather than hoping to take advantage of it.

"Honestly, is that anyway to treat a friend? I've spent a great deal of my own time working to fix your problem, I hope you know." All she received for her effort was an impatient glare. "Alright, fine! I think I've found three likely candidates," she explained. "All from well established families with big hearts and bigger bank accounts. John Carrobs lost two daughters during the war and has had a soft spot for muggleborn girls ever since. Lots of scholarships and job placements, that sort of thing. Delamora Flitch, tried for killing her husband in '68, but got off on self defense. Remarried in '73, widowed in '89, and likes to spend her time raising rare birds and promoting divorce. Charming woman. And finally, my personal favorite, Andoria Smythe, sued her father for child abuse when she was seventeen, won, and used the money to start several women run music stores."

"Where do you meet these people?" Draco wondered.

"Outside the manor grounds, darling. You should try wandering around a bit for something other than shopping."

"Enough," Harry interceded, before they started bickering. "Those all sound promising. I'll contact Skeeter to make sure there's nothing that isn't going to come up and bite us in the ass, and then have her look into pushing the paperwork through discretely. I've got an invite to attend a masquerade in Paris in mid October. That should give us eight months to work it all out or come up with a new plan."

"This is so exciting. I hope they make a play about it one day."

"Well, I'm glad at least someone is enjoying all of this," Hermione bit off bitterly, but Natalie, as usual, was ignoring her sour mood.

The door to their compartment slid open and a bespectacled third year popped his head inside, only to find himself greeted by several wands pointed at him.

"Oi! What I'd do?"

"Ever hear of knocking?" Draco snapped.

"I did!"

"The Silencing Charm was up," Hermione reminded him, and everyone tucked their wands away. "Sorry about that. What did you want then?"

"Eh. I'm looking for somewhere else to sit. This guy in my compartment looks like he's ready to hurl at any moment."

"What, is he sick? Cursed?"

The boy shrugged. Hermione rolled her eyes.

"For Merlin's sake. Take me to him."

"Fine," he grumbled, "Don't know what you expect to do about it."

"More than you obviously can be bothered with. The rest of you stay here, he probably just needs an anti-motion sickness charm. It should only take a minute."

"Yes, Nurse Hermione," Natalie jibed.

"You do know I'm a prefect, don't you?"

"You do know I'm one too?"

She rolled her eyes and left, leaving them to fill the void her abrupt departure created. Inevitably, it turned to quidditch and the national cup victory by the underdog team, the Derbanshire Devils, followed by a rousing debate over who was going to replace Snape as the supervisor in dueling club. They hadn't gotten very far, when Hermione returned to their compartment, white as a sheet.

"Harry, I need you for a minute."

She grabbed his arm and hauled him out into the hallway before he could even ask what was happening, and hurriedly marched into

another car. Several students had stuck their heads out of their compartment, listening to what Harry thought was some of the most horrific coughing he had ever heard. It was loud, harsh, and disturbingly wet.

"Hermione, what is-"

"He said you'd know what to do."

"He who? I don't know how to stop a cough! I never got to take First Aide remember? I got blown up that semester."

She wasn't amused, and pretty much ignored him until they reached the door the coughing was originating from. She threw it open, and pulled Harry inside after her. Hunched over in his seat, Ron Weasley was struggling to take on air, his lungs rattling with every labored breath. He was white as a sheet and soaking wet.

"Oh god, he's even worse than before," she said. "It has to be a curse or a poison. Nothing else would work this fast. Do you recognize it?"

Harry could honestly say he didn't. He had seen truly horrific curses in his life, but nothing quite like this. He couldn't even begin to guess how to start helping him. What he did know, however, was that he didn't want Hermione to be in here if it all somehow proved... lethal.

"Go find the conductor and tell him what's happening. He might be able to get a healer for us," he ordered.

"Can you help him?" she begged.

"Maybe," he lied. "Hurry up, I'll stay with him."

She nodded and hurried out to find help. He closed the door behind her and threw up a silencing charm. Ron stared at him blearily through one eye, still hunched over as if he expected to start heaving at any moment.

"Why did you tell her to get me? What do you think I can do that no one else on the train can?" he demanded, taking a threatening step forward.

Needles, hot tar, and stagnant water washed over him, stabbing and pulling at his senses, tearing off little pieces of him and filling it with mud. He leapt away, staggering as far back as the compartment would allow. His magus sensatia was going crazy, telling him in a hundred different ways that this wasn't right. It was wrong and terrible and unclean.

"Fuck, ugh... fuck. Who did this to you?"

Ron closed his eyes tiredly, and Harry understood.

"You idiot. YOU GODDAMN IDIOT! You did it to yourself, didn't you? You tried to fucking kill someone, but it blew up in your face! Shit! How could you be so stupid?"

"Please...", Ron begged weakly, his voice like sandpaper. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I need your help. I thought..." he broke off into several body wrenching gasps, until finally he managed to regain control of himself. "I thought... I'd have more t-time t-to fix th-this... but... it's getting... worse... faster... P-please."

"I don't know how."

"Please..."

By now Ron was all but in tears, terrified and exhausted. Harry's own magic recoiled and shifted unpleasantly as he watched the effects of the curse slowly tearing the other boy to pieces from the inside out. He tried closing his eyes, to block it out, but even without seeing he could still feel it.

What could he do though? He wasn't a healer, and this wasn't a curse he knew how to handle. He didn't know its source or its method, and even if he did he wasn't sure how to undo it. It was contaminating the very air around him, and he didn't....

"I'll be right back. I think I know something that might help."

He stormed out of the compartment and down the hall, sending other passengers ducking out of his way as he made his way back to his car. His friends looked up from a game of cards as he stepped inside, but he didn't give them time to say anything before he summoned down his trunk from the overhead compartment, and dropped it on the floor.

"Hey, watcher!" Clyde protested, barely moving his foot in time from receiving a nasty stomping.

"Sorry, no time to explain," he blurted, opening the trunk and digging through its contents as quickly as he could. He found the sealed wooden box at the bottom right corner where he had left it, pulled it out, and ran for the door without bothering to close his trunk.

"What's going on?" Ginny called after him, but he didn't reply. Back inside with Ron, he closed the door once again and sealed it shut. He didn't want anyone seeing what he was doing and attempting to stop him. The redhead was struggling harder than ever for air, watching with growing desperation as Harry worked to save him.

"Scarlet pimpernel," Harry whispered and the box opened, revealing his ritual dagger, small jars of ink, brushes, chalk, charcoal, and a thick bundle of dried, leafy stalks. He took the bundled herbs and closed the box. He glanced at Ron, and told him bluntly. "I have no idea if this is going to work or not, or how well. I should just let you choke on your own blood, but we actually share some mutual friends in common who might give a damn."

Taking his wand, he lit the bundle on fire. Within seconds, a strong, fragrant smoke filled the small room. Ron started to wheeze again, to panic as the air grew thinner and the smoke grew thicker. He threw his hand out to knock the burning herbs from Harry's hand and when that failed, he struggled to his feet to take them. He was weak as a kitten, but Harry was struggling to breathe himself and his eyes were watering. He was starting to think this had been the mother of all stupid ideas, when Ron fell on top of him.

The dirty feeling of the curse lingered and rubbed again his magic in the same filthy way, but it was no longer as all powering as it had been before. He wasn't sure what affect it had on Ron's internal magic, but at least the air around him and been partially cleansed. He struggled to push Ron off of him, and made his way to the window, which he opened to let out the smoky air.

"What-" Ron wheezed, but already his lungs sounded clearer. "- was that?"

"Sage. It's used to purify an area of negative energies. And guess what you are, you dumb pillock?"

The Slytherin blinked at him.

"I'm cured?" he asked hopefully.

"No. It's in too deep, whatever it is. It'll come back."

"But the sage helps?"

"Apparently."

"For how long?"

"I don't know! I didn't even know if it would work! You figure it out," he snapped, and threw open the door. Hermione, the conductor, and several attendants stood there and gave him a startled look.

"What happened? Why did you lock the door?" the conductor demanded.

"Er..."

"Ron, are you alright?" Hermione called, worriedly.

"I'm fine," he replied, his voice stronger even if it was still a bit raspy. "I was just having an allergic reaction. Potter sorted me out."

"Why does it smell like smoke in here?" the conductor persisted, turning redder by the moment. "Are you boys smoking something?"

Harry spent the entire ride back to Hogwarts trying to convince the conductor that no, they had not been doing drugs or engaging in any other sort of illegal activity. Ron had a slow allergic reaction from one of the Bernie Botts every flavor beans, and he knew Harry had ways of treating it which involved burning special herbs because of a previous experience. Harry had locked the door so no one would open it and disperse the medicinal smoke before it took affect. The silencing charm was just habit. Honest.

The conductor didn't believe them for a minute, but since he had no evidence of anything other than Harry saving Ron's life, he didn't have the authority to hold them once the train had reached its destination. Frustrated, annoyed, and just plain angry with the entire situation, he had stalked away from Ron as soon as the first opportunity presented itself.

The youngest Weasley son wasn't quite ready to let him go yet, however, and caught up to him before he had a chance to climb into a waiting carriage and pulled him off to the side.

"Wait! Potter, hold on!"

"Go away, Weasley."

"Oh, come on. Can't I at least say 'thank you'? You saved my life! I haven't felt this good in weeks!"

"You're welcome. Goodbye."

"Whoa, whoa, what's your hurry? Off to save orphans from a fire?" the Slytherin laughed. Harry wasn't buying his good cheer, and his glare pointedly told him so. Ron sobered, his smile melting from his face.

"I screwed up."

"No shit. What happened?"

Ron fidgeted. "It was going well enough for the most part, it was just at the end see. There was this cat. I was suppose to... you know. Bleed it. I thought it would be easy, but... it struggled... and the knife slipped and I cut myself instead, and the cat got away. Then it all pretty much exploded in my face."

Harry found himself thinking of the sianach he had killed, how easily the knife had slipped in and out, but the blood hadn't been as controllable. It ahd been on his face and his clothes before he could finish. Voldemort had been there to show him how to do it, to understand the meaning behind what he had done, the horrifying beauty of it.

And here was Ron, ignorant and arrogant, thinking he could control what he couldn't even begin to understand. He had tried to use the death of an innocent animal to beget the murder of another man without any respect for what he was doing, and the gods had given him a metaphorical slap to the face for it. It was infuriating and pitiful, and he didn't want to deal with it.

"I'm not going to help you fix this. I bought you time. Use it to find a solution yourself."

"Potter, give me a break! I've been trying since it happened. The book I used had counter curses for this sort of thing, but the thing burned during the accident! Without that book, I have no clue what I'm doing. You figured out in half a minute what I couldn't figure out in two months! Please! I've never begged for a thing in my life, until today. I need your help."

Harry spun around, ready to punch the other in the face, but Ron stumbled and fell before it landed.

"Just like you needed my help to murder?" he snarled like a cornered animal. "You brought this on yourself. Talk to Snape, talk to the Celtic studies teacher, hell, talk to Madam Pomfrey, but don't talk to me. I wash my hands of you."

And with that, he stalked away, leaving the other sitting stupefied in the dirt.

~ Author's Notes~

In case you haven't figured it out, Ron did try to curse Lucius Malfoy, and he was unknowingly successful even though it blew up in his face. The curse does not act directly, it's much more subtle. It manipulates events around the victim so that they die, in this case it would appear my Tom's poisoning. No one is noticing, including the Dark Lord, because the curse won't let them. So no, Lord V is not just being stupid or unobservant, he's just not immune to the curse, especially when he doesn't know to look for it.

Book VI:

Chapter 9: Everything Changes

Auror Commander Mandalari was a man of moderation. Too much of anything, good or bad, always led to disaster as far as he was concerned. Which was why after almost three months stationed in London, pillaging the heathen city with barely so much as a wrist slap from the Dark Lord's supposedly formidable army, he was feeling anxious and his fellow soldiers were like-wise uneasy. The battle of York had been more than bad luck. The ease with which their forces had been dispatched, by a single wizard no less (albeit one of the servants of the Dark One), had brought a sudden and stark realization to him and his comrades.

They had taken London, and they remained there, because that was exactly where the Dark Lord wanted them. Even discounting York, their handful of attempts to attack other cities had gone poorly, and they had been unable to do more than cause some property damage and kill a handful of civilians and soldiers, and always at a price. A price their captured city had not been able to pay.

London had been a strategically sound attack point for a number of reasons. It was the center of government, art, education, etc. and its loss should have thrown the country into chaos and destroyed British morale. The overwhelming wealth of the city should also have financed the invasion and the continuing battles for decades. Their attack, however, had been pre-empted, and much of the wealth and governmental infrastructure had been moved from the city. The universities had been closed that spring, the museums and libraries emptied or else made impenetrable, the government offices spread to different cities across the country. What wealth remained was found in the private dwellings of the city's more affluent neighborhoods, but extracting valuables from these places required specialized training and time, making their earnings moderate at best. They had been so pleased with ease of their victory at the beginning that it had taken them several weeks to realize their great triumph was only a mediocre one.

It was painful to accept, and some still had not. Mandalari had accepted it as a devil's trick, and fortified his spirit against what was to come. He was a veteran, old enough to remember Grindelwald and the sacrifices that had been made to keep him from gaining a foothold in the motherland. Raised in this place, this new, stronger, subtler evil stretched its hand across Europe to continue where his predecessor had failed. Britain would have to be destroyed; the pagan taint that permeated it wiped clean with prayer, fire, and iron will. If they did not, the ungodly magics and teachings would spread and corrupt the people.

It had been a long time coming. England, Scotland, and Wales had always been resistant to the spread of Catholicism, and the quickest to throw it off with their heretical Church of England. The Irish remained stubbornly steadfast in their faith, but they were surrounded on all sides and at all times by the fiendish fairy folk and always on the cusp of falling, having neither the strength nor will to do away with their eldritch neighbors altogether. It was no surprise to Mandalari or anyone else that the wellspring of this evil should spring from these ancient shores. They had been the final hiding place for Old Ways after all*.

This was their final great battle against the Old Ways, and nothing less than their souls were at stake here. While Germany, France, and all the others worried about borders and sovereignty, the wizards and witches of Italy saw the greater scheme. Germany had kicked the hornet's nest, but it was merely an excuse the Dark Lord had been waiting for. Any fool could see the creature had been prepared, had been biding his time and building his strength, while Europe buried its head in the sand and waited for it all to just go away. Already the corruption was spreading across the Continent, the people quivering in fear or adoration and all of it feeding the power of the foulest conjurer of their age.

London had been a baited trap, a diversion, but Mandalari was not stupid. They could not linger for much longer. Any true progress had to be made outside the capitol city, in places of legitimate strategy and of magical corruption. They would find the ancient places, the places of power that the Dark Lord coveted, and that tainted the world, and they would destroy them and with them the source of his strength.

Mandalari moved through the rubble to the former Ministry building. The structure had been sealed after the destruction of the former Ministry of Magic, and the Italian Aurors had been making use of it, finding it a fitting new base of operation. There were ghosts in the building, spirits of former office workers and Aurors, who welcomed them there with a ghostly spite against their mutual enemies or else kept their distance and their silence. The entire building was gradually falling into a grandiose dilapidation, the magic used to support it neglected for fifteen years, and the elements very slowly making their way into the walls. The portraits hanging throughout were faded, and the subjects were sluggish and bleary eyed, rarely moving from their respective frame. The charmed windows in the levels below overlooked a sunny harbor somewhere in Cornwall, everyday, twenty four hours a day and played havoc with everyone's sense of time. The architecture was still sound though, and the columns and arches and marble stairwells and gilded lamps still maintained their splendor, albeit under a fine layer of dust. One of the other soldiers had managed to get the fountain in the courtyard working, and the soft sound of splashing water made the place seem almost lively at times. Someone else had placed crucifixes around the necks of the witch and the wizard statues, and something about that cheered Mandalari up whenever he saw it.

God was on their side. Of that, he was absolutely certain.

He passed through the courtyard and into the building's internal offices. There were several that had built in anti-spying wards and he was happy to make use of them. Mandalari was the last to arrive, but no one dared scold his tardiness. He was a busy man and a respected man. It didn't matter that he was late to a meeting he himself had called.

"Gentlemen," he said, addressing the dozen witches and wizards gathered within the large oval shaped conference room. Many of them, he had handpicked himself, and he was pleased to see the resolve in their hard expressions and pitiless eyes. "... I believe I have found our next target."

~ Page Break~

Tonks gripped tightly to her partner's hand, reminding him, sometimes painfully, that they were not running away. She had told him before their mission that they were absolutely not to run or fidget or look around nervously. There wasn't much she could do about the later two, except hiss angrily at him every so often, but she could keep him from running.

"People remember runners," she said crossly, as they made their way towards Rue du Manquant, the last completely wizarding street this side of Paris before they hit the muggle parts of the city. "And for God's sake, Elton, stop fidgeting. Here, hold the umbrella."

"Well, excuse me. I don't have a lot of practice with this sort of thing," the man beside her grumbled in English, but took the umbrella nonetheless. He was a little younger than her and handsome enough when he wasn't being mulish. She was already quite sick of him and his seemingly unending incompetence. His only contribution thus far was his ability to get them inside the office building where he worked as a janitor, and since then had been pestering her with questions or drawing unwanted attention or just generally being a rank amateur. Her own short temper wasn't helping matters, but it had been cold and raining for days, her contacts in Paris had been unreliable, and her sleep had been poor so it was unlikely to improve anytime soon.

"If you can't handle it, then you shouldn't-"

Her chastisement was cut off by a loud rumble and a slight tremor beneath their feet. Around them, Parisians cried out in alarm, and there was a loud crash of breaking glass and china from the nearby cafes as people dropped or knocked over their dishes. It only lasted a moment, and then stopped. Witches and wizards swarmed out into the street with their wands drawn, looking for the source of the explosion, while families with children remained in the relative safety of the stores and restaurants, looking out curiously through the windows. Tonks and her companion stopped and stared as well, as irresistibly drawn to the sight of chaos as everyone else.

"Where is the Chambre les Affaires étrangères? We should be able to see the turrets from here?" a woman shouted in French.

"Mon dieu! Mon dieu!"

"Was there anyone inside?"

"I think it's closed on Sunday, but who knows?"

"Where are the Aurors? They should be-"

A loud siren rang through the city, briefly cutting off the crowd's growing agitation. It was not the high wailing sound typical of muggle sirens, which seemed to provoke an immediate sense of panic. The wizarding alarm was a low bellow that rattled the windows and seemed to freeze the people in their tracks. Unlike muggles, it was an alarm meant to summon fighters rather than scare away potential victims.

Within moments, several individuals separated themselves from the crowd and began running towards the summons, and less than a minute later Aurors and Musketeers were zipping overhead, flying low along the streets to keep from being seen by muggles.

"It's time to go," Tonks finally said, and moved her companion quietly away towards the muggle side of town. He was pale and unresisting as she led him through an empty alleyway, at the end of which they would go their separate ways. Before they could reach the end, however, they found their way blocked by two Aurors. Elton stiffened beside her, instinctively dropped the umbrella and tried for his wand, but she held fast to his arm and picked up the dropped item.

"Ah! You scared us!" she said, attempting to cover up the mistake, lifting the umbrella back over their heads and smiling apologetically.

One of the Aurors, a middle aged women with a severe mouth, seemed to notice but did not immediately react. Her partner, young and with a rather contrite expression lifted his empty hand in a halting motion.

"I am sorry madam, monsieur, but I must ask you to go back. The inner section of the city is cordoned off for safety reasons."

Tonks adopted her best, wide-eyed and frightened look.

"Safety? But surely it is not safe here? Are we under attack? What if another building blows up? Please, monsieur let us go home! We left the children with my mother and they will be terribly frightened!" she begged in French.

The young Auror looked sympathetic, but his senior partner remained unmoved, and more importantly her eyes narrowed suspiciously.

"You are married?" the Auror asked.

"Oui," she said, daring a glance at her 'husband' who looked like a deer caught in the headlights.

"Then where are your rings?"

Tonks faltered for a moment, and it was all the justification the Auror needed to draw her wand. Beside her Elton spooked, and foolishly pulled his arm free of her to go for his own wand. The stunning hex hit him before he could even pull his hand from his robe. Tonks' reflexes were faster. She grabbed Elton before he fell completely and shoved him into the Auror, knocking her down.

"Petrificus totalus!" she snapped out, catching the younger Auror before he could overcome his shock, and then bolted for the other end of the alley and back out into wizarding Paris. She just managed to turn the corner before a hex flew passed her, and she didn't bother stopping to throw one back. The city was sealed and she needed to find a way out as quickly as possible.

But Paris was not her city. It was an old city, but too progressive for her to make much sense of it. Witches and wizards here drove cars and rode bicycles rather than walked and flooed and apparated, and it changed how the streets and buildings were laid out in ways she had never considered. Once she had lost her pursuers in a lucky turn into a crowd of people and quickly changed her hair from straight black to honey blond curls, she forced herself to stop running. She

had no place prepared to hide in except the crowd, and for that she couldn't run unless they did so as well.

Within a few minutes, a public announcement was ringing through the streets.

"At approximately 6:37pm an explosion at the Chambre les Affaires étrangères has occurred. No casualties are being reported at this time, and a suspect has been apprehended by city Aurors. The inner city has been temporarily sealed to search for additional suspects. Please move to Rue du Manquent, Rue du Araignée, or Rue du Rogét in a calm and orderly fashion, where Aurors will be present to escort you out of the city. Please have identification ready for examination. More announcements will be issued as necessary. Thank you for your cooperation."

Tonks winced internally. Her French wasn't nearly as good as her German, but she knew she was in trouble. She had not expected security to be so tight or well organized. It was a sloppy mistake on her part. One she was likely going to have to pay for. Around her, the crowd buzzed with excited speculation, but moved steadily towards the evacuation points. They were not going in a direction Tonks wanted to follow, but if she tried to move against the crowd she would soon be noticed and already she could see Aurors moving into position on street corners. Her description had likely been circulated along with news of Elton's arrest already.

Gradually, she moved out of the crowd and into a café where patrons were still gathering, waiting out the crowds or else gathering more news about what was happening. She did her best to seem inconspicuous, ordering a cup of coffee while she tried to figure out what she was going to do. She had few options. She could hide, but she didn't know the city well enough to find a place that an Auror couldn't. She could make a run for it, and would almost certainly be caught. She could try to sneak through the check points. The last one was risky for a variety of reasons, not so much because she was worried about being recognized (her natural shapeshifting abilities would take care of that), but because she had no papers and her wand was traceable from the spell she had used on the Auror.

Ah hell, she had charmed her way through check points before.

The bad weather that had dogged her throughout her stay in Paris proved itself a boon. The rain began to fall harder, bringing on a premature night and a convenient excuse to hide behind the high collar of her rain-proof robes and the plain black umbrella she purchased at the café. Aurors and civilians alike were wet and impatient, eager to be done and gone. By eight, it was completely dark and skirmishes were erupting in the crowd, as Tonks made her way slowly up the Rue du Araignée. She started a few of them herself with a silent, well placed pushing hex, distracting an Auror who took a second glance too long at her as she passed.

Ahead of her she could see the crowd divided into three lines, each line passing through two or three Aurors who were checking identification and asking the people questions. She chose the line on the furthest left, where the Aurors were looking the most harried and impatient and the civilians were meeting their attitude with some of their own, further aggravating the situation. As she drew nearer the checkpoint, so that only three or four people were in front of her, she cast a very light shoving charm on the wizard ahead of the one in front of her.

The wizard, a heavy set man with a thick white beard, spun around to face a tall, thin young wizard.

"You insolent cub! I ought to backhand you into next Thursday!"

The thin man sneered, albeit with some uncertainty. "What are you talking about? I haven't done anything."

"You have been whining like a baby ever since you started standing behind me, thinking I can't hear you muttering! And now you shove me, and think I won't notice that either?"

"I didn't touch you!"

By now the Aurors were done with the people ahead and calling the elder man forward, but the man was ignoring them in favor of taking his frustration out on the other. The thin wizard wasn't rising to the

bait, but he wasn't calming things down either as he continued to deny his guilt and further incite his accuser. Predictably, a scuffle broke out, and the Aurors had to rush in to pull them apart. During the distraction, Tonks slipped behind them and slipped by.

She let out a sigh of relief as she walked away, still caught in the crowd. A little smile managed to find its way onto her face and for the first time that day things seemed to be looking up for her.

"Excuse me, madame," someone called. Tonks didn't pay much attention. There were several people outside the check points waiting for friends and family to come out, despite the heavy rain. "Madame! You in the dark green robes."

Tonks froze. She was wearing dark green robes. Hesitantly, she turned around. A girl, perhaps only a year or two out of school, and dressed in the blue and silver robes of a Musketeer was moving towards her. Something about her pretty pale face seemed familiar, but Tonks couldn't immediately think of from where. Keeping a cool head, she smiled a bit nervously at her.

"Yes, is something wrong?"

Despite being so young, the girl had a very confident expression, completely different from young Auror she had stunned earlier that day. Musketeers were said to be the elite, a step above even the finest Aurors, and she wasn't entirely sure what she was facing now. The young witch's stare was very serious and focused, her eyes flitting over her quickly to assess where she was keeping her wand and what she was carrying or potentially hiding. Tonks felt her luck had run out.

"I am going to have to check your identification, please."

"But I just-" she tried to protest.

"No you did not," the girl said sharply, daring her to lie.

Tonks went for sheepish.

"You saw that did you? Sorry. It's just been a really long day, and I didn't want to have to wait there another ten minutes because some idiot caused trouble. Umm, let me see... would you mind holding my umbrella for a second while I get it out?"

The girl hesitated for the first time, but reached for the umbrella with the hand opposite her wand. Tonks went for her wand. The Musketeer immediately kicked her in the stomach, knocking her onto her back. She threw the open umbrella at her, knocking the girl's arm movement out of synch with her spell, before throwing up one of her own.

"Expelliarmus!"

The Musketeer flew back several meters into a handful of civilians, but clutched stubbornly to her wand. It only took a few seconds for her to clear her head and climb shakily to her feet, but Tonks was already sprinting down the street, dodging in between pedestrians as she went. She dared a glance behind her to see several Aurors and another musketeer giving chase behind her. She tried to apparate, but soon felt the resistance of anti-apparation wards and didn't try again.

Turning down an alley filled with junk, she ran and leaped and dodged about as she went. Behind her, she could hear spells being shouted at her and the sound of smashing wood and breaking glass where they struck creates and bottles. Out of the mouth of the alley, she ran towards the street, only to leap back as a sleek silver car swerved to avoid running her over. Atop its hood a glowing sign read 'Taxi Parisien'.

She was in muggle Paris!

From the alley, her pursuers began to pour out, heedless of their surroundings as they raised their wands to attack. Throwing off her green robe, she bolted into the street traffic, ignoring the blaring of horns as she went. A loud 'wump' behind her meant someone else hadn't managed to make it across the same way. Across the street, she ducked into a shop and ran straight through, splattering postcards and nicnacs with her rain soaked clothes, and kept going

straight on into the back of the store with the cashier behind the counter screaming obscenities at her. The back door was locked, but she blasted it open with a spell. Into another alley, and then blasting in through another backdoor into what appeared to be a tailors and then out into another street, turning left towards the busiest street she could find. She tried to hail a taxi, but they seemed to swerve out of her way. Chances were she looked ten kinds of crazy running around in the rain in combat boots and a knitted dress. Not her best fashion choice, but it seemed to matter when she was wearing her robes.

Or perhaps it was the ten or so other crazies in robes running after her that made her such an undesirable fare. The sidewalks were all but deserted, even though the streets themselves were packed with commuters, and she had to duck into traffic twice to dodge a hex. As fast as she ran and as many trick turns as she tried to take, there was always someone behind her, slowly closing in, and she still had no idea where she was going. A wrong turn led her onto a street of storefronts with no alleys to duck into, and she was running out of breath. She made an attempt to run through a dinner, but as she flung the door open a curse caught her head on in the chest, and sent her flying. She landed roughly on the pavement and rolled into the gutter between two cars parked along the street, losing her wand in an open drain.

"Don't move! Don't move or I'll blow your damn head off!"

Tonks, barely clinging to consciousness, her body going into shock from the spell and the cold, glanced up blearily at her attacker. It was the girl from before. Her pretty face was twisted into something not quite human, her blond locks flying around her as if caught in a gale. Delacour, she thought, finally remembering where she had seen the girl before, and realized it was a fairly useless tidbit of information now.

She calculated the odds of managing to roll into the street and surviving to tell the tale, and found them very poor. Her wand was lost, probably washed away, and a part of her mourned its loss more than her own capture.

"Let me see your hands!" Delacour commanded, just as a second Musketeer and several Aurors caught up with her.

"Good work. I wish I still had your stamina," the elder Musketeer said, breathing heavily from the running. He trained his wand on Tonks now as well, but turned to speak to the Aurors. "Take care of any muggle witnesses. We'll wrap up here."

Delacour still had not moved her eyes from where they were trained on Tonks, her barely contained rage was not the least bit sated as her prey placed her empty hands in front of her on the sidewalk. The metamorphmagus glared death right back at her, the affect she felt was somewhat dimmed given that she was not using her true eyes to deliver it.

"Well, Miss Guttersnipe, perhaps you wouldn't mind climbing out of there? Preferably, with your hands where we can see them," the older Musketeer said smugly.

Slowly, Tonks pushed herself up, the metal grate digging into her knees. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. Once she was standing, that was it. She was done. Her mission was over and all she could do was fight to hold onto her secrets for as long as possible, waiting for death or imprisonment or both.

But that was the way of it. She had known from the beginning when she had joined the Order of the Phoenix that the end of her story wasn't going to be a pleasant one. There was nothing to regret. She was leaving no one behind. Her husband was dead, her parents were dead, most of her friends too, and those few that remained understood this was to be their own sacrifice eventually.

She hoped it wasn't for nothing. That her mission wasn't a frivolous as it first appeared and that her efforts would mean more than a side note in history. She hoped Viktor forgave her when she saw him again. The time seemed to becoming soon.

She opened her eyes, preparing to stand.

And stopped.

Ten long, pale fingers rose up from between the metal grate beneath her, curling around the thick metal on either side of her knees. She blinked once, and then the grate was pulled clean out from under her. Screaming, she fell through the darkened hole and into the sewer below. Icy cold water sprung up to meet her, swallowing her down into a rapid current. Frantically, she struggle to swim, but the water was filled with debris; trash, branches, dead and not so dead things.

Then something grabbed her, hard and powerful and too cold to be truly alive. It pulled her up and out of the water, and into its arms, and then they were moving. The movement was too fast, too intense and inside her stomach filthy water sloshed nauseatingly. She struggled on instinct; against sickness, against panic, against the incredible strength of the arms around her.

"Stop!" she found herself saying, first in English, then in French.

But her captor didn't stop, and the movement around them became more jarring as it seemed to be leaping now, up and down and over, water from the streets above raining down on them at some point along with the noise of traffic. A particularly long fall downwards, and the sudden stop was all it took before she started gagging, and at last she was set shakily on her feet, vomiting into the water that reached up to her elbows.

"I do apologize," a voice; male, German, and somewhat mocking said, echoing against the wet stone walls around them. It was pitch black in the sewer, but obviously it didn't seem to bother the man... creature... whatever it was. "I thought we needed to make a certain amount of distance from our spell-happy friends. We're almost two and half miles now. That should be sufficient, if you wish to apparate. If you dare, in your current condition anyway."

"Who- who are you?" she asked, and then added after a moment. "What are you?"

"You can't guess? I don't blame you for being a bit slow on the uptake. That Musketeer gave you quite a nasty blow. My name is irrelevant. I don't think we'll meet again."

She remained silent, absorbing that information. It was difficult to think. She was cold, and she probably did have a concussion.

"Are you going to kill me?"

"No. I assure you there was far easier prey walking about if that was what I wanted. Besides, you probably taste like sewer now."

"Shut up. That's hardly my fault. Why did you help me then?"

"I was told to."

"By who?"

The creature chuckled softly.

"By the only one who can order a vampire to do anything. Hold out your hand. I have a treat for you."

"No. I don't trust you."

Another laugh.

"Very good, but you'll want this. Every witch and wizard does," he goaded.

Honestly, there wasn't much she could do if he chose to hurt her, and since he obviously had some incentive not to, she did as she was told. Her wand settled back into her hand, a familiar weight that warmed her fingers by its mere presence.

"Lumos!"

Light did nothing to improve her setting. The sewer was ancient, part of the old city; the brick walls were shiny and black, even as they crumbled into the brackish water from invading roots and passing vermin. She spun her wand around, searching for her rescuer, but there was only empty tunnels disappearing into the darkness beyond her wand glow.

"Hey! Are you there? Who are you?" she called, but there was no reply. She was alone or at least meant to think she was. She waited for a minute, collecting her wits and searching in vain for her rescuer. Finally, she could no longer tolerate the cold, cramped darkness of the underground and apparated away with a loud pop.

Further down the tunnel, the vampire waited and watched for the witch to disappear. When she was gone, he made his way back home, moving through the sewers and then higher up into the catacombs after he crossed the beneath the river on the other side of Paris, where the famous crypts and graveyards of the city stood. Paris' underground city was not like Berlin's in layout or texture or smell, but there was something comforting about it nonetheless. His master had chosen their coven's new home well.

He exited the catacombs in Montmartre Cemetery as a shadow, slipping passed the night watchman with no more than few raised hairs on the back of the mortal's neck to mark his passing. A block south of the cemetery, an abandoned paper mill had been converted into loft apartments that suited his coven's needs just fine. The rent was exorbitant, but it had the benefit of being run by muggles who didn't ask questions. His keycard allowed him access to the first level, entering immediately into a lounge where a majority of the coven was gathered. The decadent luxury of Katarina's style was absent here, replaced by an aesthetic of simplicity and open space, not unlike a martial arts dojo or a Bhuddist temple. Quiet and open, it was a place of reflection and unconstrained movement.

It suited his master very well.

"The woman escaped," he announced brazenly, causing several vampires to look up. Viktor was not one of them. He simply turned the page of a large tome in his lap, unmoving from his chair beside the fireplace.

"Good. Did anyone see you?"

"No, not even the woman herself. I don't know if she even understood what I was. She was disoriented from the fight."

"She will work it out eventually."

"Oh? You are familiar with her then? An old friend perhaps?"

"An old acquaintance. She owes us a favor now, and I might call to collect upon it one of these days."

Goethe snickered. His master really was adorable when he played the cold Machiavellian prince.

"Of course, a favor. I do enjoy these games you play. So much more interesting than Katarina's, bless her undead soul."

"This is not a game."

"If there is a winner and a loser, then it is a game," the elder vampire replied teasingly, and headed for the stairs. He needed to wash and change his clothes. While he enjoyed playing with mortals, particularly witches and wizards, running around a sewer during a rainstorm was not his idea of fun. Distracted by the thought of a hot shower, he failed to notice that his last barb had struck home, and Viktor's sharp black gaze was torn from the pages of his book to follow his irascible minion up the stairs.

~ Page Break~

Harry liked Hogwarts. Honestly, he did. Even when it had giant killer snakes in the basement and madmen plotting to kill him and some seriously questionable teaching staff, he generally enjoyed living and studying there. There was something that never grew old about waking up in a the magnificent castle to learn magic. It didn't hurt that he was good at magic, either through natural talent or Voldemort's special brand of tutelage, and that he had a certain set of skills that made learning more magic quite simple. He wouldn't say classes were easy, but aside from the occasional rough patch, he was a good student and enjoyed the leeway that bought him with most of his teachers.

So at the start of sixth year, a wonderful year as far as classes went because there were plenty of interesting electives and no NEWTS or OWLS to worry about at the end of term, Harry was happy enough with his class choices. In addition to the standard Herbology, Advanced Potions, Transfiguration, History of Magic, and Astronomy, he had tested high enough to get out of Charms and DA&D, and into Magical Theory & Spell Design, which left him a free period to take Magical Art again, as well as his semester electives; Magical First Aid (he kept missing that class due to hospitalization it seemed) and Introduction to Military Training. The last one was taught by Lockhart, and not something Harry wanted to associate himself with, but Snape had insisted he take it.

Harry expected it was revenge for existing.

Classes were routine, controlled, and tedious with the occasional educational gem thrown in from time to time. Lately, Harry had even found studying to be a fairly relaxing activity, even if he still didn't enjoy it with the same enthusiasm as Hermione.

It was outside of classes that he found himself struggling with. Harry was popular. Extremely popular, and it was not nearly as enjoyable as people seemed to think it was. It seemed he couldn't find a spare moment where someone didn't want him for something. The Dueling Club had elected him Sr. Dueling Club Vice Captain after Ron's expulsion for missing too many tournaments, and while he enjoyed the club he didn't enjoy his teammates constantly interrupting his meals, study time, commute between classes, or what was supposed to be his leisure time to ask for advice or favors or excuses. This also applied to the inexplicably large number of girls at school who suddenly seemed to want to go out with him. Go out where, he hadn't a clue, because everyone was still pretty much locked in the castle twenty-four seven these days, but he could honestly say he wasn't interested.

Well, he was, but in a purely physical way that all teenage boys are. Honestly, he had bigger things on his plate without worrying about a girlfriend.

At least other students he could deal with. Teachers were a completely different matter. He didn't have Lockhart until second semester (he was secretly hoping he would be hospitalized again to get out of it), but the man kept popping up at random times to offer him 'advice' about this and that and being more popular or something. It was extremely annoying, but he was developing methods of avoiding the man, primarily taking his meals in the tower and changing the routes he traveled to classes everyday. He actually had Slughorn for class and couldn't escape him, however, and while the man wasn't nearly as obnoxious, he was pushy about getting Harry to come to some of his dinner parties. Something Harry didn't want to waste his precious little free time doing. Professor Vector had even cornered him twice in the hall trying to convince him to drop Astronomy in favor of Arithmancy, and try some additional projects similar to the one he had done for his final semester the year before.

The most he could do with these teachers was make vague, noncommittal statements and wait for them to go away.

Somewhere in all of this he apparently had made enemies. He honestly didn't notice them as busy as he was, but his friends assured him they were around. Gary St. James, Ginny's ex-boyfriend, apparently had a whole little club of Harry-Haters, which was sort of funny and sort of sad. Draco informed him they were an unpopular minority, but he couldn't care less one way or another. As long as they weren't plotting his murder, they were free to do what they wanted. He had been shunned by the student body before, and frankly he was finding he preferred it these days

He would have preferred the free time and space that being socially ostracized afforded him to work on his several private projects. His animagus studies had all but ground to a stand still once term had started, and his paganism studies were not faring any better. Most of the time he spent with his friends was eating meals, studying, or their Anti-Betrothal Society meetings (Natalie's title eventually stuck).

"So that's my life this week," Harry finished, setting down his tea cup. Thankfully, it wasn't that god-awful animagus tea, but a simple Earl Grey Snape had provided for their first weekly meeting. Snape was

one of the very few people he hadn't seen since the start of term, and the only other person who seemed even busier than himself.

"Mm..." the headmaster said, not looking up from some document or another. Harry knew better than to think the man hadn't heard him. He had this terrible habit of hearing and remembering everything Harry ever said, and then bringing it up at inopportune moments.

"How's Ira?" he said, conversationally.

"The same as she was last week."

"And you?"

"Busy."

"So I should go?"

"I wish you would. Will you need anything?" I.e. potions to let you sleep, combat pain from previous injuries, or from having a nervous breakdown.

"No. Life is wonderful."

"I will look out for signs of an impending plague."

"I always enjoy our enlivening conversations, sir. Good day."

He set his tea aside and made for the door. As far as weekly meetings went, this one had been unusually brief and pain free. The corridor to the Headmaster's office was blessedly empty of people, and he took a moment to enjoy the silence of it. Now which way should he go? If he went left and took the stairs passed the owlry, he was less likely to run into a teacher but more likely to be cornered alone by a girl. If he went right and took the corridor passed the Transfigurations classroom he ran a greater risk of being spotted by a teacher but held more escape routes to get away from everyone else.

Decisions, decisions. It was times like these that he wished he carried his invisibility cloak with him.

He decided to risk heading by the owlry. He would visit Elsbeth who was likely feeling neglected after a week to herself. With mail being restricted to Thursdays, and no packages allowed without advanced permission, few students visited except on the allotted day. Luckily, there were no admirers hiding behind suits of armor, and he managed to enter the owlry without incident, only to find he wasn't the only one with the same idea.

"Oh, Harry!" Ginny said, somewhat flustered at being caught off guard.

"Potter," Ron said with a forced sort of congeniality. "Come on in we were just talking business."

Reluctantly, he did so, moving towards Elsbeth so that he could direct his attention on something other than his homicidal idiot of a 'business partner'.

"So," the other boy continued. "I've already gotten some orders in from my house. It's ridiculous what people forget to bring back from summer vacation. If we shake down the other three houses, I bet we could make 50 galleons easy for the first delivery if it's within a month."

Ginny shook her head.

"You mean if I shook down the other three houses. I don't see why you can't talk to the Ravenclaws yourself."

"They don't like me."

"They don't trust you," Harry couldn't help but correct. "And not surprising after you swindled half the House at cards."

Ron had the gall to look indignant.

"Not my fault they didn't apply their big brains to more practical pursuits."

"Cards?" Ginny asked, skeptically.

"Cheating," Harry corrected.

"Ron!"

Her brother merely shrugged.

"Well, then talk to the Hufflepuffs."

"Meh."

The youngest Weasley's eyes narrowed.

"Then don't. I'm not wasting my time doing your half of the work. We'll just make less money."

"Fine. Merlin, don't have a troll. I'll talk to the Powderpuffs, alright?"

"Good. And don't try cheating them either. We're sticking to Fred and George's rate, and not a knut higher."

"Oh, come on. Inflation! Everything's more expensive now!"

"Not a knut more!" she insisted adamantly. Ron looked to Harry for support, but he kept his eyes firmly on Elsbeth, stroking her feathers affectionately. The Weasley siblings argued for a bit longer, but Slytherin guile had nothing on Gryffindor stubbornness, and eventually Ron gave up. There was more discussion about other aspects of the business, who knew what and how much and what to do if a teacher caught them. Harry listened with half an ear. Most of it didn't concern him. His part was simple and straightforward, however critical, and he trusted Ginny to look after his profits at the end of their little venture. Over all it took about twenty minutes for them to iron out the details, at which point Elsbeth had grown tired of Harry's attention and was nipping his fingers in annoyance.

Ginny was in a short temper and left quickly, stomping down the stairs. Harry followed afterwards, but was halted by Ron's hand on his shoulder. He paused reluctantly, and glanced over his shoulder.

"Are you still mad?" the redhead asked.

"It doesn't concern me anymore," he replied emotionlessly. Honestly, he hadn't had the time or the inclination to worry about the curse since classes started. He preferred to keep it that way. Ron looked around the owlry, awkwardly avoid his gaze.

"I don't know where to start looking."

"Where you got the first book, I imagine."

"The shopkeeper didn't have any other copies. He didn't know if there were any others."

"Try a professional book dealer, then."

"I don't have that sort of money."

"I should think fifty galleons worth of your profits would be plenty," he said, although honestly he didn't know. He didn't know the rates of book dealers, but it probably depended on what they were asked to find. Ron looked ready to protest, but he held up his hand to silence him.

"I don't care. Ask Hermione, she probably knows how to find rare books. Figure it out."

He shoved Ron's hand from his shoulder and left him standing there, looking frustrated, alone, and a bit frightened. It wasn't his concern, he reminded himself. The Slytherin wasn't one of his friends or family, and he certainly hadn't been responsible for the mess he had gotten himself into. Eventually, he would figure it out. He had already bought him some time.

He had his own problems to sort out.

~ Page Break~

Viktor made it a point to wander wizarding Paris at least once a week. While he had an established network of spies and observers amongst his minions, he found going out into the world encouraged them to be more thorough in their own investigations. No one wanted to have to explain why they had told their Master one thing and he had found out it was another. On a more personal note, he liked gauging the local atmosphere himself every once in a while.

It was nearly a week after the explosion of Chambre les Affaires étrangères, and he wanted to get a feel for the city after that, no doubt nerve-wracking, ordeal. Unsurprisingly, the atmosphere was tense. At the royal palace, witches and wizards protested against the recent treaty with Britain, many of them British refugees themselves, while native Parisians complained about their pretentious, cowardly behavior in newspapers and street side conversations. While there was general agreement that the response of the city defenses had been prompt and thorough, there was a continuing scandal over the escape of one of the suspects which had occurred outside the security check points.

Viktor got a strange feeling whenever he looked at a newspaper and saw Fleur's pretty face glaring fiercely out at him. A combination of respect and smugness that reminded him of simpler, if not more innocent, days as competitors in the triwizard tournament.

If there is a winner and a loser, then it is a game.

Goethe's words were still bothering him a week later. He had never thought of his resistance against the Dark Lord's encroachment on the free world as a game, but the more time he was left to reflect (and he found time was something he had in abundance) the more he realized he had been treating it like one. It was all about who won and who lost, and not what he hoped to achieve by winning or what would be destroyed by losing. He had a vague sense that important things would be lost by the Dark Lord's invasion of Europe, but until he could pinpoint exactly what those things were he felt uneasy and restless.

There was a letter in the study of the loft addressed to Dumbledore. He hadn't gotten two sentences through it, and despite several

attempts to complete it, he had made no progress. Something inside him recoiled at the thought of placing himself under the thumb of that wise wizard a second time, and if he revealed himself alive he had no doubt that was exactly what would happen. He and his coven would become pawns, and as much as he despised his own kind they were his and he would not sell them as cannon fodder for anyone's morality other than his own.

"Master Viktor?" a timid voice called from the shadows of an alleyway as he passed. He didn't turn to look or act in anyway surprised, and it wasn't until the vampiress left the confines of her hiding place to follow him that he acknowledged her presence. She was a tall, beautiful woman with reddish brown hair and red lipstick that spoke of a blatant confidence in her self and her sexuality, yet following behind him she seemed somehow shy and reserved.

"What do you want, child?" he asked.

The chances were she was decades, perhaps even centuries older than him, but as minion she would always be a child to him. Small, helpless, dependent. If only in spirit.

"M-my master would like...ah...a moment of your time," she said, beseechingly.

He made an annoyed grunt.

"My time is precious to me. What is he going to offer me for it?" he challenged.

The vampiress was taken back, and unreasonably flustered. While not all minions were completely spineless, this one clearly didn't have experience as a go between for two Masters. Or else Viktor was making a vampiric social faux pas she didn't know how to deal with. He'd have to ask Goethe later. No doubt he would get a titter or two out of it.

"Never mind. Take me to him."

She scurried to comply but ended up having to stop several times when he didn't speed up his own pace to follow her. Taking his time to observe the other pedestrians, glancing at newspapers laying by newsstands or abandoned on the street, listening to the radios of cars (still something he had not gotten used to seeing in a wizarding city), and counting the Aurors patrolling the streets or peeking out of windows, Viktor made it clear he had no intention of jumping at her Master's beck and call. He had dealings with the elder vampire when he had first arrived in the city, and had made it clear from the beginning he was not afraid of the other.

Master Clarión lived firmly inside the boundaries of wizarding Paris, and as a result was a prisoner in his own home. There were always Aurors posted outside his town house, watching the comings and goings of his coven with suspicious eyes and twitching wands. Viktor flicked up the hood of his cape well before coming into sight of the house. Let the Aurors be suspicious. As long as they didn't identify him, it was not his concern. His guide led him inside, offering to take his cloak, but he shooed her away. He had no intention of staying long.

Clarión was not as extravagant as Katarina had been, but he was a creature of comfort and his home reflected that. There were a great number of overstuffed sofas and chairs throughout the house, and pieces of art and large vases overflowing with flowers at every corner to tempt one to sit and admire their surroundings for a while. Altogether distracting, and not to Viktor's rather utilitarian tastes.

He didn't need to follow his guide any further, and moved purposefully to the second floor and the third door down the hallway, entering without waiting to be announced. Clarión looked up from the mortal he had been suckling, and dropped her back onto the bed with something close to exasperation.

"Lessons in manners would do you some good. Knocking would be one of the first," he sneered, standing up. The elder vampire was taller than Viktor, leaner and smoother in his movements, but he was not stronger and that was made clear by the fact he didn't offer to teach Viktor manners himself. His 'victim', a sultry little muggle

laughed stupidly into the bedding beneath her and curled where she lay. They both ignored her.

"What do you want?" he said without preamble. He didn't come to make social niceties with the undead, even from the residing Master of Paris.

"I summoned you a week ago."

"If you had bothered to step outside of your little cage, I might have actually received the message. Again, what do you want?"

For a moment, Clarión's handsome features pinched as if he had just bitten into a lemon, but then instantly fell smooth and calm.

"What was your involvement with the explosion of the Chambre les Affaires étrangères?"

"I had no involvement."

"And yet it was one from your coven who helped a suspect escape."

It seemed Viktor was going to have to punish someone back home for gossiping.

"I was uninvolved there as well," he said, without missing a beat.

"And yet she escaped through your tunnels. Yours and the rats"

Viktor actually rolled his eyes at that.

"My coven and I make use of the underground, that doesn't mean we hold exclusive rights to it. If the terrorist was clever enough to make use of them, then she's cleverer than some," he couldn't help slipping in the barb after the 'rats' comment. "Or else desperate. She probably drowned. It would be foolish to send my people into a sewer during a rainstorm."

Unless it was a Master of even greater strength than his own. And who would have such a creature counted amongst his minions?

Clarión looked decidedly sour at that piece of irrefutable logic. He had no proof, just a strong suspicion, and that was not enough to move against the arrogant cub standing impatiently in the doorway. If he had the power, or rather the confidence, to kill Viktor himself he would have the night he had first stepped foot into his city. There was something decidedly off about the master, more than his young age and unflappable calm. He had killed his Mistress on the first night of his resurrection and taken her coven as his own, moving from the destruction of Berlin and straight to Paris, spreading like a sort of disease. From the beginning, Viktor had not behaved as visiting master nor as a potential rival should have behaved. He was uninterested in vampire decorum and lived and moved with a flagrant disregard of both wizards and Clarión himself. To this day, he still did not know where Viktor lived or how many made up his coven, and the hand full of times he had managed to pull the young master into his house he had been evasively silent in all things.

He did not know much about his guest, but he did know this: the boy had plans, plans that should not concern a vampire, and that put everyone at risk. He had voiced his suspicions in letters to other masters in neighboring cities, but no one had taken him seriously. To them, it was another power struggle between two rival covens, and none of their concern. He suspected they would soon regret their dismissal.

"If you are done wasting both our time," Viktor said, sharply and turned to leave. Clarión nearly stopped him, but then realized he no more wanted him in his house than the other wished to be there. Better to hold off this battle of wills for another night. Viktor was resourceful, but Paris was not his city. Not yet. Given time the elder master would find the proof he needed to destroy Viktor without recrimination from the rest of their community, but until then...

He turned to the woman curled up into the duvet and smirked.

~ Page Break~

Despite the halt in construction at Hogwarts and the delayed plans to convert the castle into a private preparatory college, Hogsmeade's

real estate was in higher demand than ever. The evacuation of several wizarding cities and the over abundance of young people in need of cheap housing in absence of university dormitories, meant the little village was growing rapidly into a small city.

Severus idly wondered what that would mean for Hogsmeade weekends once things were peaceful enough again for them to resume. It was far easier to supervise two dozen shops and businesses than the nearly sixty buildings that had sprung up since the Triwizard tournament. If he were lucky, the return to peace time would mean the village would once again shrink to a more manageable size, but somehow he doubted it.

"Does it look so terribly different?" Ira asked him as they rode down the cobble stone street (a new addition) in the Hogwart's carriage, towards the row of townhouses at the edge of the village. The townhouses had been constructed during the Triwizard tournament to house visiting diplomats, but had sense been rented out to Hogsmeade's more affluent new residents.

"I can recognize certain shops... but the village itself is unrecognizable," he admitted. Something like nostalgia threatened to turn into melancholy, and he ruthlessly squashed it. He was not a sentimental man and had no intention of becoming one. "All things change in time."

She tightened her grip on his arm slightly, a gesture of comfort for what he did not say as well as what he did, but tactfully said nothing more about it. All things change, and sometimes it was for the better. She was living proof of that.

They exited the carriage at the end of the road and were met by a middle-aged witch in a trendy grey robes and oversized heals. She grinned like a salesperson and shook both their hands firmly upon introduction.

"I've got two excellent houses to show you today," she said pleasantly, immediately leading the way to the nearest townhouse. Snape noted critically, that the wooden steps creaked. A sign of poor workmanship and spellcraft after only a few years of construction.

"This one is three stories and a cellar, three bedrooms, two baths, a full kitchen, sitting area, lots of storage space."

"It would have to since it doesn't have much floor space," the potions master muttered as they entered. While he didn't mind living in a small home, he didn't honestly want to live in a crowded home. And something about the place seemed distinctly claustrophobic. Probably the lack of windows on the walls they shared with their neighbors.

"It's not that different from my mom's flat in London," Ira pointed out. "Let's look around a bit."

The rest of the house was not as bad as Snape had first thought from the foyer. The kitchen was small but functional, as was the dining room and parlor, all on the first floor. The second floor held two bedrooms, also small, but the master had its own bath and view that looked out from the edge of town to the Scottish countryside and even Hogwarts was just visible at the far corner of the window. Top floor was a completed attic and largest room in the house and had two small round windows on either side overlooking both the town and the village.

"It would make an excellent nursery. A crib on one side and a play area on the other," Ira pointed out. The realtor jumped to expound upon that virtue.

"If you throw up a few more spells you won't have to worry about leaving toys all over the house, and it's far enough out of the way that everyone can get a little space."

He considered carefully.

"There are a lot of narrow stairs," he pointed out, "And I doubt there are anti-slipping spells on them either. They creak badly."

"The better to keep track of the children, dear. I can do the anti-slipping spells myself. The house will have to be prepared for a new baby regardless of what we chose."

"Let's look at the other place first, and see how they compare," he said noncommittally. As they made their way out of the house and further down the row, Snape had a sudden sense of unreality. He was married. He was going to be a father. He was shopping for a flat to rent to keep both near Hogwarts, where he himself was in charge.

He had been domesticated.

Good bloody hell, how had that happen? Hadn't he been fighting violent battles and navigating political intrigue only a few months ago? Was he still doing that? It seemed like it had been years since he had lifted his wand or brewed a potion for anything more serious than his own research and tormenting his troublesome ward. Surely, it all didn't stop just like that? It was far too convenient.

Irrationally, he found himself looking up and down the street for any sign of demeters or a passing army of orcs. The only thing out of place that he noticed was Ira had a light sheen of sweat on her forehead.

"Are you are right? You seem flushed."

She smiled ruefully.

"You were right about the stairs. There were a lot of them."

The second place was at the end of the row, which meant three of the four walls had windows, but was otherwise very similar to the first house. The attic had been converted into the master suite complete with a bath, but Snape found the sloping ceiling irritating. And of course, there was the stairs problem again. Which Ira did not seem to be enjoying.

"Would you mind if I used the loo? I need to freshen up for a moment," she told the realtor. She was even more flushed then before, not surprising perhaps given the additional stairs they had been climbing, but now she was also breathing more rapidly and Snape was starting to become concerned. Maybe it was hormones? Did women get hot flashes when they were pregnant? Or maybe morning sickness? No, it was too soon for that.

He listened with half an ear to the realtor's glowing praise of the neighborhood with young families, the new primary school that was being built a few blocks over, and a great deal of local history he already knew while they waited for Ira to finish up in the nearby bathroom. It was taking her a while, but he didn't want to rush her if she wasn't feeling well. Ten minutes later, even the realtor was looking towards the closed bathroom door with some concern, and Snape had decided to check on her.

"Ira," he called softly through the door, uncomfortably aware of the other woman's close scrutiny. "Are you alright?"

There was no reply for several moments, and then the door opened. She was deathly pale, far more than could be accounted for in the brief time they had been separated, and her eyes were very wide. He could see her pupils were dilated

"Ira-"

"I need you to take me to a medi-wizard," she said, her voice completely without inflection. "Now."

He stared at her. She stared straight ahead for a moment, and then slowly looked down. He followed her gaze.

A drop of blood landed on the wood floor between her feet.

Then another.

And another.

"I'm taking you to Madam Pomfrey," he said, bursting into action. A couple of quick spells to reduce her weight, and he lifted her into his arms and towards the stairs. The realtor jumped out of his way and didn't dare try to stop to ask questions as he fled from the house. Within a minute he was gently depositing his wife in the carriage, and signaling it to return to the castle with a harsh thump on the roof. The vehicle lurched into motion, and as if sensing his haste the thestral broke out into a gallop.

Turning back to his wife, he checked her vitals. She was feverish, her pulse rapid, and she seemed unable to focus. She was going into shock. Was it because she was sick or because she was just horrified that-

"Ira! Ira, can you hear me? Ira, answer me... it will be okay. You're going to be okay, but you have to remain calm."

She didn't respond. Didn't even look at him. He contemplated turning around and going to the village doctor. There was a new one with a clinic within the village proper. He dismissed the idea almost immediately. He didn't need a waiting room and a young pup floundering around his potion's cabinet. He needed a healer with a cool head, a quick mind, and experience with this... sort of thing. Because while Hogwarts was a school, it was school of healthy young people a little too eager to play grown-up games, and... accidents happened. Accidents that Pomfrey had always handled discreetly, one way or another, through whatever complications arose.

The carriage ride to the castle seemed to stretch on for eternity.

~ Page Break~

Harry heard about Ira's admittance to the school infirmary during lunch. Apparently, she had some sort of carriage accident and broke her foot. The injury wasn't in anyway spectacular, but the headmaster carrying his wife all the way to the infirmary had sent a large female portion of the school into fits of giggles. While taking ones spouse to the school medi-witch was probably not allowed according to the Hogwart's Professor Handbook, Harry wasn't the least bit surprised that Snape had bent the rules in his favor, and likewise wasn't feeling the least bit sympathetic about the gossip mill that had arisen from his chivalrous deed.

He was feeling a bit of sympathy for Ira, however. A broken foot wasn't any fun. He should know, he had shattered the bones in two of them. So during his first free period of the day, he forewent his normal study session and went to the infirmary to see if she was still there and needed some cheering up.

Within the first few seconds of stepping into the infirmary, he knew Ira had not broken her foot. The large, open room was filled with bright sunlight but the atmosphere was deathly silent and painfully heavy, like a slow acting curse might feel to his magus hypersentia. Snape was sitting in a chair just outside a screened off area, behind which Harry could hear Madam Pomfrey moving about, probably attending to Ira. Cold, black eyes slide over him as he entered, and he immediately froze.

While he would never say that Snape was exactly welcoming towards him, he had never been subjected to such a look of absolute unwelcome either. His guardian's expression was closed, so devoid of anything that he had to have been hiding something immense and terrible. Harry eyes darted to the closed off screen and a sinking feeling filled him.

"She will live," Snape said, his voice as empty as his expression and in no way reassuring.

The Gryffindor said nothing. He didn't dare. Instead, he kept staring at the screen, as if it might somehow provide the answers he could bring himself to ask. Snape continued to regard him for another minute or two, his unceasing scrutiny making him uncomfortable yet not enough to make him leave.

"She miscarried," the man said finally, and turned away.

~ Author's Note~

1. Mandalari's understanding of 'Old Ways' is rather ignorant, in addition to being religiously skewed. 'Old Ways' permeate even the most modern of magic, it is simply that most modern witches and wizards look at it in a 'New Way'. A sort of 'the glass is half empty, the glass is half full' kind of thing. It's all the same glass and same amount of water, just understood differently and thus used differently. Additionally, even if the 'Old Way' of looking at things were wiped out in Britain and the rest of Europe somehow, it would still persist almost everywhere else on the globe, including the Americas and Asia.

Book VI:

Chapter 10:

Harry did not see Snape for the rest of September, except during the occasional dinner in the Great Hall or in passing through corridors. Ira was even scarcer, although she was rumored to be staying in her husband's quarters. Not a word passed between them, and he was torn between relief and guilt as the silence continued into early October.

My child is dead. Are you happy now?

Those were the words that haunted him whenever his thoughts turned to them; so he spent as much of his time finding ways of not thinking about the Snape-family-that-wasn't. That was easy enough during the day, when his schedule was packed and everyone was vying for a bit of his time and attention, but at night it only made things worse. He was painfully aware that he still didn't care about the baby. The baby wasn't and never had been real. It was only an idea, a phantasm at best, driving two of the few people he cared for into a deep despair. Sometimes he hated it, wished it had never existed in the first place, and knew he could never look Snape or Ira in the eye with that feeling in his heart.

"You should visit Ira sometime this weekend," Hermione said during Saturday breakfast, looking at him with some disapproval as he kept his eyes trained on his plate.

She didn't understand his reluctance, although she tried, but in the end she had too much empathy for Ira to understand why Harry, who was closer to the woman than she was, couldn't bring himself to see her. He made a noncommittal sound, and pushed his eggs around on his plate. A heavy sigh informed him that she was disappointed, but not surprised, and was leaving it alone... for now. And only because the weekly post had arrived.

Packages were still forbidden in the school without a special request, but Snape had setup a system that would allow letters (all very carefully screened before being passed on) to be received. It was a

hassle, usually took almost two weeks longer than normal, but it was better than nothing. Harry hadn't received anything yet, but then his mail had considerably more security on it than most and there were few who would or could send him anything at all. It didn't mean he was any less eager than everyone else to see if anyone had sent him something.

Pansy Parkinson was in charge of handing out the mail that morning, and was displaying a rather ridiculous amount of glee in calling out (and occasionally butchering) names and forcing everyone to get out of their seats and come to her. Harry also noticed that sometimes she would find a name and surreptitiously shuffle it to the bottom of the stack. Several students were getting angry, but the teachers were seemingly oblivious.

Harry considered chucking a muffin at her.

Then she called his name. Perhaps a little more surprised than he ought to be, he hurried to retrieve the letter, notable in that the parchment was finest white with inlaid vines and seal in dark purple wax. It was markedly different from the usual wizarding parchment, which was naturally tallow and stiff and looked ancient no matter how fresh. He knew its source immediately, and judging by the whispering that followed him back to his seat, he imagined the school would soon figure it out as well.

Hermione, who had been pointedly not gawking, turned to look when he finally sat down and gave a small gasping sound.

"Is that from..?"

"Queen Ophelia? Yes, or at least from someone in her court."

The seal to the letter was royal purple wax with Her Majesty's private crest, a lion above set of crossed swords encircled in vicious thorns. A very fierce crest, Harry thought, for such a refined woman. He pressed his thumb over the seal, winced as he felt the magic prick him and droplets of his blood filled the indented surfaces. The wax turned red, and then burned away to allow the contents of the letter to unfold. For one slightly panicky moment, he was afraid it would be in

French, but luckily Her Majesty was as fine at writing English as she was at speaking it. He read the contents quickly, Hermione looking at him anxiously.

After minute or two, he refolded it.

"She's invited me to a costume ball later this month," he explained.

Her brow puckered in confusion.

"She says she's looking forward to talking to me. Don't worry, it's a subtle way of saying she'll hear me out. Don't tell me Lucius doesn't disguise business as pleasure sometimes?"

"Oh, when you say it like that, it makes more sense. For a moment, I really thought she had confused your visit as social."

He smiled at her.

"Who says it isn't? I'm sure she'll have me playing nice with all the court dandies while I'm there."

"Court dandies?" she said, clearly amused at the description.

"That's what Snape calls them, anyway."

"You'll have to talk to him about going as soon as possible. He'll need to plan to clear his schedule. While you're at it, you should go see Ira."

He grimaced. Asking Snape for a favor, one that took him away from his many responsibilities and would force them to be in close contact for a long period of time, was the very last thing he wanted to do. There had to be an alternative.

"No, he's way too busy. I'll tell him, of course, but I'll ask for one of the teachers or something to accompany me."

"You're dodging."

"Shamelessly, but it doesn't make it untrue. He wouldn't want to go and he is needed at the school. McGonagall might do it."

Hermione shook her head.

"She's Deputy Headmistress, Head of Gryffindor House, and full-time teacher. You think she's any less busy?"

Harry smiled. "Well, I'll just have to find out. If anything, she might know one of the other teachers who would be available."

She continued to give him disappointed stares throughout the morning, but did not try to force the issue any further. He was under enough stress without her pestering him about his pseudo-familial relationships. She even helped him track down McGonagall, who Hermione knew from her duties as prefect was always to be found in the teacher's private study on Saturday mornings. The private study, like the staff break room, was off limits to student use and dedicated solely for teacher's private research. It was not heavily used, but there were still a handful of staff that pursued a private self education and/or participated in scholarly research that they submitted in high end magical research journals. McGonagall was one of these teachers.

The study entrance was a large oaken door guarded by a pair of miniature stone dragons that snapped at them as they drew near. Hermione boldly leaned forward and spoke directly into the open mouth of one of the hissing serpents.

"Granger and Potter to see Professor McGonagall please."

For almost a minute the dragons just continued to hiss and snap at them, but finally they settled back, and the door opened a little of its own accord. They moved inside. The study reminded Harry of a cross between the Headmaster's office, the school library, and the Dueling Hall. The room was circular, with a high ceiling and books filling every nook and cranny not occupied by a window, the large fire place, or the occasional chart or diagram. A fire was burning cheerily, casting a warm glow against the polished oak and maple woodwork; ivy engraved bookshelves, four round tables with the constellations of

each season, and the floorboards that glowed red wherever you stepped for just a second or two. There was an alcove to the left of the fire place, lined in glittering black stone, and all but empty except for a very battered looking practice dummy. It must have been where the teachers experimented.

Harry instantly loved the room. Not only was it infused with magic, but the feelings of those who had come searching for answers. It was filled with the emotions of frustration, frenzy, terror, hope, elation, awe, and pure joy. Those who used this room had loved magic for magic's sake.

"It's magnificent, isn't it?" Hermione whispered to him, smiling knowingly as he ogled every detail of the room. "It feels like the answers to the universe are hidden somewhere inside of it."

"If only," McGonagall said. She was sitting at one of the circular tables, a small pile of books with note cards sticking out of them resting beside her. Harry could clearly see Pegasus, Andromeda, and Pisces so she must have been sitting at the autumn table. "Now what can I do for you? Mr. Potter being here, I'll assume it is not related to your prefect duties."

Hermione shook her head and nudge her friend forward. He felt suddenly and uncharacteristically shy facing the formidable witch. His relationship with her was very different than that of other Gryffindors. Despite being sorted into her house, she had never been his ultimate authority. Even before he was headmaster, Snape had been his overseer and academic confidant, and between him and the Dark Lord pulling him out of school regularly and his many outrageous stunts he had always felt a little guilty around her. Certainly, she never would have tolerated even half of the things that he had done if she had any say in the matter. He worked extra hard in her class to show how much he respected her and that he took his schooling seriously, but he didn't know if she picked up on it.

"Er...ah... I..." he stammered. McGonagall's expression became concerned.

"Heavens, child, are you alright? Has something happened?"

He shook his head, and tried to recollect himself. He was being stupid. She was a teacher, not the commander of the German army.

"No, I... just... I wanted to ask a favor of you, and I don't know quite where to start."

McGonagall looked skeptical.

"What kind of a favor? You know I can't show you any preferential treatment. I don't condone blatant favoritism by teachers for students."

Harry wondered if this actually counted as preferential or not. Snape hadn't seemed to think so, but that man was... well...Snape.

"I don't think it is. I...uh... I'm going... I mean I've been invited to Paris. By her Majesty. It's a sort of diplomacy thing. Lord Voldemort helped set it up. Um... anyway, I'm supposed to go in the third week of October, but I need a chaperone so... I was wondering if... um... you could take me?"

McGonagall just stared at him.

"... or if you could recommend someone else if you'd rather not."

She frowned slightly.

"... or I could find someone else myself."

"Calm down, Mr. Potter. You just caught me off guard," she said, taking off her glasses and setting them atop her pile of books. "I would have thought Headmaster Snape would be the one to escort you, however, I can see why under the circumstances you would not want to take him so far from home."

Harry tensed. Did McGonagall know about Ira and the baby? So far the matter had been kept very 'hush, hush', with no one outside of Harry, Snape's godchildren, and Madam Pomfrey knew what had happened. They were, after all, the only ones who knew Ira had been

pregnant in the first place. Or so he had thought. Had Snape told McGonagall or had she found out by some other means? He didn't think they were that close, but then he couldn't say he knew much of what either did outside of the classroom and potion's lab.

Or maybe she was just referring to his new job taking up so much of his time and his guilty conscience was playing tricks on him.

"Er... yeah. He's really busy, so I thought I should ask someone else first."

She nodded.

"I'm flattered that you thought of me as your first alternative," she said with a touch of irony.

"Well, you are my Head of House."

"I am? I'm surprised you remember."

He looked away. Hermione, however, wasn't so cowed.

"Professor, that's not fair and you know it."

McGonagall sighed. "You are correct, Miss Granger. I apologize, Mr. Potter. Your situation is unique and I have no right to criticize you for it. Antagonism is a far worse offense than favoritism. However, in this case, I really can't help you. The former Headmistress," and here there was a very obvious sneer neither of them had seen on her before, "was not known for her organizational skills. I have been busy, and will continue to be busy for some time yet helping the Headmaster put everything in order."

"Oh, okay. I understand. Er... if there is anything I can do..."

"You can help Professor Vector with one of her research projects."

"Huh? I don't... how did you..."

McGonagall favored him with a cat-like smile.

"You know she isn't just asking you to build up her own reputation. Her teaching contract requires she publish something at least once a year if she hopes to obtain tenure. So do all of the full-time teaching staff, even though things have been lax since Lestranger" sneer #2 was even more prominent than the first "took over. Now we're at risk of losing some of our Court funding if we don't start meeting our publishing quota, especially with funding being so tight because of the war. Hence, why I'm stuck in here making up for papers other professors should have done on top of everything else. Two or three papers from her end would be truly helpful."

Well, damn it. Him and his big mouth.

"Er... yeah, okay. I'll see what I can do," he said, reluctantly.

"I'll help too," Hermione said with genuine enthusiasm. Sometimes he wanted to slap his best friend. He really, really did.

"Very good. As for going to Paris... I would recommend Professor Slughorn. He's quite fluent in French and would love the opportunity."

Harry tried to hide his disappointment, and thanked her accordingly. He talked with Hermione about other options as they made their way to the library, but every suggestion was quickly shot down. Professor Flitwick was notoriously busy all the time arranging intellectual and academic activities to keep Ravenclaw suitably stimulated, Professor Sprout didn't speak French and would look like a turnip in a rose garden at a ball, Professor Toure was too defensive and would demand a duel at the first perceived insult to Britain or Lord Voldemort, Sinistra was a notorious flirt, Vector was too high strung, and Lockhart...no, just...no. That left Slughorn as the most reasonable alternative, and really there wasn't any particular reason Harry should have been reluctant to take him along. He got along with the man well enough, even if he was trying to avoid being 'collected' like so many others of his acquaintance.

As predicted, when Harry went to see him that afternoon, he was delighted by the invitation. Only his foresight in keeping Hermione firmly between them at all times kept him from being hugged. Even so,

he was forced to spend nearly an hour explaining everything he knew and guessing a great deal that he didn't about the party, the Queen, the other guests, and his general reputation amongst the French court. Then another hour being lectured on court decorum, the art of talking about politics, intellectualism, and small talk, how to politely accept and refuse invitations, and rather embarrassingly how to flirt and be flirted with in an acceptable manner (apparently it was expected that he flirt with absolutely every woman there since he was young and single or they'd be insulted if he didn't, but he could only take it so far depending on whether they were married, engaged/betrothed, single, and/or he was seriously pursuing them). It was far more invasive a process than he really wanted to go through, but if nothing else he could at least count on Slughorn to keep him from committing a social faux pas.

With the potions professor's enthusiastic participation assured, Harry was left with one more less than enviable task. He needed to talk to Snape.

"We should go now before dinner," Hermione said, impatiently. They had study plans for this weekend, and so far those had flown out the window and she wasn't happy about it. She wanted the travel arrangements out of the way so they could relax and look to something that wasn't related to her own marital woes.

"No, I should request a meeting first. He always gets annoyed when I just show up. You know, I could probably just make my request in a note. It would save time for the both of us."

Hermione spun him around so they were looking face to face..

"What is with you lately, Harry? I know you've been anxious since... you know, but you can't keep treating your guardians like they've got the plague. Don't you remember how upset you were when your godfathers didn't visit when you were sick? How do you think Ira must feel after what happened and now you won't even go see her?"

Her words stung. More so because he knew she was right. He was being selfish and cowardly, and the longer he waited the worse things seemed to get. But he didn't know what to say to either them. More

than anything, he was afraid he would make it worse. Probably had made it worse by not visiting sooner like Hermione insisted, and done irreparable damage to his relationship with Ira. He still wasn't sure what his standing with Snape was, but the man obviously hadn't wanted to see him. He hadn't gone to their weekly meeting since 'it' happened, and hadn't been called in either. Whether it was antipathy or apathy that spurred this negligence, he didn't know and didn't want to find out.

"I... I'm scared, okay?" he said finally. "They're... they're like... parents." Like family. "If they're broken... what am I supposed to do?" Who will look after me?

Her expression softened as she took in his genuine uncertainty.

"Oh, Harry... is that what you're worried about? That you have to fix this?"

No. Yes. Maybe. The situation was way beyond his skill and understanding, and Snape probably wouldn't have appreciated his interference to begin with. But at the same time, he didn't know how to approach them without knowing how he could possibly help or at the very least not make things worse. Would his sympathy be a comfort or an aggravation? If they made a request of him, would he be able to fulfill it? Could he deny them anything right now?

"It's not your job to fix everything, Harry. You're a friend, not a miracle worker. Come on, you've put this off too long already. Let's go see, Ira."

She took his hand and started towards another section of the dungeons. He resisted for a moment, still afraid on some level that this was going to be painful, but eventually he surrendered. This was something that needed to be done, and it seemed he was only going to be able to do so with her help. That was oddly appropriate.

Snape's position afforded him the headmaster's suite closer to his office, but the man hadn't wanted to abandon his private potions lab and had kept his quarters in the dungeons. Not exactly the most accessible location, but the man didn't seem to care whether

sociability marked his career as Headmaster or not. Although they lived in the dungeons, most Slytherins did not spend their free time there and the corridors were all but deserted this late in the afternoon. A good thing, because favor or no, he really didn't want anyone seeing Hermione leading him around by the hand like an errant child.

They reached the tapestry that marked Snape's rooms. There was a bell beside the tapestry that had not been there previously, and Harry cautiously pulled the rope beside it. It gave a cheery little ring that seemed incongruous to the shadowy hallway.

After a moment, a thin hand reached out to pull the tapestry aside. Ira stood in the door, looking pale and thin and tired, but otherwise just as he remembered her. She looked startled to see them, but after a moment she smiled. It was as tired as the rest of her, but genuine. He felt some of his anxiety dissipate.

"Harry, Hermione, come inside. It's good to see you both."

She moved aside to let them through, and they stepped into the living room. It was very similar to how Harry remembered it, masculine and den-like, but there were a few feminine touches now. Several dozen decorative sconces of amber colored glass lined the bare walls; a pair of overstuffed violet throw pillows lay on the sofa, and an elegant lamp Harry recognized as a souvenir from France graced the end table beside the reading chair. A gramophone stood just outside the kitchen nook playing some sort of opera. Ira turned it off as she led them into the kitchen.

"I'm afraid you missed Serverus, and he won't be back until after dinner. He's so busy these days. I hope you'll stay for a cup of tea, though," she said, a touch of desperation in her voice.

"Uh, yeah, that would be great," he rushed to assure her. "We came to see you, actually."

She looked genuinely surprised, and he felt like a complete slug.

"Really?"

"Absolutely," Hermione said. "We meant to visit much sooner, but..."

She shot Harry a pointed look. Less than a slug. He was slug slime trail. Ira smiled in understanding and turned back to her cupboard to find a kettle.

"I understand. No one really seems to know how to respond. It's okay, though. It was a... shock, but... Madam Pomfrey says these sorts of things happen all the time, especially when the mother is older. The infection could have happened regardless of my age*. It was just bad luck."

Her tone was light, but Harry couldn't help but notice that she didn't turn to face them as she spoke and her movements seemed oddly jerky.

"Oh," Hermione said. "That's...unfortunate. But you're okay?"

Ira turned and sat her self at the table, still smiling but it was strained.

"I'm fine. Madam Pomfrey says I should be able to try again at anytime, but... we decided to put it off for a while. Severus is so busy and this house hunting we've been doing has caused us both so much stress. We're just going to take it easy for a while. Maybe in the spring when things have settled a bit."

"Yeah, you guys shouldn't rush it. You're health is important," Harry offered, lamely. "Um... so are you going to stay at the castle until then? It's a neat place, but it starts to feel claustrophobic after a while. Especially, down here in the dungeons."

Ira's smile became a bit more genuine.

"I like it down here. It feels very safe. There's an enchanted window in the bedroom that lets me look out into the lake. I can spend all day just sitting there and watching the fish swim around. I've even seen the giant squid a couple of times."

"Really?" Hermione said. "What about merpeople?"

"And Grindylows?" he asked.

"Only at a distance. They don't seem to like to come too close to the castle. Maybe it's just too close to the shore. But there are a lot of other things you wouldn't think of. Otters, diving winnows*, eels, fresh water hydras*, turtles, some beavers... all sorts of things. I'm thinking about doing a survey of the lake wildlife. Severus says there hasn't been one done in over two hundred years. Who knows what's come and gone since then? It would give me something to do."

"I haven't seen you around-"

The kettle on the stove began to whistle, cutting off Harry's response.

"I hope you still like Earl Grey. I'm afraid it's all we have right now."

"Earl Grey's fine."

In fact, if he never drank anything other than Earl Grey tea for the rest of his life, he would be perfectly fine with that after what he went through with the animagus tea. She went about preparing it for them, and Harry continued.

"I haven't seen you around the castle. I don't think anyone else even knows you're here."

"Ah. Well, I admit I haven't felt like going out much. I like it down here in Severus' quarters, but everywhere else? I feel out of place. Everybody stares at me, wondering what I'm doing there. Even the portraits and the ghosts. Although, Sir Nicholas was very charming."

Hermione smiled.

"Well, you are being very mysterious. Of course, they're wondering about you."

"Mysterious?" she asked, confused.

Hermione shot a quick glance at Harry, before nodding at Ira. It took a moment, but he caught on.

"Oh, yes. Very mysterious. I mean, there are all sorts of silly rumors about the mysterious Ira Snape floating around the castle. Half the school is convinced you don't really exist and the other half that you're actually a vampire or a ...a... banshee. Oh, don't look so alarmed. The first years have the same rumors about Snape. I was described as several unfortunate things during my first year."

Ira was looking distinctly alarmed. Hermione kicked him under the chair.

"Ow! Um...I mean... it's just a Hogwarts tradition. Everyone makes up all sorts of stories until they get to know you. Honestly, there's no harm in it."

Until the local boys try to sacrifice you to werewolves in an abandoned field that is. Seriously, though, who would do that twice?

"What an odd tradition," Ira said, somewhat skeptical.

"You should come out with us sometime," Hermione offered. "We could show you around, introduce you to some people. I think you'd really like a lot of the professors and even some of the students. It would be a lot easier without the headmaster standing over your shoulder."

She still looked uncertain, and he felt Hermione nudge his foot to help her out.

"Why don't you come to the Dueling Club placement tryouts Friday evening? Everyone except the First Year will be competing for their new rank. We've gotten really popular, so half the school is likely to show up. It's something of a circus, but a lot of fun. Hermione, Draco, and I will all be there so you won't be alone. Please?"

The 'please' seemed to be what did her in.

"Alright."

The continued to talk for sometime, keeping the conversation light and simple, and slowly Ira seemed to unwind. Harry could see she had been terribly lonely, and she was still suffering from an insecurity that he could not find the source of. The matter of the unborn child hung over their every word and both parties avoided the topic very carefully, but he wasn't sure if that was good or bad.

What did Ira really need right now? Did she need to be distracted or to vent? Did she think they didn't care because they refused to talk about it? Would she become upset with them if they did?

He didn't know, so all he did was follow Hermione's lead. If nothing else, at least they were having some success in getting her out of the dungeons. Perhaps the elephant in the room could be addressed after the rift of Harry's absence had healed. He wasn't looking forward to it, but it was the way thing needed... should be.

It was nearing dinner time, and Hermione was trying to convince Ira to come up to the great hall to eat, when the siren went off. Caught off guard, Hermione dropped her tea cup and Harry's followed after when he jumped to his feet. The low, booming call echoed through the castle muffled the shattering of porcelain before settling into a softer, but no less persistent drone.

"Are we having a drill?" Hermione shouted over the siren.

Harry turned to Ira, who even in the dim lighting he could clearly see the telltale widening of her eyes and the hitch in her breathing.

"It's not a drill," he said with certainty. "Come on, Hermione, we need to get to our posts. Ira, do you know your post? Ira? IRA!"

She jumped, and then shook her head.

"N-no, I... we never..."

"Alright, then here's what I want you to do. Follow us out to the stairwell. I want you to supervise the younger students as they come down the stairs. Make sure they don't panic and start pushing each other down the steps, okay? They know where they need to go.

Slughorn will follow after they're all down and you can help him look after them from there. Come on, we need to hurry."

Ira floundered for a moment, but soon followed after them as they moved swiftly out of the rooms and into the hallway. It took less than half a minute to reach the stairwell, and already young students were starting to hurry down the steps while older students rushed upwards. They left Ira half way up the stairs to oversee that everyone go up and down safely, then continued on. The older students moved easily and purposefully, having not only the two drills last September but several of the drills the year before, but the first years were panicky and Harry snarled at several of them to stop pushing each other as they passed them.

Slughorn was at the top of the stairs, speedily counting and reciting the name of every child (he had a definite skill for remembering names and faces that made him ideal for this job) that passed him on the way down. Somewhere the names were being checked off a list and would be reviewed to account for all of the first year students.

That was not Harry and Hermione's concern for the moment. As sixth year students, and members of the Senior Dueling Club, they were stationed in secondary defense positions around the school. Primary defense involved the Sentinels and teachers stationed at the most vulnerable entry points of the school or else supervising the movement of their defenses and the enemy. They found the main level of the castle a well organized chaos. Over the drone of the sirens, came Snape's clipped, dulcet voice reciting the familiar instructions to take their positions, to remain calm, what to do if they encountered the enemy, all delivered with a icy determination.

Harry didn't even attempt to look for him. He knew he would be at the front entrance, the most vulnerable entry point into the castle, and that was not his station. He hurried towards the astronomy tower, the third most vulnerable point into the castle after the courtyard, passing small teams of increasingly older students posted at various points in the corridors and hallways. Hermione disappeared at some point, but she had her own section to guard on the second floor, and he could only spare a moment to worry about her before continuing on. He just made it to the foot of the main stairwell when an explosion shook the

castle, sending down dust from above and rattling the portraits on the wall.

A group of fourth years he recognized from dueling club were stationed at the bottom of the stairs, looking upwards with growing anxiety. One of them spotted Harry.

"You're late, Potter! Hurry it up so we can rig the stairs!" Eliza Merryton demanded anxiously.

"Calm yourself, madam. The enemy has not breeched the primary defenses," a sailor in a bicorne hat said stoically from a nearby painting. Harry the portrait's knowledge of the matter. The school portraits were intimately linked to the defense of the castle, and knew what they were talking about.

"Thank you, captain," Harry called as he rushed the stairs, taking them three at a time. The staircases were blessedly still, but soon they would be rigged to move so that they would lead absolutely nowhere in order to stall the enemy. The students stuck on the upper floors would be trapped or else left dependent on the secret passageways.

He was sweating heavily and near out of break by the time he reached the fourth floor, but not about ready to stop. It was only a little further to his post and sure enough there were half a dozen sixth and seventh year Duel Club members lingering anxiously at the entrance to the astronomy tower.

Angelina Johnson scowled at him as he hurried up.

"You're late."

"I was in the dungeon when the alarm went off. What's happening?"

"The attack started at the gatehouse. I think they may have taken out the Sentinels, but one of them was able to raise the alarm and the portcullis was already shut for the evening, so luckily nobody got through. We could hear it all from the Great Hall, and the next thing we knew the sirens were going off."

"Who's attacking?"

"Does it matter? All them bastards want us dead."

True enough.

"How many?"

"Don't know. You want to stick your head out a window and find out?"

Perhaps it was the adrenaline, but Harry found himself laughing at that. Everyone looked at him as if he were crazy.

"Don't look so serious," he said. "We're ready for them. They're not taking this castle unless we let them. Are Flitwick and Vector already up in the tower?"

His confidence seemed to ease the others, although Angelina seemed even more annoyed than before.

"Yeah, they're there. I haven't heard anything from them yet," she replied reluctantly.

Harry nodded.

"Good, that means the castle defenses are holding without their help. So, what was for dinner?" he asked cheerily, although he kept one eye on the doorway to the tower and his wand in hand.

"Potter, this really isn't the time."

"Why not? I want to know what I have to look forward to. We're all going to be starved when this is all over."

There a tense silence for a moment, and then one of the sixth year boys answered softly.

"Liver and onions."

"Egh. I guess I'm not missing anything after all."

A few of them chuckled, and Angelina rolled her eyes.

"Honestly, Potter, can't you take this a little more seriously? I would have thought you, of all people, would understand the gravity of the situation!"

He grinned at her, but it wasn't in anyway pleasant or friendly. His tone was light and teasing, but his eyes seemed to glow with a tightly controlled rage.

"I am taking this situation seriously. Deadly serious. I know a dozen lethal curses off the top of my head, and if anyone comes through that door who isn't Flitwick or Vector, you'll get to see them. Until then, however, you all need to calm down or you're likely to cause an accident."

She graced him with an irritated scowl, but turned her attention back to the door. He was right. Out of everyone there he was the one she should least be concerned about. His wand was steady in his hand, and for all his odd humor he always kept at least one eye or ear on the entryway. Potter had been in real battles. Bloody, vicious, deadly battles. He had killed. He had won.

For all her nervous agitation, Angelina couldn't think of anyone else she would rather have at her side in this moment.

~ Page Break~

The attack had been a mixed success, which to Mandalari meant it had also been a failure. A salvageable failure, but a failure nonetheless. The village had been a ridiculously easy target. Most of the buildings there were new and held little of the magical protection that came from generations of protective wards and blood magic associated with ancestral homes and businesses. Within minutes it was burning like a bonfire, and the people were fleeing in terror. Mandalari did not allow his troops to linger.

Hogsmeade was not their primary target, and as defenseless as it was, it would be simple enough to return and finish up later. He quickly turned their sights to the distant castle on the hill, silhouetted by rapidly fading sunlight. It was truly something to behold, even he had to admit that. A monument to more savage times, it stood apart and yet a part of the rocky Scottish hills, a thousand torches and glowing windows lending it the illusion of aliveness. The walls were thick and gray, but the mottled stones and the slope and curve of the design was distinctly organic. It reminded Mandalari of an enormous dragon, curled asleep around a mountain.

He moved his soldiers in fast and low, hoping to catch the guards at the gate by surprise, but they had already been alerted by the rising smoke in the village below and were raising the draw bridge, sealing the primary entrance. His men managed to take out the two Sentinels at the gatehouse, but were too late to prevent the activation of the castle defenses.

It all went down hill from there.

Mandalari had expected more difficulty with the castle than with the village. It was a castle after all, and it had a reputation for being well protected. It was still a school, however, and he had not anticipated the level of resistance his troops had encountered. He had nearly a hundred men, and yet even attacking simultaneously, they had could not breach it. The doors were all sealed and glass windows would not break. Within in moments, the castle's exterior defenses came alive.

Stone gargoyles leapt from their perches to fly after the Aurors, a single swipe from their massive claws enough to knock any of them out of the air. Luckily, they were slow and clumsy, and their brooms were more than capable of outmaneuvering them, but it made it impossible to stay in any one spot for a coordinated attack. They wasted several precious minutes blasting the creatures into dust, before they could renew their assault and in the interim the castle occupants had taken up offensive positions.

Hexes and curses whizzed through the air, catching the unwary and the reckless, forcing them to pull back where ever they had begun to make progress. There was no one to aim their retaliation against, as

most of the curses came through the arrowslits* in the sides walls. Mandalari ordered his men to scattered, to draw their fire power and exhaust them, while he circled and looked for weaknesses. Nothing immediately came to his attention, and everywhere he looked the defenses, whether they were from the witches and wizards inside or the castle itself, were solid and unyielding. Flying low as he passed over the lake nearly spelled his end when several enormous tentacles shot out of the air, nearly knocking him from his broom and dragging him into the brackish waters below.

There was no way inside, and having encountered more resistance than he had anticipated at the exterior, he wasn't sure they were at all prepared to face the defenses that lay within. As things stood, they could not, and would not take the castle this night. Angry and frustrated, Mandalari order one last volley of blasting curses against whatever even remotely vulnerable structure they could find, and then ordered the retreat.

Clay roof tiles, exposed blocks, decorative plaster, banners, and wooden hoardings* shattered, raining down debris into the empty stone walkways and courtyard, but the main structures held without so much as a quiver, the damage completely superficial.

From start to finish, it took less than thirty minutes and cost him nearly twenty men.

They pulled back to Hogsmeade, but the village was little more than cinders and the people already fled. By now Voldemort's army had been alerted to the attack and had mobilized, meaning if they stayed there would be more intense fighting with little more accomplished than they already had. He ordered their final retreat for London, and apparated out of there.

When they all reappeared Mandalari knew something was wrong. They were not in their intended drop zone, but what looked like a long lake or wide river surrounded by a large park*. In the distance, he could identify several distinctive pieces of London's modern muggle architecture, but he did not recognize his location or its position in relation to wizarding London. He turned to shout orders to his men-

"Def-"

And gave away his rank to the enemy descending on all sides. The curse caught him cleanly in the arm, knocking him from his broom and into one of his soldiers. They tumbled down into the cold dark waters beneath. The first casualties of this newest battle, they were soon joined by their comrades, falling one after the other as two hundred the thirty-six Culties, lead by Lt. Commander Stratus descended upon them like wolves and slaughtered them down to the last man.

From start to finish, it took less than four minutes and cost every Italian witch and wizard there their lives.

All except one.

~ Page Break~

Voldemort came to Hogwarts at first light the day after the attack, but already the castle was swarming with activity. Sentinels and Culties scoured the surrounding countryside and the nearby lake for the dead and wounded enemy. Lucius oversaw the process from a position atop a small hill, tired and fierce and stoically silent. Several teachers were out as well, inspecting the damage to the castle structure and defenses. Along the open walkways, groups of students were working diligently to remove the debris, levitating stones, wood, and mortar into large self-propelled carts to be hauled away.

The banners that normally decorated the castle exterior were all gone, burned or torn away by enemy fire, but atop the Astronomy tower someone had hung the Flag of Britain and below that the school flag. The boiling rage that had plagued him throughout the night when he learned of the attack eased somewhat at the sight.

Hogwarts was still here. She was stronger than her enemies.

The castle drawbridge had been damaged in during the fighting, but someone had scrounged up a temporary replacement made out of a partially transfigured wrought iron gate. The new bridge was narrow, and creaked in protest with every step, but held both his weight and

that of the other witches and wizard carefully moving around him in the course of their duties. Already, he could see the castle starting to absorb the new structure into its base framework, healing a wound from the previous night's skirmish. He ran his hands over the stones at the entryway, and mentally sighed in relief as he felt the vibrant hum of the magic beneath his fingertips.

"Lord Voldemort?"

He turned to see a young Sentinel fidgeting nervously at the doorway.

"What?"

"Headmaster Snape said that you might show up, and that I should take you to him."

The Dark Lord squashed his irritation at the perceived summons. Snape was busy, not playing power games, and taking his frustrations out on the man would not help the situation.

"Take me to him. Where is Potter?"

The Sentinel hesitated.

"Harold Potter, my Lord?"

"Yes," he replied, impatiently. How many Potters did this fool think he would ask after?

"Er... I am afraid I do not know, sir."

"Once you are done, I want you to find him and bring him to me. Bring General Malfoy, as well."

"Yes, my Lord."

That was about the only smart thing the boy had said yet. The rest of the walk was blessedly silent. They made their way to the Great Hall, the traffic gradually getting thicker as students with their arms full of sleeping bags and overnight kits ambled by in their night clothes or

dressed and ready for day of work putting their home back in order. The closer they drew to the Great Hall the quieter the conversation got, until at last they entered what was clearly the temporary dormitory for the students. The tables had been removed, and in a scene easily similar to four years ago, replaced with mats and sleeping bags pushed tightly together. Most of the children were up and preparing to leave, but a few of the older students were still fast asleep in their sleeping bags, and those around them were careful not to disturb them. Voldemort scanned the sleeping faces, but none of them was Harry or even one of his close associates.

At the front of the room, the teachers' table was still present, and Snape was seated in his reserved position, hurriedly scribbling instructions onto parchment, which he then passed on to a student or teacher or Sentinel. Beside him, Ira talked softly to students and staff, taking down what they were saying and occasionally directing them elsewhere or moving them on to talk to her husband. Neither looked as if they had slept.

"Severus," he said softly, even he not immune to the subdued atmosphere that seemed to demand that one only speak in whispers. Snape immediately stood, and turned briefly to his wife.

"Send for McGonagall to cover for me."

She nodded, and he moved around the table to lead Lord Voldemort to a small room directly behind the teacher's table for the sake of privacy. He snapped his fingers twice, and the house elves popped into the room just long enough to light the sconces, activate the privacy wards, and set a small coffee set on the plain rectangular table before disappearing again. Snape sat himself down, but the Dark Lord felt in no hurry to follow his example.

"How extensive is the damage?" Voldemort began, knowing neither of them wanted to waste the other's time.

"Mostly superficial. I'm having the staff evaluate what they can now that it's light enough, but mostly it just seems to be minor damage. Roof tiles, plaster work... one of the wooden expansions off Gryffindor tower. I'll have professionals come in and evaluate

everything before we allow students into any of the towers, but I doubt they'll find anything. The wards will need to be boosted again, but they held for the attack."

The Dark Lord nodded, satisfied with the assessment.

"Was anyone killed?"

"The two Sentinels at the gatehouse lost their lives, but otherwise no one inside the castle was hurt. Everyone performed their roles admirably."

"And the enemy?"

"Last I heard they found fourteen bodies, but Lucius would have the most current tally."

Voldemort nodded. Lt. Commander Stratus was still fighting in London, but he had sent word that he was certain he had wiped out what remained of the Italian raiding party. He said as much to Snape, who mustered enough energy to look suitably pleased with this report. They talked for a little longer, mostly with the headmaster answering straightforward facts about the events of the attack, the response of security, staff, and students, and plans for the future. Snape was quick with an answer or else quick with an estimation on how and when he was likely to have an answer, and Voldemort felt his anxiety over the failed attack ease as he continued to be reassured by the man's competence. For perhaps the first time, he was absolutely convinced that having him replace Lestrage had been an excellent decision.

They were eventually joined by Lucius, who poured himself a cup of coffee and made himself comfortable. There were dark shadows across his face and he looked overdrawn, but his eyes danced with a malicious delight as he updated them on what he knew.

"We've found eighteen bodies, although if there are any that fell in the lake there's a good chance we'll not find anything. Nevertheless, I've sent men to search the shoreline for ten miles, just in case. Witnesses put the first attack as starting at Hogsmeade around

6:20pm and lasting roughly ten minutes, before they moved onto Hogwarts. The attack lasted roughly thirty minutes before the Italians retreated back to Hogsmeade for another five to ten minutes, and then attempted to apparate back to wizarding London. My plan to have them relayed into Hyde Park worked perfectly. They might have thought themselves very brave and cunning fighting civilians and invalids, but against trained fighters they were nothing short of pathetic. They were all dead within five minutes."

"Well done, Lucius," Snape commended, because even he had to admit his scheme to catch the raiders as they attempted to return to their stronghold was remarkably clever. "And London?"

"I have Stratus seeing to it. You haven't met him, I don't think. A humble man, but very reliable. If things go according to schedule, he'll have ousted the invaders by this afternoon. Tomorrow evening, at the-"

There was a soft knock on the door, and Harry entered the room. He wasn't wearing his robes, his sleeves were rolled up, and there was flour smudges on his hands and face. His eyes scanned the room and quickly settled on the Dark Lord. Color aside, the elder wizard thought the boy's eyes must be very similar to his own at the moment. Fierce. Proud. Resolved.

Murderous.

"You summoned me, my Lord?"

"Those who attacked this castle are all dead," he said, his tone matter-of-fact.

Harry blinked, but otherwise his expression remained unchanged. After a moment, he replied.

"Good."

The Dark Lord found himself smiling despite himself.

"Thank you for tell me," the boy continued. "Was that all you wanted me for?"

"No. What were you doing before I summoned you?"

"Making pancakes. The house elves are too busy to do it, so I got kitchen duty."

"I'm sure no one will starve without you. Find a seat."

Harry looked uncertainly at the other two men in the room, who did not look enthused by his presence but otherwise said nothing. He set himself at the table on the one side left unoccupied. Voldemort couldn't help but notice he looked unusually uncomfortable, but likely that had to do with Lucius and their private skirmish over the Granger girl.

"How do you feel things went during the attack, Harry?"

The Gryffindor thought a moment. "Like clockwork. Everyone knew their place and purpose."

"Were you ever afraid of the outcome?"

"No. I was too angry to be afraid."

"And the other students?"

He hesitated.

"They were scared, I think, but they would have done what needed to be done."

"Do you think anything could have been improved?"

"I don't know. I didn't get to see the entire plan come together. I don't think there's anything wrong with the plan itself... maybe student response. I don't think the younger years were ready for what was happening. They were panicky."

Voldemort turned to Severus.

"Do you agree with this assessment?"

"As far as it goes," the headmaster replied, unconcerned. "It was to be expected. That is why I have the younger students placed further into the castle's defenses. Less chance of seeing actual combat. Having faced the actual possibility of combat, however, they may be more open to psychological preparedness training. I'm not sure their parents would approve, given the techniques involved."

Lucius smirked. "As a parent, I won't object."

Snape rolled his eyes.

"Do you believe this sort of training to be necessary, after the current level of security seems to have been proven sufficient?" Voldemort asked.

"Yes, but then I believe it should have been a standard of DA&D curriculum from the beginning."

The conversation continued along the vein of curriculum alteration, drills and defense exercises, increased security measures, student involvement, parental response, how the press should be handled, fiscal adjustments, various and sundry matters that would have to be dealt with over the coming hours, days, and weeks. Harry remained quiet, but attentive, not understanding half of it but willing enough to give an opinion when the Dark Lord asked him for one. It was half war council, half school board meeting and he wasn't sure where one ended and the other began.

They went on undisturbed for some time, and the house elves replaced the coffee carafe twice before they were finally interrupted by a knock at the door. Ira peeked her head inside.

"Belsifer Pitwick is here to see you, Severus. He insists it's urgent."

"Who?"

"The mayor of Hogsmeade."

Severus was about to point out that Juliana Hobsnack was mayor of Hogsmeade, then realized the woman was probably dead. He looked to Voldemort to see if he was interested or if he should put the man off until they were done. The Dark Lord answered for him.

"Send him in. It will save me a trip to see him later."

She moved out of the way to let the visitor in.

Belsifer Pitwick was an interesting sort of fellow, who was a little bit of everything and therefore nothing in particular. He was dressed very gentlemanly, but mud splattered yellow boots sort of ruined the effect. His face, which had a friendly sort of composition, was compromised by his bloodshot eyes and an unlit pipe that hung from the corner of his mouth. If he was surprised to find the Headmaster of Hogwarts sitting in with Britain's ruler and second in command of her armed forces, the only indication he gave was to twist his mouth in such a way that his pipe moved from one side of his mouth to the other without him having to touch it.

He bowed politely.

"Gentleman."

"Welcome, Mayor Pitwick," Voldemort greeted evenly, neither truly welcoming nor intimidating. "I hope you don't mind if we sit in with your meeting. We all have a vested interest in the wellbeing of this school, and have been working collaboratively to get through this latest crisis."

Pitwick glanced at Harry briefly, as if unsure. The Gryffindor simply stood and indicated the man should take his chair, while he moved to stand off in the corner. This was more for his own benefit than the mayor's, as he was starting to get jittery after his third cup of coffee and didn't want to sit anymore.

"Not at all," he said, "If nothing else, perhaps you can give me some ideas on my next course of action. You see, I find myself in

something of a predicament. I am the mayor of a village that no longer exists."

In his corner, Harry closed his eyes, and took a long deep breathe.

"My condolences," Voldemort said, in the same cautious tone as before, "The Court will, of course, do everything it can to help you and the villagers rebuild and resettle as quickly as possible."

A diplomatic answer. Especially, since everyone there knew the Court was inundated with similar projects, and with limited resources it might be over a year before they were able to lend any meaningful assistance. The heavy response Hogwarts was receiving was, frankly, unbelievable and completely unfair but not unexpected given its status as both national treasure and Voldemort's private pet project.

Pitwick didn't seem surprised or bothered by the maneuver.

"I am not overly concerned with that. The village was well insured. It's part of the county ordinances in order to build or own property. About the only act of foresight Hobsnack ever had, may she rest in peace. We have, or will have soon, the money to rebuild, and we'll do it smarter this time around, with better defenses and building codes. Maybe a keystone like they have in those Irish towns, I don't know... I'll have to talk to professionals about-

"You should bury the dead along the border of the village."

For the first time, Pitwick was caught off guard. He turned to the boy standing in the corner, whose reputation preceded him but not the unnerving quality of his unflinching gaze. The other men in the room also turned to him as well, although they did not seem alarmed by his suggestion.

"Burial sites can act as a sort of keystone. Particularly when the victims died by violence," Harry explained. He was thinking of the long disappeared wall around the Forbidden Forest, the burial shrine at the werewolf colony, and the many marked and unmarked graves that littered the Malfoy Estates.

Voldemort looked intrigued.

"He is correct. In ancient times, it was standard practice to place cemeteries and crypts in pentagonal formation around towns and villages. The original Hogsmeade, likely had such a layout, but the cemeteries have been built over or moved throughout the centuries. I would highly recommend finding some older maps, and reestablish these gravesites. They will strengthen the village's defenses and act as a natural barrier against some malevolent magical influences."

Pitwick relaxed a little, having been given a practical explanation for an otherwise macabre suggestion.

"I will look into it. More important than the dead, however, are the living. I have eight hundred men, women, and children who have no idea where they're going to stay tonight or get their next meal. Most of them moved to Hogsmeade escaping from London or sold their homes in the big cities and have no where else to go."

Snape's expression was becoming increasingly rigid as he began to see the direction this conversation was taking. Lucius too seemed to have it figured it out, and smirked at his friend's growing unease.

"Even if temporary dwellings were available, it is not reasonable to ask the villagers to leave themselves exposed after what has just occurred."

"The Italians are dead and gone, Mayor Pitwick," Snape interrupted. "The raiding party was destroyed after their retreat and their main force is being ousted from London as we speak. They are no longer a threat to you or the villagers."

The mayor paused to consider this newest information, reworking his pitch quickly.

"The Italians are no longer a threat... or at least they won't be for a while. There are also the Germans to consider, the approaching winter, the Forbidden Forest... simple logistical concerns such as sanitation and food. None of which the government has the time or the resources to provide at the moment."

Snape sighed, accepting the inevitable request.

"I would like to have a portion of the remaining village relocated to the castle while we work to rebuild and better secure against further attacks."

The Headmaster looked to Voldemort to see his position before answering, but all he found was an open sort of curiosity. The Dark Lord wanted to know what his response would be. That put him in a tricky position. The man likely already knew what he wanted done and this was more of a test than anything.

"I doubt the castle could handle another eight-hundred-"

"Closer to five hundred. Some of them do have relatives who can take them in or alternative arrangements."

"Financially, we couldn't afford to feed, cloth, or bed-"

"The insurance covers rent and lost property. This wouldn't be charity. Not entirely, at least."

"Security would be a nightmare-"

Here, Lucius was happy to provide the answer Pitwick couldn't.

"I think I can spare some men to handle that. We already agreed there should be increased military presence around the castle. If you register the villagers as staff or students, the castle will accept them."

"Thank you, Lucius," he bit off sourly. He turned to Harry who was now fidgeting in the corner, and glared. "Anything you'd like to add? Do you think you could live in the castle with double the occupants?"

The Gryffindor blinked.

"I can't say I'd want to," Harry admitted, "But that doesn't mean I couldn't. It's not really up to us, anyway. Aren't we like... required to do it? That's one of the reasons the castle was built, to offer

sanctuary to the village during war. I think it's even in the school charter."

Snape tried to recall if that was true, and it became readily apparent when he did.

"Bugger."

Voldemort's curious expression morphed into one of amusement.

"Don't concern yourself overly much, Severus. You have my full approval to cancel classes and make use of the students during this transition period. I'll handle the school board and any financial hindrances you might face with the insurance companies. I'll have my public relations liaison come by later with a list of contacts you'll find useful. Adjustments will be made to your responsibilities, authority, and subsequent pay and benefits. Handle this right, and you'll come out of this with far more than you had going in."

That, of course, seemed to ease some of Snape's aggravation, although he still did not look pleased with this newest turn of events. He had been expecting to have his hands full simply handling students and teachers, now he found himself looking after five hundred something traumatized villagers. He honestly had no idea where to start, and having not slept for nearly thirty-six hours after a highly stressful event, he didn't feel up to figuring it out.

He should make Potter do it, just for the hell of it.

"I will take care of it."

"I know you will, Severus," Voldemort said, part reassurance and part unspoken threat. "When the press shows up, try to act appropriately humble and sympathetic."

~ Page Break~

The remainder of the meeting did not last much longer, and afterwards Harry accompanied Voldemort to his office.

"I want you to help Severus as much as possible, Harry. You are a figurehead to both your classmates and the villagers, and making the effort to help both sides adjust will be critical over the next few months," the Dark Lord said as they made their way through the congested halls. Part of him was eager and happy to do whatever he could to help both the villagers and school get through this, but another part dreaded the experience. The school had seemed so crowded During the Triwizard tournament, and there had been less than hundred additional people then and all prepared for well in advance. How were they going to handle five hundred or more refugees?

"How long do you think they'll be here?" he asked instead.

"The rest of the school year, at least, although I suspect the numbers will begin to lessen well before then. I'll grease the wheels for the insurance companies to begin clean up and sorting through claims to speed things along, but it will be winter before they are able to start rebuilding, and there will be frequent setback due to weather and security threats. You will all have to take pains to adjust."

Harry nodded, and decided to drop the subject for now. He would be dealing with it soon enough.

"So the Italians really are all dead?"

"Yes. At least the ones who participated in the attack. How many we will take out in London is anyone's guess. Depends how fiercely they dig in, I suppose. Regardless, their strong hold in England is over."

"Do you think that will be the end of it? Of the attacks in Britain, anyway?"

Voldemort snorted.

"Not if they have any common sense. I've already demonstrated what happens when you attack Britain and then try to run home. We come after you."

Harry suddenly stopped.

"You're going to invade Italy now?"

The Dark Lord glanced over his shoulder at him, but kept walking.

"Absolutely. They're far too dangerous to leave unpunished. After we've subdued Germany and secured our alliances in Europe, we'll finish in Italy. They're strong, but not stronger than Britain and France combined, and no one will come to their aid."

Harry was hurried to catch up to the Dark Lord, his thoughts dizzy with the meaning of those words. He couldn't say he was surprised by the man's decision, and he didn't hold any sympathy for the Italians either, but the idea of extended the war even further had absolutely no appeal to him whatsoever.

"You disapprove?" Voldemort asked, catching his expression.

"I understand it, I just wish there were another way."

"Hhhmmm... and here I thought you would be pleased. You were about the demise of the attackers."

"It is one thing to remove a thorn in your foot and another to go out and burn down the briar patch'."

"An interesting analogy."

"Professor Sprout."

"Hufflepuff. It figures."

"I don't like the idea of sending out people to die if they don't have to."

"Luckily, that it is not your decision to make. I assure you, Harry, I don't enjoy it either. I'd much rather have Britain's sons and daughter at home, raising families and contributing to the advancement of society than defending what little we have from ravenous dogs. Unfortunately, we must first address the later before we can obtain the former."

They walked the rest of the way in silence, and at some point the flood of busy witches and wizards in the halls had slowed to a trickle until they stood at the entrance to Voldemort's office without another soul in sight. He turned to Harry and looked down into his earnest eyes.

"I know this is difficult for you. Your life has been intimately intertwined with the conflicts Britain now faces, and you cannot bring yourself to disassociate yourself from it the way your classmates can. You feel you cannot know peace until the country is at peace. For that, I am sorry."

Harry looked away, embarrassed. His feelings weren't something he really liked to discuss, especially with Voldemort. The Dark Lord, however, wasn't about ready to let him avoid it that easily, and caught his chin so that he was once again looking directly up at the man.

"I need you have to faith, Harry. And patience. These trials and triumphs are not the work of vanity or wounded pride. We are clearing the debris of our troubled past to set the foundations of a glorious future. Already, we begin to see our efforts take shape. The civil war left Britain in chaos, but we have achieved a capable and competent government structure and our people are united in a common cause. We have grown socially and economically, ready to re-enter the global community as a super power unto ourselves. One day, these troubled times will be nothing more than distant memory."

Despite his words, Harry did not look reassured.

"One day, yes," he agreed. "But will I live long enough to see it?"

~ Page Break~

Harry managed to catch a two hour nap (despite the coffee that morning) in Voldemort's office, while the man performed administrative magic with an endless supply of paper and the absolute obedience of the resident house elves. When he awoke, he lingered for only a few minutes while fighting off drowsiness, before heading out to do his apparent duty as Snape's little helper.

He headed down to the Great Hall, expecting to find Snape at the teacher's table, but instead found himself being herded into one of six long lines by Clyde.

"Where have you been, Harry? We've been looking all over for you! Come on, let's stick in this line. I think Natalie is heading this one."

"What are you talking about? I was asleep. I don't know what's going on."

All around them, students were lining up or leaving, talking excitedly or looking for friends, the morning lethargy evaporating with this newest event. Clyde was as jittery and excited as everyone else, looking around curiously and standing on his toes every so often to see over the crowd.

"Okay, sorry. I guess I assumed you'd know what was happening what with being in on that meeting and everything. What was that all about, anyway?"

Harry sighed in exasperation.

"Why don't you tell me what's going on here first, and I'll tell you about the meeting?"

"Oh, yeah, sure," the other boy agreed, still busy looking around at everyone else. "Okay, so about an hour ago we get this announcement that Hogsmeade's an ashy cinder, and we're going to be like a refugee camp or something."

Nothing Harry hadn't known about, but still didn't quite explain what was going on now.

"Then we get told that classes are canceled for the week so that we can all help reorganize the school or something. So right now, we're all getting arm bands and applying for job responsibilities and stuff. But get this, we're getting paid."

"What, the school?"

Clyde grinned. "Nope. Us. The students. How brilliant is that?"

Harry had to admit that was impressive. He hadn't anticipated being paid for helping out, but he could see why it would be a good idea especially when it came to getting the other students on board with what was happening. Treating this all like a job, rather than a chore, was likely to go over better in the long run.

"How much do we get paid?" he asked, curiously.

"It depends on what your job is. I don't think anyone really knows how to tell yet, but the color of your security band is supposed to match your type of job, so you might be able to figure out that way."

"I heard administration get the best pay," someone in a neighboring line said. "They've got the green arm bands. Guess who keep getting them? Slytherins. They were quick to snatch up the cushy, high paying jobs."

A girl further up voiced her disagreement.

"Nuh-uh. My friend Marcy got an admin job and she's a Hufflepuff."

"Probably a Slytherin's secretary!"

"Nuh-uh!"

"Ya-huh!"

"Nuh-uh!"

"Both of you shut up already! Neither of you knows anything," Clyde snapped in annoyance, then turned to Harry. "So what was the meeting about?"

Harry shrugged.

"Lots of stuff. Mostly plans for fixing up the school and improving security. Didn't know we were taking in Hogsmeade until the mayor

showed up. Snape was pissed." He thought of telling Clyde about the Italians being wiped out, but decided against it. It would probably be better to wait until London was officially cleaned out in case something went wrong.

The other boy laughed. "I'll bet!"

They putzed around in line for a while, sharing gossip and conjecture with their neighboring classmates about the night before and the week ahead. Most of the students seemed to have fared well, and were greeting the new day with a giddy sort of high that follows a moment of terror quickly averted. After half an hour they finally made it to the front of the line, where Natalie was waiting for them. She was dressed in her casual clothes, but she tied up her hair in a French knot and was proudly sporting a light green armband with the words 'ADMIN II' printed in black letters.

"Hello, Harry," she greeted cheerfully, and then a little less cheerfully added, "Hello, Houghtson."

"Good to you too, luv," Clyde muttered. Harry smiled at her.

"Hey, Natalie. So what have you got for us?"

"You, I've got this!" She had a little rolodex situated in front of her, from which she pulled a plain white card with his name printed on it. She tapped it twice on the table and it grew into a full sized folder. She flipped it open. "Ah, excellent! They've got you pre-assigned. Most of us just get a type of job assigned based on aptitude and then have to apply for a position, but you're already Student/Civilian Liaison; Security Level I. I think you're the only student with that level of clearance."

She pulled out a black armband with 'SECURITY I' in white letters. He slipped it over his arm, and despite being loose it didn't fall down. Clyde looked suitably impressed.

"Bloody brilliant! I bet you could order everyone else in the school around. What about me?"

With somewhat less enthusiasm, Natalie turned back to her rolodex and pulled out his card. She enlarged it, and looked inside his folder. Mirth immediately spread across her features.

"Oh my... it's... hhhmm..."

"What? What is it? It can't be that bad!" He snatched the folder out of her hand. A light purple armband fell out, and Harry picked it up and read it.

"Dom services?"

"Domestic services, like kitchen duty or laundry," Natalie offered up, trying to smother a smile. Clyde looked as if someone had killed his dog. "It's not that bad. Three fourths of the students are domestic services or general labor. That's what you get for never having a summer job or volunteer work on your student record. Take your folder, fill out your paperwork, and report to the Charms classroom. If you hurry, you might get a position as a supervisor somewhere."

The mortified Gryffindor didn't have to be told twice, and immediately rushed off without looking back. Harry and Natalie shared a look, and burst out laughing.

~ Page Break~

Security Liaison turned out to be a position uniquely suited to Harry. He was easily recognized by military personnel, students, and civilians alike, and most of them seemed to like him well enough. His reputation was such that no one attempted to mess with him despite his age and relatively small stature. It helped that he had a dynamic face that could be both inviting and intimidating depending upon what the situation called for.

When working, he wore the same 'uniform' as all the other 'security' students; black school robe, black cloak, all terrain boots, arm guards, white shirt, black tie, name badge, and armband. Aside from the black tie, the entire ensemble came from his private wardrobe and could mostly be found in any other student's as well. The over all effect though was enough that he and his fellows could easily be

identified at a distance even without their arm bands, and always had the appearance of being ready to jump into a fight at a moment's notice.

Of the thirty-four students assigned to security, thirty were Level IV who generally did whatever menial, low-risk task was assigned to them, three were Level III in charge of supervising Level IV, and Harry, whose job was pretty much to be sociable with everyone and scary as hell at the same time. If Sentinel Seitler, the only person he was required to take orders from or salute, found any ironic humor in this, he had the good grace not to show it.

Harry's first assignment was to oversee the villagers as they arrived at the gatehouse to be registered as castle residents (which student security was handling) and be checked by security (handled by Lucius' new regiment of Culties). He walked amongst the growing lines of tired, anxious families and individuals, speaking to as many of them as he could, reassuring them of their safety and welcome at the castle, answering questions, offering an encouraging word, or talking down the frustrated (during which his more sinister reputation came in handy). Children, for whatever reason, seemed to adore him, and frequently abandoned their parents' sides to ask him questions or request a magic trick, which he would perform only on the condition that stopped getting out of line.

It was gratifying, yet heartbreaking work. Many of the people who came to the gate were still in shock; some had lost family, friends, and neighbors. A handful were orphans. The castle offered them refuge, but there was no guarantee it would grant them solace, and their future was uncertain. If nothing else, he was at least convinced of the rightness of bringing them into the castle whatever the inconvenience.

Whether Headmaster Snape would agree with this assessment, Harry wasn't at all certain. He saw the man regularly over the next week, perhaps more so than anyone else except Seitler, to inform the man of the refugees' behavior or relay the details of some incident or another. Their conversations, however, were brief, to the point, and without the usual verbal swordplay. Harry wasn't sure if he should take it personally or not. The man was obviously stressed and his

time was valuable, and if he wasn't in the mood for banter he didn't blame him.

He didn't know if he could keep his own tone civil, especially about how the refugees were being handled. The man seemed almost obsessed with keeping the villagers separate from the students, rearranging classrooms and closing off corridors to prevent either parties from meeting accidentally and restricting student movement into the 'Hogsmeade Hall' unless on work related business. Whatever assigned duties could be turned over to villagers, were done so quickly, further distancing them from each other. Harry didn't understand it, but it seemed cold and vaguely cruel to be so blatantly unwelcoming to people who had just lost so much.

Everyone else, however, seemed to be embracing their guests and their own roles in helping them get their lives back together. Although off duty fraternization was discouraged, there was nothing that could be done to stop students (or staff for that matter) from hanging around while they were on duty, and an inordinate amount of time was spent slacking off with conversations and playing games and whatever else they could get away with. In a lot of ways, visiting Hogsmeade Hall was like visiting the village itself and a way to escape the confining drudgery of student life.

For Harry, it was a precarious adventure of endless dangers.

"Tell us another story!" a six year old demanded, as Harry moved to stand up from the circular rug, around which some dozen young children had been avidly listening to him retell of his marvelous escape from Germany (after careful editing and a great deal of artistic license). He had dropped by Hogsmeade Hall to visit the make-shift primary school and give a brief lecture about safety inside the castle (don't worry, the ghosts are harmless; never wander around alone; if you get lost, find the nearest student or uniformed wizard to help you; no the headmaster is not a vampire and there aren't any dragons in the dungeons, etc.), and had been roped into a story time. He now knew this was a skill innate to all children, and not just a special gift of Morgana and Alyssa Reicher.

"I'm afraid I don't have another story right now. You'll have to wait until I think of another."

The students let out a long 'aaahhhh', and he had to fight back a smile.

"Sorry, that's the way it is. I better get back to work. My boss will turn me into a pink flamingo if he catches me."

Predictably, they all found the idea of Harry as pink bird ridiculously funny and he ducked out of the classroom quickly while they were busy laughing at his expense. Natalie was waiting for him outside, looking even more amused.

"A white knight and good with children. Why did we break up?"

"Because, you don't like white knights or children?" he offered.

"Oh yeah."

"Not that I'm not happy to see you, but what are doing down here? I thought you were still on duty?"

Natalie's job was as supervisor of General Inventory, which kept track of all of the supplies needed in Hogsmeade Hall. This job was technically supposed to be in the hands of one of the villagers by now, but she was so good at it that no one wanted to replace her until they absolutely had to. She had apparently done similar jobs while volunteering in Ireland and discovered she had a head for it. She was exceptionally proud of herself, and there was little anyone could do to drag her away from her private office or the backrooms that defined her territory.

"I was just dropping off some baby food at the daycare, when I overheard you telling your story. Very exciting."

Harry pretended not to be embarrassed, but he couldn't do much to stop his ears from flushing at her gentle teasing.

"And I thought I should let you know that Rita Skeeter is in the castle and she's looking for you."

"Skeeter?"

"No one should have to face her without at least a heads up. That woman's wardrobe shouldn't exist outside a burlesque."

Harry grinned, and kissed her on the cheek. Her ears suddenly matched his.

"Thanks, Natalie. I better find her before she gives up and leaves."

"Yes, well... I think she's in the courtyard, signaling aliens in outer space with her fluorescent yellow hair."

He jogged off to find the reporter, easing his way around the crowded halls with practiced agility. It didn't take him long to find Skeeter, although she had moved from the courtyard towards the Gryffindor dorms. Her bright green jacket and sparkling red heels made her somewhat hard to miss in the sea of black robes. He jogged passed her on the stairs as if he didn't see her, not wanting anyone else to think he looking for publicity, and painted on a look of mock horror when she noticed him.

"Mr. Potter!" she practically shrieked, and ran after him.

"Er..."

"Just a moment of your time, dear!" she said happily, and quickly latched onto his arm like hawk snatching up a mouse.

"Uh..."

"Now, Mr. Potter, I hear you have had a most exciting couple of days here at Hogwarts. Do you think you could spare a minute to talk about it? It's been months since we heard anything from you! Here, let's talk somewhere more private!"

Feigning horror-struck silence, he allowed her to pull him off the stairs and into one of the corridors. A quick search (she was amazingly fast for a woman in heels) revealed an empty classroom, and she quickly pulled him inside. She spun him around and wrapped her arms around him in a surprise hug.

"Harry! How is my favorite little blackmailer?" she squealed in delight.

He choked out a laugh at her over the top behavior and carefully extracted himself.

"I'm... well. How are you... crazy, ladybug woman."

"Oh, Harry, you needn't be so coy. I know you're happy to see me."

He gave her a thoughtful look.

"Perhaps. Depending on what you brought me."

Far from being put off, she actually looked even happier to show him the results of the errand he had sent her on. She pulled a file from inside her jacket and handed it to him.

"So, I did a little research on the names you gave, and boy, I think we're both going to be happy that you did. Darling, blue-eyed Johnny Carrobs with his fondness for little muggleborn girls... several of them who seem to have gone on to be single mothers with even more darling little blue-eyed children. Naughty, naughty."

Harry glanced through the file of John Carrobs, and grimaced. Skeeter hadn't bothered to edit out the full extent of her findings or her more sordid theories. Just the same, she was right that he had no intention of putting Hermione in this man's debt, even if Skeeter's findings were mostly conjecture.

"And the others?"

"Delamora Smith bought her way out of a prison sentence in '92 when her rare Mongolian Trypas bird killed and ate her butler. She might have kept herself out of the bird cage, but she'll never be

approved as a guardian. Not while she's still breeding Trypas in any event."

Harry sighed. Why were so many wizards and witches weirdos?

"Andoria Smythe?"

"She's dating Merton Graves* and tours with his band, the Weird Sisters. Fascinating woman. Very active in the feminist movement, but she's not a lesbian. Go figure."

"Do you think she'd help Hermione?"

"I wouldn't be surprised. She's adopted six kids already."

Harry gave her a funny look and turned to the file for clarification. Sure enough, Andoria Smythe had adopted six children, all of them over the age of twelve, all girls. It seemed she made a hobby of taking in older orphans girls to keep them off the street and out of the underground brothel houses. It looked as if she would be the ideal for what they wanted.

"Thank you, Skeeter. You did excellent work."

She gave him a smugly satisfied look.

"Yes, well, it pays to keep a woman with my skills around."

Funny, hadn't Natalie said the exact same thing recently? Feeling generous, he smiled back at her.

"Yes, I can see that now."

~ Author's Notes~

Ira's miscarriage was the result of minor infection unrelated to her pregnancy causing complication in her pregnancy, primarily a fever and a hormonal imbalance.

A diving winnow is a swallow-like bird that dives for its dinner in Scottish lakes. Once it hits the water it swells with water to the size of a small penguin (and acts much like one) and can't fly again until its feathers dry out- forty minutes to six hours later depending on the weather. They have long legs and sharp claws, however, and can run or climb trees if faced with predators.

Fresh water hydras are related to jellyfish, not the multi-headed dragon thing.

Arrowslits are real castle features, and as the name implies they were used for shooting arrows out at the enemy while minimizing exposure to the archer. I thought the same feature would work well for wizards. Hoardings were wooden constructs that projected beyond the wall, allowing defenders to shoot at, or drop objects on attackers at the base of the wall without having to lean perilously over the crenellations, thereby exposing themselves to retaliatory fire. (Wikipedia; "castle")

The Italians apparated over the Serpentine in Hyde Park, London.

Merton Graves is an actual member of the canon Weird Sisters.

Finally, FINALLY! I finished this chapter. It just didn't want to get written. Sorry about the wait.

Book VI:

Chapter 11: Royal Amusements

"I need your help," Ron said, and Harry contemplated turning around and stabbing him through the eye with his wand. It was not so much the Slytherin's request as his request on top of everything else over the last two weeks. He was heading to the library for a much needed study session, after a two hour mediation between Sentinel Seitler and Mayor Pitwick about the mobility of villagers in and out of the castle and the ability to bring in supplies themselves. Harry thought it was a sad state of affairs when two grown men needed a sixteen year old present to keep things civil and fair, but that seemed to be the flavor of things these days.

In addition to his job as liaison, Harry was also working with Vector to design a research project, under a lot of pressure to go for the Captain's position in Dueling Club that year by the student body, trying to catch up on his studies, and preparing for a trip to France. He did not need Ron making requests on time and energy he didn't have. He took a deep breath and let it out slowly.

"With what?" he asked, not turning around or slowing down.

"I found the book."

Harry looked around the hall to make sure no one was listening. They were in the buffer zone between Hogsmeade Hall and the rest of the school, so there was no one in sight.

"You need me to help perform a ritual, then?"

"No... well, yes, but I need help getting the book first."

"I thought you said-"

"I found the book, but I don't have it. It's at the National Public Library of Wizardry in London."

"Huh. Lucky the Culties took control of the city then."

"Yeah, well, the library isn't open yet. It won't be for months. I have no way to request it be sent here."

Harry considered the dilemma for a moment. He finally stopped and looked back at Ron, who was sort of grimacing.

"You can't wait till Christmas break or even until they are open again? You haven't been coughing ..."

The Weasley boy shook his head.

"No, the sage has been helping with that... but... I haven't eaten in two days."

Harry studied him for a long moment. Ron was looked tired, perhaps more so than could be explained by student life. His eyes were shadowed and red rimmed, his skin pale and chapped, and if he looked closely enough he thought the other might have lost some weight.

"I can't keep anything down. I vomited an anti-vomting potion. How the hell does that work?" Ron said, grimacing at the memory. "And there's more."

He pulled up the sleeve of his robe to show Harry his forearm, which was now mottled with yellow and green bruises.

"I've got some on my back and legs too. I don't know what it's from."

Harry felt his mouth go dry. Cautiously, he reached out to the exposed skin, letting his fingers hover over it. His magus hypersentia interpreted it as an oily, clammy sensation and if he were to touch it directly he felt certain it would be like touching maggoty meat. He quickly withdrew his hand. Ron was rotting from the inside out. He schooled his expression before he spoke.

"I'll see what I can do about the book. In the meantime, you need to see if the school library has anything on purification rituals. It worked for your lungs; it might help with the rest of your body for a while at least."

Ron nodded eagerly.

"Yeah, okay, I can do that. Thanks...um... I owe you one."

"I think you owe me more than one," Harry pointed out blandly, and started walking away. He just barely caught the look of annoyance and frustration out of the corner of his eye, but it was enough. It wasn't particularly nice of him to be pushing the other's buttons, particularly not when his life depended upon his clemency, but he couldn't help deriving a sense of satisfaction from aggravating the other even as he lent his assistance. He may have changed his mind about helping Ron, but that didn't make them friends and it certainly didn't mean Harry had to like him.

~ Page Break~

It wasn't until a few days later that Harry came up with a possible method of obtaining the necessary book for Ron. The Slytherin must have found something in his research of purification rituals, because he was eating by dinnertime. Only fruit and crackers, but still eating.

He was talking with Vector about pagan rituals and what he knew of the significance of the geometric patterns and shapes (which was considerably less than he thought after she grilled him on the subject), when it became clear there was going to be some preliminary research required. That was when Harry got an idea.

"You know, Professor, I haven't found much in the Hogwarts library about this sort of thing, but the National Library in London has an extensive collection of rare and ancient texts. I am sure they have a lot of what we're looking for."

"You may be right, Mr. Potter, but I don't know if they're up and running yet. I hear the university won't be open until next semester,

and they are part of the same consortium," Vector said, looking thoughtful.

"I might be able to pull a few strings. I have travel arrangements for next weekend. I doubt it would take much to detour through London on my way back."

At this, the arithmancy teacher gave him an appraising stare.

"They could probably benefit from the publicity. I can get the contact information of the library director for you if you like."

"That would be very helpful, thank you."

"No, Mr. Potter. Thank you."

After running his intentions by Professor Slughorn, who had nothing but praise for Harry's initiative, the arrangements were made and Harry was feeling rather pleased with himself. His plans all seemed to be coming together, despite the chaos of his day to day life. The universe seemed to be oddly in step with him lately, and in a turn of good fortune he received two letters the following Thursday from not only his godfathers but also the Weasley twins.

The letter from his godfathers was written in its usual humorous duality of two men with very different personalities vying for attention, and despite a few vague references to skirmishes with the local wizards at some of the colonies, everything seemed to be going well. The Weasley twins had a similar style of writing, but unlike his godfathers were nothing but butterflies and rainbows it seemed. Their pub, one of only two that had remained open for the entirety of the London siege (and how this was possible Harry couldn't even fathom) was now bursting at the seams with new customers. They were something like local legends and had appeared twice in the papers, and it seemed no one could come back into London without visiting at least once for a pint and the latest news around town. Harry hoped he would somehow find the opportunity to swing by to see them while he was in London.

Despite the relatively optimistic future that was presenting itself, Harry knew his luck couldn't hold out for much longer, and when the Sr. Dueling Club competition rolled around Thursday evening (it was supposed to have been the previous Friday but had to be postponed) he was proven correct.

The entire school seemed to have shown up, crowded into the bleachers along the wall or else crowding the floor in battle gear. Before the match, Harry was clustered with Angelina, Draco, and the other members who still held some sort of rank.

"I swear to God if you throw the match to me intentionally," Angelina growled, "I will find ways to make you suffer."

Harry fought the distinct urge to pout. He was faced with a conundrum. He didn't want to be Dueling Club Captain, but he certainly didn't want to quit, piss off Angelina, or make it obvious he lost intentionally to a weaker opponent in front of the entire school. Draco was quick to make an offer.

"I on the other hand, wouldn't mind in the slightest. I'll even let you pick the spell you want me to use."

Harry considered. Angelina slapped him upside the head.

"What is wrong with you?"

"I don't want to be captain," he whined like a five-year old.

"Merlin, you're pretentious. You honestly think you winning is a sure thing?"

He smirked. Someone snickered. She rolled her eyes.

"I never thought I would wish Ronald Weasley was back on the team, but at least you took him seriously. Where the hell is he, anyway? I thought his suspension was over."

Recalling Ron brought to mind bruised skin and rotting. Not something Harry wanted to linger on.

"He's been sick."

A pause. Draco frowned.

"He's been acting wonky for a while now. You think he's on something?"

Angelina gave him an exasperated look.

"He's your dorm mate. Shouldn't you know?"

"Why? If he's taking illegal potions he'd have the good sense not to show off. You'd be surprised how often that sort of thing slips anyone's notice."

Harry, through intense will, did not squirm.

Soon enough, the matches began and he did not have the time or the focus to decide exactly what he was going to do, be it lose to Draco or just win and accept another time consuming position. His matches were all predictably easy to win in one to three spells. Most of his opponents seemed resigned to losing to him from the start, and he equally resigned to win.

And then, a sort of miracle occurred.

Michael Allbright*, a slip of a boy in Hufflepuff whom Harry had mentored during his first painful year in Jr. Dueling Club, took the platform. He wasn't particularly powerful and when he had first started he had a tendency to freeze up under intimidation, but he had stuck it out and Harry could honestly say he liked him.

Which was why, when he found himself staring up at the ceiling after a blasting hex knocked him clean off the platform, he managed a laugh. A painful, breathless laugh, but an honest laugh just the same.

"Harry!" Allbright's terrified face was suddenly hovering over him. "Are you okay? I'm so sorry! Don't kill me!"

He just smiled, and that seemed to frighten the fourth year even more. Angelina popped into view, smirking down at him.

"You fly beautifully, Potter. Pity you weren't on a broom this time."

"Heh, heh... that didn't go quite as expected. I didn't know you knew that spell, Allbright." He raised both his hands and let them pull him to his feet. He swayed a little, but managed to keep upright. There was applause from the crowd, and Allbright blushed.

"Er... it was... you know... my secret weapon."

"And I'm honored to have been on the receiving end of it."

He gave him a pat on the back, which only served to stun him further.

"You're not mad?"

"Absolutely not. I'm relieved. I hope you have another 'secret weapon' though, because now you have a match with Angelina, and she won't be caught off guard like I was."

And of course, Angelina did wipe the floor with Allbright and Draco, holding onto her position as captain for another year. Harry's good humor over his defeat by a fourth year was currently freaking out his teammates, and they were speculating on how long it would take before Allbright met with an unfortunate 'accident' when no one was looking. Even Hermione was looking at him worriedly, and checking him for signs of a concussion.

It was late by the time the competition was over, and a brief ceremony was held to inform the winners of their new positions. Harry had lost his rank as Vice Captain to Draco, but he doubted it would mean much in the long run. If he were lucky, people might actually avoid him for a while, but they'd be back soon enough. His loss was more of a fluke than anything, and pretty soon others would realize that as well.

"I'm sorry you didn't make captain," Ira said afterwards, as he walked her back to the dungeons. Snape and she had both been to the

competition, watching with everyone else just as they would if it had been a Quidditch match, but only Ira had stayed long enough to speak with him. Snape not sticking around to tease him over his defeat gave Harry an uneasy feeling he was trying very hard to ignore.

"Don't worry about it. I don't have the time for that sort of thing these days anyway. It'll be nice to get away from the responsibility for a while. How are you doing? I've seen you around the castle a lot more these days, but we don't get a lot of opportunities to talk."

She smiled a little, but it still held that melancholy from his first visit.

"Severus has been really busy, so I've been trying to help... I don't know how much good I'm doing though."

Harry offered her a reassuring smile.

"You mean you don't know how much he appreciates it. Trust me. Even if he's being a short tempered jerk sometimes, he needs someone to look after him. And house elves don't count. They're terrified of him."

Her smile became a little more genuine at that.

"Apparently they're not the only ones. You've been avoiding him lately."

"Er... more like we've been avoiding each other."

"Why is that? Did you have a fight?"

"No, nothing like that. I just cause him a lot of stress most of the time. I doubt he wants to handle me on top of everything else."

They walked along quietly for a while longer. It was obvious Ira had something else to say, but she was struggling with it and by the time they reached the tapestry leading to her rooms, she had given up and let it go.

~ Page Break~

The school was buzzing over the Dueling competition results the next day, and not a little of that buzzing was around Harry's own defeat by the wand of a virtual unknown. The 'Harry-Hater' Club finally made itself obnoxious enough to reach his attention by posting flyers around the school of his ignominious defeat. He wasn't finding it nearly as amusing as he had last night. Gritting his teeth and smiling through it, however, was the best defense he had at the moment.

The teachers were indignant for the most part of this rather mean spirited prank. Harry didn't appreciate their sympathy towards him. It only served as fuel for the unsympathetic student body to mock and ridicule. All Harry could do was keep smiling, smiling, smiling.

"It's interesting, isn't it?" Draco said as they made their way to lunch, his voice carrying loud and clear over the whispers and snickers. "How the only ones who seem to think this is at all funny, are those too pathetic to actually cut it in dueling club themselves?"

The embarrassed silence that followed lasted almost through the entire lunch period, and despite not having scored the hit himself Harry found his smile a little more genuine. This lasted until the last class of the day, when he learned from an inappropriately amused Draco, that his little comment during lunch had launched the beginnings of a school wide civil war between Dueling Club and the 'loser' population of the school.

Because now, if you weren't in Dueling Club, that was what you were.

Dinner that night was held in murderous silence as three quarters of the school glared death at the 'winners', and quietly began to prepare for war. The teachers looked on from the head table with a nervous sort of tension. Headmaster Snape glared damnation at Harry as he read prophecy in the unspoken. It was a rather unfortunate way of regaining the headmaster's attention.

The pranks started Saturday morning.

~ Page Break~

"Sneezing powder? Honestly, you would have thought we had been invaded by eight year olds!" Hermione muttered, gathering up the sparkly blue powder at the end of her wand into an ever growing sphere. Someone had tossed a sneezing powder bomb into a corner of the library used primarily for duelists and upper level DA&D students. The recipients of said attack, along with Ms. Pince, were currently in the infirmary getting wiped down and dosed with an antidote, while prefects worked to clean up and contain the mess.

Harry tagged along out of curiosity... and honest sense of self preservation. He had avoided a number of the nastier pranks by the skin of his teeth, and had made a habit of being in the company of a prefect whenever possible. Between the stairs being charmed to go absolutely nowhere, his disappearing textbooks, the breakfast that tasted like sand, the small horde of Cornish pixies let loose in the Gryffindor common room at two in the morning (people were still scratching their heads trying to figure out where they came from in the first place) and the unfortunate hex floating around that made everyone shout at the top of their lungs when they spoke, Harry was starting to feel a bit paranoid.

He wished the twins were around, if only because they would have appreciated the chaos. Probably made it worse too, but he liked to think he wouldn't have been in that path of destruction.

Fortunately, he was leaving for France in an hour and would have a few days reprieve, although what he was going to find when he returned he was afraid to even speculate.

"Sorry about all this, Hermione," he said, guiltily. She just shook her head.

"You didn't do anything to warrant this. Merlin, even Draco's comment didn't warrant this. It's just... I don't know. Everyone's been so tense since the attack and this is their way of letting off steam and retaking control."

Harry nodded in agreement. This all did seem a bit over the top for a snide comment, particularly since Draco didn't seem to be on the receiving end of anymore pranks than anyone else.

"Are you done packing?" she asked offhandedly.

"Almost. I should probably go finish. Make sure no ones cursed my toothbrush."

"Good luck in Paris. Stay safe," she said, hugging him tightly before letting him go. It was fortunate he left when he did, because his toothbrush did have a curse on it but more importantly he had goodbyes to give, packages that needed to be sent, contact information he needed to gather, security matters to discuss with Seitler, an itinerary to review, and a number of other things that made him feel like he was a politician about to go on a campaign. A really shady politician.

Voldemort would have been proud.

~ Page Break~

"God never intended us to use magic, you know," Lucius slurred, leaning over the map of Italy. "If He did, He never would have made potions taste so awful. He really wants us all to be alcoholics. That's why liquor tastes so fucking good."

To prove he was a pious man, he took another gulp of whisky. He wasn't normally a whisky drinker, but as of late it was the only thing that seemed to help with the headaches. Stratus nodded dutifully, but didn't look up from the pile of intelligence reports he was sorting through. Lucius clamped down on his irritation. He had told the man to do it, after all, because while whisky helped with his headaches, it didn't help with his paperwork.

"God hates me," he said melodramatically, knowing how stupid that sounded even as he said it. It didn't matter. Only Stratus was there and he wouldn't tell anyone else about it. He was a loyal Hufflepuff if ever he met one, and while that was somewhat sickening to him he could at least acknowledge the usefulness of his discretion. "I should become a pagan. It looks like a bloody riot. And pagan's don't die. God hates them, but He can't do squat to them. Look at Voldemort.

Ch'. Look at Potter. Could throw him in a bloody volcano and he'd still come back."

Stratus actually looked up, a curious expression on his face.

"You don't care for Mr. Potter?"

"I despise him."

"And yet, you've been trying to recruit him, as well. What would you do if you had him under your thumb?"

"I'd despise him a little less. I could tolerate him well enough if his cheekiness were directed at the Italians instead of me. He hates me you know. He's jealous."

"Jealous, sir?"

"Of my life. You think he's got his act together? He's a bloody mess. He wishes he were me. Had my position, my wealth, my control. I'm in complete control," he sneered, and took another swallow. The burning sensation down his throat and into his stomach was a delicious sort of pain, and in the moment of vague disorientation that followed he felt the throbbing pain behind his eyes ease into a dull pressure.

He needed to eat. He was going to be sick later if he didn't, but he wasn't inclined to move from behind his desk. He would send Stratus for something as soon as he could think of what he could possibly stomach at the moment. Food didn't sound particularly appealing, and hadn't for some time. It was his secretary's fault. Every time he had her pick up a meal for him, he always ended up getting sick off whatever she brought back. He was having her investigated for possibly attempting to poison him, but so far no one had turned up anything.

He still didn't trust her, however, and had been relying more heavily on Stratus because of it. Well, that and he was so tired lately. Physically and mentally. He didn't have the energy to deal with his staff and their general incompetence, and their cringing was even

more blatant and annoying than usual over the last month. Despite his success in London, barely anyone had congratulated him. They took him for granted.

"He'll learn his place soon enough. If he'd stop being such a brat, he might even enjoy himself. I'd let him fight in Italy. He could kill them to his murderous heart's content for all I care."

"He seems a bit young for that," Stratus said cautiously, watching his superior closely.

"Well, obviously he's not. If he could do it in Germany, he could do it in Italy."

Lucius let out a little laugh as he imagined it. Italians running around screaming about the devil and Potter cackling like a loon as he rampaged through the streets. Ah to be young again.

"Ah... yes, sir, I suppose you are right. I finished these if you want to sign off on them," the soldier said, walking across the office to hand him a stack of forms. Almost immediately, the general felt even more exhausted. He hated paperwork, even if all he had to do was write his signature. He poured himself another glass, and settled in to get some actual work done.

Stratus retreated to his end of the room to work through the remaining pile of reports. He kept his expression neutral, although a sliver of a smile escaped as he glanced at the general. Lucius' physical and mental deterioration was becoming increasingly apparent. The rambling, the inability to focus, the headaches, and lack of appetite were all signs. Nothing dramatic enough to draw much attention even from Malfoy himself, but enough where he was forced to rely on his new, oh-so-very-helpful assistant to get things done. The more his body and mind failed him the more reliant on 'Stratus' he became, and the more Tom learned of the Dark Lord's plans.

Slowly, but surely, it was all coming together.

~ Page Break~

The trip to France was one of Harry's better travel experiences, if a bit dull. Professor Slughorn and he were two of a handful of passengers in the first class coach, which looked rather like a miniature luxury hotel lobby and restaurant, complete with obscenely comfortable seating and a five star waiting staff to indulge their every whim. Seidler prowled the car once, then promptly left to search for potential threats elsewhere on the train. Slughorn went off to engage the few other passengers in conversation, while Harry contented himself by making sketches for art class projects and studying his animagi guide. Things were so busy at school he hadn't been able to do much in either subject, and fully intended to make productive use of his time away. When he sent Sirius and Remus his next letter, he wanted to be able to say he was taking their lessons seriously and was making progress.

"You really ought to have mingled a little, Harry," Slughorn scolded gently as they exited the train at the end of their journey. "They were wealthy entrepreneurs hoping to expand their business into France. You all would have done well to have known each other."

"Mm," Harry hummed noncommittally, looking through the crowded station for Seidler and who ever the queen had sent to pick them up. He spotted his name hovering in the air in brilliant green, and following it downward he spotted Seidler and another familiar face. Grinning, he hurried forward, leaving Slughorn still nattering on about the importance of networking.

Fleur met him half way, her arms reaching up to encircle him tightly. He returned the hug enthusiastically. Somewhere in the crowd he heard cameras flashing. Flushing in embarrassment, he pulled away to a more respectable distance.

"Hey," he greeted. Her laugh was in the curve of her lips as she smiled back at him. She was wearing civilian clothes, but still managed to look official. She wore a dark grey business suit with skirt and a maroon robe left open acting as a sort of jacket. Her shoes were black lace and velvet heels that inevitably drew attention to her shapely calves peeking out from the hem of her skirt. He tried very

hard not to stare at those calves. "You look fantastic. Don't tell me these are standard regulation?"

She gave him a little wink for the compliment.

"Non, 'Arry, today I am not a musketeer. I am your date," she said.

"Date?"

"And liaizon... and bodyguard, alzo no one iz zupposed to know, oui?"

He nodded as if it were the most obvious thing in the world, although the situation felt more surreal than anything. Fleur's master, Balthus, made a comment in French that made Slughorn laugh and Fleur blush and refuse to translate, and they left the train station. The car waiting for them was definitively muggle and no more than five years old, glossy and white of all things with the royal crest emblazoned where the hood ornament should have been. Some of their luggage (at least Slughorn's) had to be shrunk to fit into the little trunk, but once inside it was obviously a high luxury vehicle. Harry watched enviously from the back seat as Fleur climbed behind the wheel and pulled them out into traffic.

"When did you learn to drive?" he asked, curiously.

"Zey teach us at Beauxbaton's during zicth's year. Don't zey at 'Ogwarts?"

"Why would they? Only muggles have the roads for it. Sometimes I ride in a car, but it's not a common practice."

Fleur made a curious little sound, as if she didn't know if what he said was funny or sad or just a little odd. She drove him on a brief tour of the city, passing both muggle attractions and wizarding all so perfectly mingled together it was dizzying trying to distinguish them. The sun was low in the sky, but the city seemed to be just waking up. Cars and people and millions upon millions of lights filled the open spaces of Paris, giving a sense of flurried activity on a scale Harry never saw in wizarding Britain.

It felt distinctly disconcerting to see muggles. Which was strange, because he had spent over half his life thinking he was one, and even moved amongst them fairly comfortably during his summer on the lam in Germany, France, and Britain.

It felt like it had been decades ago.

He knew he was going to see them during his trip to Paris, but he realized now he had been expecting to see something different than what was there. Muggles really were just like wizarding folk. Not in their way of dressing perhaps, but the way they moved about on their business or held their lover's hand or carried their child on their shoulders. In Britain, the word 'muggle' had been tossed about not so much as an insult as a term for 'other', like veela or goblins. It was a startling, almost sickening realization that he had been socialized to think of muggles as not really human.

The car fell into a stark and sudden silence, and Harry realized belatedly that his disturbing realization had caused a fluctuation in his magical signature. One significant enough that Balthus actually drew his wand in alarm.

"Ah, sorry," he said, but didn't even try to offer an excuse.

"Are you alright, 'Arry?" she called back.

"Yes, I'm fine. It is just a bit... jarring."

Again, he did not elaborate, and tactfully, no one else asked him to. Slughorn cleared his throat, and began asking about various pieces of architecture that made up the Parisian skyline. Balthus answered him in French while Fleur translated into English. Harry accepted it as the distraction it was, and paid attention even though the descriptions were somewhat baffling to him. There were ministry offices dedicated solely to flowers? The Department of Education was on the top floor of a muggle insurance company office building? The Arc de Triomphe was the busiest floo station in Europe?

The French were crazy, Harry decided. Loveable, but crazy.

Gradually, they moved from the tourist and business district into a more residential area, lined with three story townhouses crushed together, tiny pharmacies at the corner, and streets lined with walnut and hazel trees in their fall colors. Then, almost without him realizing it, there were no more buildings, just trees and a gravel road that stretched far into the distance ahead of them. Even as they went, Japanese-style stone lanterns sudden lit themselves on either side of the road, marking the curves of the path in the quasi-darkness of the rapidly ascending night. Another turn and trees fell away to reveal an enormous chateau that would have put the Malfoy estate to shame. The sun was gone, but the sky directly behind the chateau was still brilliantly orange and pink, the building itself looking dull grey and blue in comparison. Even in the poor lighting, Harry could see the extravagant detail heaped upon every nook and cranny, from the wide arched staircase to the gilded window frames. The road circled around a large fountain and straight up to the front steps, where four hotel employees dressed with military crispness stood at attention.

The doors to the car were opened for them, and each was greeted by name and title.

"Welcome to the Hotel de Sanctuaire, Lord Potter," the head concierge greeted congenially with only the slightest accent. "My staff and I are at your service, and endeavor to make your stay here as pleasant as possible. Please do not hesitate to make a request, no matter how small or seemingly extravagant. Please follow me. The staff will get your bags."

He glanced at Fleur, who just nodded and fell into place directly behind him. Balthus was ahead, scanning for potential danger, while Slughorn just sort of ambled about like a tourist in a museum, admiring this or that.

"Your tailor has been scheduled at eight thirty, which should give you plenty of time to settle in and have a light meal. The gardens, library, kitchen, and gymnasium are open until ten. The pool, sauna, smoking room, bar, and billiard room are open until one. Any of these facilities are available to you upon special request, and anything we do not readily have available can be retrieved at any time," the concierge

recited easily as he led them inside. Witches and wizards in stately evening wear were scattered around the lobby or peaking out from the adjacent barroom. No one really turned their heads to watch, but Harry could easily make out their eyes following them with a curiosity that belied their haughty dismissal. He struggled not to shy away from their scrutiny. This wasn't the first time he had been around such rich and powerful people, but almost always he had been in the company of the Dark Lord, whose presence always made them seem silly and meek in comparison.

They moved up a large staircase that split halfway up to the next floor and then a another staircase that did the same until they reached the top floor and moved into a side hallway. The interior was not as opulent as the Queen's palace, but Harry could see it was clearly based on the same decorating scheme with too much art and decoration crammed into too little space. The portraits stared out at them with the same haughtiness of the guests, and little golden cherubs clinging to the upper most buttresses giggled mischievously down at them.

It seemed like they walked a mile before they reached their rooms, and it was at the farthest end of the corridor. There was no doorknob, only a gold plaque with the inlay of six pointed star, into which the concierge pushed a pendant he pulled from his pocket. The doors immediately swung open.

The inside was more of an apartment than a hotel room, with a large living room and six doors leading to various bedrooms, bathrooms, studies, etc. Reneire briefly explained the various features, including the servant's bell, the private floo, etc, etc. Harry nodded politely and pretended it wasn't the most exquisitely beautiful place he had ever seen let alone slept in.

"This is her Majesty's private suite. She specifically requested it be made available to you, and that you be extended the utmost courtesy. Is there anything you require?"

I trip back to the planet Earth, Harry thought.

"No, I think I can handle it from here."

"Very good, sir. Here is your key. If you will excuse me."

Once the concierge had handed off the pendant that allowed access to the room and disappeared, Balthus let out an impressed whistle. Harry grinned.

"You're welcome to spend the night," he offered, making his way over to what was apparently his private suite. "I might need one of you to find me, in case I get lost in here."

He looked inside. It was as fantastic as the rest of the apartment, if bit more feminine with the dressing table and violet satin bed sheets. His luggage, a black leather gym bag, looked like a mongrel curled up in front of the fire place. Merlin, there was a fireplace in the bedroom and the living room.

"I will 'ave to take you up on zat. I am your liaison, after all," she said a bit mockingly, as if it were a terrible burden to be trapped in this place with him. Balthus said something sarcastic, and she laughed. There was a master bath connected to his suite, and he slipped inside to look around. White tiles, blue marble, and gold trim from floor to ceiling. A large, clawfoot bathtub sat filled to the brim with steaming hot water, toiletries set off to the side, and thick white towels beside those.

A bath suddenly seemed very appealing. Certainly, the tailor he was supposedly meeting in an hour would appreciate the courtesy. Fleur checked the bathroom for potential dangers ('Arry, did I ever tell you about ze politician 'oo was boiled alive in ze bathtub?'), left him alone to check the rest of the suite with her master and to order dinner. Once she had left, he stripped and settled himself into the steaming water.

Only for Fleur to march herself right back into the bathroom fifteen minutes later.

While he was still in the tub.

For a moment, he stared at her in absolute shock. She smirked. He curled up in the bath like soldier in the trenches during an air raid.

"Do you mind?"

"Zuch a question! You should know better. You English. Zo shy with your bodies," she said dismissively. "Your dinner is 'ere. Profesor Zlug'orn went down to dinner with ze ozer guestz and Balthus iz checking in with headquarters. It iz just you and me."

Harry knew he was red. In fact, he was positive he could keep the bath water piping hot all night by the heat of his embarrassment alone. Fortunately, she took pity on him.

"I zet out zome of your clothes on ze bed. 'Urry and finish up, and 'ave dinner with me. We 'aven't zeen each ozer in ages." She backed out of the bathroom, but not before throwing out over her shoulder. "Still zo cute!"

He joined her a few minutes later, still an embarrassed red, but blessedly dressed.

Dinner was some sort of fish, which Harry wasn't particularly fond of, but the hotel's definition of fish was of course different from most British citizenry and he was surprised to find it was really very good. Fleur laughed at his surprised expression and listed off the ingredients, which were either in French or he just plain never heard of.

"Ogwart's food was awful. It was a lovely castle in its way, but the food...ich," she lamented.

"The food was fine. Actually it's very good food. It's just... not French."

"Ich," she repeated, and he just laughed. "Well, ze food iz no good, but ze boyz? Very nice. Bill Weazley iz coming to Paris, did you know? 'E iz guest speaker at international convention zis year. British curzes all ze rage! I even get to zee im talk! It took me a month of

begging Balthus. I zink he would of zaid yes anyway, but 'e likes iz ego stroking."

Harry choked on some fish when she said 'stroking' and then very forcefully pulled his mind out of the gutter.

"That's great. I knew you both really hit it off, and I know they other Weasley's really hoped you two would work out. They were all quite fond of you."

Except for Ron, but Harry sometimes doubted his parentage. She dimpled at the compliment. He decided now was as good a time as any to broach another subject he had been hoping to discuss with her.

"Do you know why I am here?" he asked her. She looked amused by the question.

"Because you were invited? It iz not my place to know zuch things. Zat iz 'er Majesty'z business. Zat iz Lord Voldemort'z business. Not zoldier business."

"Not quite."

He told her about his intention to ask the queen for asylum for Hermione during the costume ball. Fleur looked genuinely surprised. Then she smiled and let a long, wistful sigh.

"You British are much more romantic zen we give you credit for."

Harry frowned at her. Which was difficult, because her sigh had him blushing all over again. Lousy veela charm. It hadn't affect him at all when he was fourteen. What gives?

"It is not romantic. It's very serious. Hermione is in very real danger."

"It iz very, very romantic. Young woman forced to flee from an unwanted marriage to foreign landz with ze 'elp of 'a dashing young adventurer. Oui, very romantic. Are you in love with 'er?"

"No. She's like a sister to me. My best friend."

"She iz in love with you zen."

"Of course not!"

"Of course zo! Or she will be. 'Arry, you are adorable, but a bit dense zometimes. If she iz not in love with you now, she will be."

"No. She...no. She was in love with Viktor."

She did not look impressed with his reasoning. Or maybe she was just annoyed at him using Viktor's name. They did not talk of him, but he occupied the silences in between their spoken words and the empty spaces of their letters.

"Oui, Viktor waz 'er beloved. 'E waz 'er 'ero. But 'e betrayed 'er. You are friend. You are 'ero. She will fall in love with you. Very zad. She'll never be with you like that. That iz not how ze world works. Maybe in Paris, she will fall in love. Very romantic."

"It's not going to be like that. I know Hermione. She'll be too busy studying to be dating. Once things die down she'll come back home."

Fleur shook her head.

"No, no. She spend enough time in Paris, it will become her home. It iz Paris. Better zan any man. She will fall in love with ze city."

Harry didn't know how he could refute her assertion. Fleur didn't know Hermione. Hermione was one of the reasons he loved his country so much to start with. Her earnest demeanor, her gentle heart, and almost severe practicality. She wasn't French. It didn't make sense for her to stay in France forever. It was just a necessary evil.

He didn't know how to explain that to Fleur without either a) insulting France, b) making her think he was actually in love with Hermione, or c) realizing he was deluding himself and there was a very real possibility that his inquisitive and confident friend would probably love Paris.

"I think she's more of a London, girl," he said, instead.

~ Page Break~

After almost three weeks of running a school of young militants and a refugee camp all under the same roof, Snape did not think it was unreasonable to want to spend a night with his wife, doing what healthy, relatively young married couples do to unwind from stress. Everyone had started to settle into a routine, the Court advisor the Dark Lord had recommended had set up an internal infrastructure that relieved much of the burden of daily responsibilities from him and the insurance money was just starting to come in and relieve the financial burden as well. The sudden prank wars that had broken out were annoying, but the sort of the thing the rest of the teaching staff was trained to handle. Potter had left for France that afternoon, which meant he had anywhere from ten to forty-eight hours before he received word of a diplomatic incident he was going to have to help mop up after.

That meant he had a small window of opportunity before the universe righted itself and everything went to hell again.

He had left McGonagal in charge of the school.

He had left Seitler in charge of Hogsmeade Hall.

He had left the Slytherin prefects in charge of Slytherin House.

Each had received a vague warning of severe consequences if he was unduly disturbed that night. They had all nodded like good minions and shuffled off to do his bidding. Alright, that last part was a bit of a stretch, but they wouldn't be bothering him. Of that he was almost certain.

Now if only his wife were as cooperative.

"Severus, wait, stop... I'm not... I can't...Please, stop..." she begged softly between kisses. They were in the living room. They had just eaten private meal together and were unwinding with a glass of red wine. They had gone through this routine a dozen times before... 'It' happened.

"You're beautiful," he said softly, like a promise and kissed her again, moving his hands from her shoulders to her sides of her face, cupping them gently. She liked it when he touched her face. From her lips to her eyelids to her flushed cheeks, all of it seemed to be one great erogenous zone. Already her eyes were dilated, her lips firming with a stroke of his thumb. He could see and feel her desire.

She reached up quickly and snatched his hands away.

"No... not yet..."

He let out a frustrated sigh.

"When?"

"I don't know. It's not... it's a psychological thing not a biological one. I'm sorry. I just don't know," she said sharply. She stood up from the couch and stalked towards the fire place. He remained where he was, stunned by the frustration and resentment behind the words. "Do you think I want to be this way? Melancholy? Useless? Frigid?"

"What are you talking about? I think we established early on you're not frigid," he snapped back.

"But melancholy and useless, you won't deny?"

"Don't put words into my mouth!"

"What else am I supposed to do? You never talk to me!"

"I talk to you everyday! We were just talking over dinner!"

By now they were shouting at each other, feeding off the raw, volatile emotions that had been festering after weeks of tragedy and crisis. Snape got to his feet, his hands clenched. He made a step towards her, then quickly changed his mind and stood behind the coach, creating a physical and figurative barrier between them. His wand was in the kitchen beside the wine rack, along with Ira's by the sink. A careless thing to do, but at the moment he was glad for the mistake.

He didn't entirely trust himself at the moment, and certainly didn't trust his increasingly hysterical wife.

"About work! About whatever chores you expect me to do tomorrow to keep busy while you're playing lord of the castle!"

"What is that supposed to mean? You think I'm having fun? You think it's easy? The board of governors, the students, the staff, the whole bloody country and the Dark Lord himself, breathing down my neck twenty-four seven? Do you even realize what I have to go through to keep this place running?"

"I know exactly what you go through everyday, Severus. I'm right there! Every single day, I'm right there, at your beck and call!"

"You said you wanted to help! Did you change your mind when you realized it was actually going to be hard work?"

"SCREW YOU!" she screamed. In the dark enclave of their private rooms, her words were deafening even after all their shouting. For a moment, she looked startled, and glanced guiltily around the shadows of the room as if expecting to hear irritated neighbors banging on floor above them. When she spoke again, it was in a quieter, yet equally venomous tone.

"I wanted to help because I'm your wife! I'm not a house elf, and I expect some acknowledgement of that. I went through that with my first marriage and I'm not going to go through it again."

"What are you talking about? I do not treat you like a house elf!"

"You never say thank you!"

"I say thank you all the time!"

"You never look at me when you do! You say it like you're saying 'hello' or 'good night'. Like a reflex. A meaningless pleasantry, while you're focused on something else entirely."

"I..."

That was actually quite possible. But damn it, he was busy! He might have been distracted, but that didn't mean he wasn't sincere.

"And you never introduce me. To anyone. Half the teaching staff didn't know I was your wife until Harry introduced me. Half the people you brought in to fix the castle or run security don't even know I'm more than your secretary!"

That... that may have been a legitimate blunder on his part. He had just sort of assumed... Merlin, the entire castle knew when a ghost farted in the astronomy within half a day and they really couldn't figure out that Ira was his wife? And it was not half the staff. More than half the staff had actually been at his wedding.

"But who can blame them? It's not like we act like a married couple! You don't kiss me, or hold my hand, or talk to me about anything other than work in public."

"And when I try to do those things in private, you don't want to do them!" he reminded her. "I may not do those things in public- I frankly despise people who inflict that sort of thing on innocent bystanders- but don't you dare say I've neglected you in private. I've broken half a dozen regulations to keep you near. To make sure you had everything you wanted. I've tried to be what you needed, patient and understanding, and I thought I was doing a pretty good job under the circumstances until about ten minutes ago! I'm trying to be patient and understanding now, because I... I know... It was hard. God dammit, I know how hard it was... It was my child too!"

And as if the word 'child' were the hidden tap to their souls, the anger and fight drained out of both of them. Snape covered his face with his hand. He did not cry, hadn't for decades, but he knew his expression was open and painful like a deep wound that needed to be hidden from even the gentlest prodding. Across from him, Ira mirrored the gesture, but she had tears enough for the both of them and neither the will nor the desire to hold them back. It had been two weeks since she had last cried, and she thought she would never cry again after that, but now it was too easy, too natural.

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

The apology encompassed more than their lover's spat. Snape wasn't entirely sure of what all it entailed. He could no longer arrogantly claim to know his wife that thoroughly after that emotional blitzkrieg. He could guess some of it. The baby... it hadn't been her fault, but he had known from the beginning that she was almost obsessively attached to it. Guilt wasn't reasonable, but it was understandable.

However, he suspected there was more to it than even that.

The moment of grief stretched on for several minutes, Snape standing completely motionless and Ira sobbing into her hands. Predictably, he recovered first with a deep, cleansing breath and a straightening of his shoulders. He looked at his wife. He felt unpleasantly awkward and useless just standing there, watching her fall to pieces. He wanted to storm off, to tell her to stop her blubbering, to be unaffected and superior as he had been when faced countless weeping widows and mothers before.

But he couldn't.

He loved her. He didn't want to. It complicated otherwise very simple situations. He wished he could kill the fool who first convinced the world there was anything good about being in love. Moron. Bastard. Liar.

He wanted to make this better and he didn't know how. He was a Slytherin, not a damn... Hufflepuff. Yes. Sentimental saps, true, but also the most psychologically stable and healthy group of young people in the school. What would a Hufflepuff do in this situation?

It took an embarrassingly long time to put himself in the mindset of someone who wasn't inherently self-centered. When he finally managed, the answer was even more embarrassingly obvious.

He moved around the couch, closing the distance between them, and took her into his arms. He was terrified. His biggest fear was that she would reject his touch again, reject the physical comfort he had

withheld under the misguided respect for her grief, and he would be left with a soul deep sense of betrayal.

He had only ever truly loved one other person in his life and her rejection over a few hurtful words spoken after the moment of his deepest shame and anger had nearly destroyed him.

He did not know what he would do if it happened a second time.

She didn't pull away.

She buried her head into his shoulder, arms to his back and sides, melting into the curves of his body like liquid metal into a mold. She didn't stop crying. If anything, she only got louder, but he felt supremely relieved. The distance that had been growing between them since early September was finally starting to close.

"S-severus?"

"Yes, Ira?"

"Why...Why..." A sniffled, followed by a deep breath to help steady her tongue. "Why don't we talk about the nursery, anymore?"

"The nursery?"

"You didn't want to let mother decorate it. I said you couldn't paint it green."

He suddenly felt very clueless. He had no idea what she was talking about. Well, yes, he remembered the conversation about Susan Morgan's offer to decorate the nursery at their cottage, but it seemed rather non sequitur at the moment.

"Or the names you wanted if our first were a boy or a girl. Or what we need to baby proof the house. Or what they might look like. We used to be able to talk about those things for hours. We don't talk about them anymore. Why don't we talk about them? Is it... is it over? Is this as far as got?"

And suddenly, everything that just happened made a lot more sense to him. Her irrational behavior was rooted in rational fears.

Her previous husband had inflicted psychological wounds surrounding her sense of self, skewing the boundaries between womanhood, desirability, and reproduction irrevocably. She had told him herself that her ex-husband had been physically and emotionally abusive, emphasizing her only desirable quality as the ability to reproduce, and the same ability he deprived her of before discarding her. Her father's siding against her had reinforced this belief. She had fallen into a deep depression, never dated despite the occasional offer, and gradually reinventing herself into a sort of asexual scholar.

Then he had come along. He was the first man she said who made her feel desirable, and then he became the first person to offer the hope of marrying and starting a family of her own. Inadvertently, he had reinforced the beliefs instilled by her abusive husband and neglectful father.

And then their first hope had ended, so easily and so quickly it was offensive.

Legally or just emotionally, she thought he would leave her, just as every other male family member had. What he had interpreted as grief was insecurity.

At least, partially. Probably it was both grief and insecurity, and trying to deal with both at the same time was going to be damn difficult. Suddenly, sleep seemed a lot more enjoyable than psychologically compromised sex at the moment.

"No," he said at last, hoping his long pause hadn't once again been misinterpreted. "We'll try again. And if it doesn't work then we'll try it again. And again and again and again, until something works. But not right now. We're both too stressed and too exhausted. When we're both ready, and personally I'm not ready yet," he threw in, hoping to ease some of that insecurity he had finally identified, "then we'll see Healer Jacobi and we'll talk about nurseries and names. Until then, I need you to keep doing what you've been doing... helping me get through the days and keeping me company during the nights. I was...

pleased... when you came to help me without me having to ask. You are... a wonderful assistant. I couldn't have done it without you."

Ira sudden choked beneath him and at he thought it was another sob, but when she spoke he realized she was laughing.

"Now, you're just laying it on thick. I know you appreciated it. I know you didn't mean anything by not introducing me. You just assumed everyone already knew who I was the same way they all seemed to know who you were. I was just being stupid. Crazy. I'm sorry. Let's just blame it on PMS, and forget it."

Ah, the PMS theory. He hadn't considered that.

He chuckled softly, more out of relief than anything else. She laughed too, and for a while they just stood there and laughed softly. He wouldn't forget, but he wouldn't compromise the tangible relief they were both feeling as their uncharacteristically dramatic behavior finally broke, and they settled back into the warm, comfortable affection they both preferred.

Ira pulled away first, sniffing and awkwardly rubbing her eyes.

"Ugh, I feel positively disgusting. I probably got snot all over your robes."

Snape grimaced, knowing that was very likely. Ah, well, he was a Slytherin. He could find an opportunity almost anywhere.

"Perhaps then, Mrs. Snape," he said in mock formality, "I might interest you in a long, hot bath. I could use one myself."

She suddenly looked more cautious.

"Together?"

"No point in wasting water."

"It's not that big of a tub."

"I admit, it may be a bit snug, but I am a gentleman, madam. I would never dream of taking advantage."

She gave him a skeptical look. Her eyes and the edge of her nostrils were bright red from rubbing, her cheeks streaked from tears, but the corner of her mouth twitched just a little. It was first time in a long time they had played like this.

"Well, since it is my snot you're covered in, I don't suppose I'm in any position to refuse."

He gave her a sardonic smile.

"Very gracious of you."

"Serverus?"

"Yes?"

"I love you."

~ Page Break~

"That's a common misunderstanding," Harry explained to the small dinner party gathered around the dinning table. He was feeling decidedly relaxed after a day to himself, enjoying the various amenities the hotel had to offer. Now he was enjoying a light meal before the masquerade, and found himself the center of attention for a dozen or so distinguished witches and wizards, whose names he could only half pronounce. "The werewolf colonies are not government run. The werewolves have their own sovereignty on their assigned lands. It was part of the original treaty between Lord Voldemort and Fenrir Greyback after the war. It seems to work well for all parties invovled."

"Exzept fur ze prizners oo are zent to live zere," a plump woman in deep purple robes quipped. He was feeling relaxed enough, possibly due to the wine he had been drinking, not to snap at her.

"I've never met a prisoner yet who preferred Azkaban over a colony."

Not that he had ever asked the question directly and knew their preference hadn't been asked before they were exiled, but even the surliest werewolves he knew seemed to have some appreciation for the chance at the life they had been given. He didn't think he had ever heard anyone complain about it.

The woman's husband laughed softly into his wine glass, earning him an annoyed swat with her fan. Another man across the table gave Slughorn a disapproving look. The potions teacher had taken advantage of his charge's popularity to insinuate himself into their company. He had not said much except to explain a question or clarify an answer that became garbled in translation, however. Harry suspected the man was using the opportunity to gage his political savvy.

"I can see Lord Potter has an 'onest sentiment for these people, but it seems utterly irresponsible to me that someone so young should be placed in such a physically and politically precarious position among a group of felons with a 'ighly contagious and debilitating condition. The fact that 'e 'as not contracted lycanthrosis or worse already, is nothing short of a miracle."

"'ere, 'ere," the plump woman agreed.

Slughorn did not apologize or look the least contrite. He simply turned to Harry.

"Should I explain or would you like to?"

Harry smiled at the other guests. It was more than a little condescending, but they had been looking at him similarly throughout dinner.

"I am immune to lycanthrosis. That, and for various other reasons, means I am likely the least vulnerable to infection. Besides, they like me there."

This earned him several disbelieving looks. He stared back with unwavering confidence. Another wizard, only a few years older than

Harry, grinned and lifted his glass to him. Before the others could recover and ask him to either explain or renounce his claim, the concierge entered the dining room and leaned over the young English wizard.

"Lord Potter, your costumes have just arrived from the tailor's. I sent them to your room with Mademoiselle Delacour."

Harry pulled out his pocket watch to check the time. It was quarter after six. He had one hour before he had to leave for the masquerade.

"Just in time. Thank you, Reneire. If you will excuse me, ladies and gentlemen, I am afraid I have a previous engagement."

He stood from the table, bowed politely, and left for his rooms with Slughorn at his heels. He was glad now for all those lessons in manners Voldemort had inflicted upon his younger self. They had been occasionally useful in Britain, but in France they were practically a survival skill amongst the aristocracy.

"You did quite well for yourself, Mr. Potter," Slughorn said as they made their long trek back to the suite. "It might be impertinent of me to say, but you seem to handle yourself best when a certain level of antagonism is involved."

"Oh? I didn't think they were that bad."

"No, not that bad. Your socio-economic status is somewhat of a mystery so they were testing your confidence level instead to see where you rank. Rather foolish of them, given you are obviously in high standing with both Lord Voldemort and Queen Ophelia. Ah, well..."

"Ah, well," Harry agreed with a shrug.

Fleur had their costumes laid out on the chaise longue in the living room, their masks sitting on top. She was already half changed, her black petticoats sticking out of the bottom of a full length red silk corset. Slughorn coughed and looked pointedly elsewhere. Harry, for his part, couldn't look away.

"Um..."

She just smiled and rolled her eyes.

"I keep forgetting you are British."

"No you don't. You're just shameless. Absolutely shameless," he scolded.

She laughed.

"Maybe. But 'urry and get ready, we do not 'ave much time."

She grabbed Slughorn's costume and mask, an artistic interpretation of a laconic basset hound, shoved them into the man's arms and hurried him towards his room. He was still too embarrassed to look directly at her. By the time she turned around, Harry had already snatched up his things and escaped to his bedroom. He took a moment to study it all.

The mask was a half mask of red fox; the pointy black nose, the sharp slant of the eyes, and pert little triangle ears gave it a rather devilish appearance. The rest of his costume, ironically, was fox hunting attire. It was not the traditional attire, but again an artful interpretation. The coat was velvet with a thorny briar motif pressed into it, and a row of elaborate brass buttons engraved with pagan symbols he doubted their creators understood the significance of were sown down the front. The white breeches were leather and snug, the black English dress boots reached almost to his thigh rather than below his knee, and his black leather gloves were more suited to a piano player than a hunter.

It did not take long for him to change, and when he finally looked himself in the mirror, he didn't know if he was supposed look like he was going hunting or clubbing. Curious, he put on his mask and to see what it looked like.

He immediately took it off again.

It was creepy.

Very, very creepy.

He spent another ten minutes grooming himself and trying fruitlessly to tame his hair into some semblance of order, then went out into the living room to wait for the others. Slughorn joined him a few minutes later; his own costume was that of a navy sea captain.

"Ah, you got the fox! Lucky you," he said, making himself comfortable on the chaise lounge.

"What do you mean?"

"The fox has great significance to the French. They are symbols of intellect, daring, and...er... virility. It's usually the most sought after mask amongst young men."

"Sought after? You mean they aren't assigned randomly?"

"Of course not! The masks all have significance. They represent certain virtues and vices, status, and popularity. Duels and vendettas have occurred over the assigning of masks. There was a famous case twenty something years ago, where a count murdered a visiting Belgium because he received the lion mask the count had wanted."

"What? That's stupid!"

"Absolutely, but the lion mask is traditionally assigned to the most decorated soldiers and warriors, which the count was at the time, and giving it to a middle ranking foreigner was a grave insult. It was later learned that the visiting count had only received the mask because he paid an exorbitant sum for the honor. That is and was a perfectly common practice, but no one felt the least bit of sympathy for him, especially among the nobles. The count got off Scott free."

"Not free. 'E ended up paying 'alf 'is estate in legal fees before ze end," Fleur said, opening the door to her own bedroom to enter. She would have fit in perfectly at the court of Mary Antoinette in her scarlet silk sack-back gown, except for the lack of a ridiculous wig.

Although the large white bunny ears were certainly something to look at.

"You're a rabbit?" he asked, because of all the things he had imagined Fleur's costume to be, rabbit seemed one of the least suited to her personality.

"Oui. I am lucky you are ze fox or else I would probably be a fish."

"What? Why? I thought you were nobility and popular and... stuff."

She waved it off, not the least bit bothered.

"I am ze young, unmarried daughter of a rich, but minor noble and a disinherited duchess, with little to my name but ze triwizard tournament fiasco and an apprenticeship under a well liked Musketeer. I am nobody to them."

That sounded utterly ridiculous to Harry. Fleur was one of the most remarkable people he had ever met, and certainly a good deal more interesting than most of the nobles, French and British alike. He said as much.

She kissed him on the cheek.

"I 'ope you always stay zis cute," she said. "'Ere, let me 'elp you with your scarf. You've managed to butcher it zome 'ow."

They fussed about the suite for a while, fixing their clothes, their hair, make-up in Fleur's case, and a clean shave in Slughorn's. Reneire knocked on their door to announce that Balthus was waiting for them with the car. They went downstairs. There were three or four other wizards and witches in costume waiting for their rides in the front entrance as well. They stared jealously at the fox's mask in Harry's hand or else at the buxom young rabbit wrapped around his arm.

Slughorn held the door open for Fleur as she climbed into the back seat. There was no way to negotiate her hoop skirt and panniers into the front, and Harry following in after her had to gather up her voluminous dress as he went to keep from stepping on it.

"I hope we don't run into any trouble. I don't know how you could do much of anything in this getup," he joked lightly as he settled in beside her.

"Don't worry. Zere iz a zecret cache I can touch and ze whole zing just falls right off. I can fight in my underwear just fine."

"That would certainly make for an interesting party," Harry laughed. Balthus was not as conservative a driver as Fleur, which meant that aside from several brushes with death (and the occasional pedestrian) they also managed to make it to palace with time to spare. There was a line of cars, carriages, and even levitating palanquins leading up to the palace, most of which were handed off to valet's or moved off on their own accord. Witches and wizards in a variety of costumes and animal masks made their way up the wide stone steps, a menagerie of creatures that would have left Noah scratching his head.

"It iz customary to put your mask on before arriving," Fleur said, slipping on her own disguise. Her blue eyes shown clearly through the wide eye holes, the faux diamond (at least he hope they weren't real diamonds) sprinkled across her mask reflected the surrounding light and made her eyes glitter rather spectacularly. Slughorn slipped on his mask as well, and despite its rather doleful expression, the cheerful sociability that comprised his character managed to shine through in a way that was almost dog-like in itself. Balthus' mask was not that of an animal at all, but of a troll-like creature of all things with an exceptionally long nose and ears and mustard yellow skin. His costume was that of a Persian sheik. A type of djinn perhaps?

With some reluctance, Harry slipped off his glasses and set the mask in place. A few more spells and he could see clearly through the eye slits and had secured his disguise to his head. He was momentarily startled when he felt some sort of magic activate inside of the mask. His first instinct was to rip it off again, but when he touched it, the feel of his own fingertips through plaster gave him pause. He blinked, and felt the mask blink as well. He wiggled his nose. The mask wiggled its nose in time.

"Huh. Weird."

Fleur laughed, and her little pink nose shivered up and down. They moved further up in the line of vehicles, and a valet made his way towards them. Balthus, who maintained an air of amused detachment, suddenly turned to his apprentice and said something strict Harry didn't follow.

Fleur snapped something back just as sharply then turn to Harry.

"Don't worry about it."

Despite her words, once they left the car, she was all business. She might have been holding his arm as he escorted her up the steps, but her eyes were darting this way and that and her rabbit ears swiveled about like antennae looking for a signal. He gave an internal sigh. It was just as well. He had his own job to perform and it was imperative that he succeed.

Inside, the palace was just as overwhelming in its opulence as Harry remembered. The walk to the ballroom was a short one, but somewhat delayed by other party goers lingering out in the corridors to hold conversations.

"Zey are trying to figure out 'oo iz 'oo," Fleur said, somewhat disapproving. "You are not zupposed to know 'oo anyone iz during a masquerade, zat iz zort of ze point., but zome people are always trying to be clever."

"Does anyone know I am here? That I am the fox?"

"Oui. Everyone knows you are 'ere zomewhere, and I doubt it would not take much to guess you are ze fox. You are ze only Englishman 'ere. But it iz not polite to point it out."

Fleur managed to maneuver him through the corridor without being snatched up by one of the many curious people lingering in the halls, but once they were in the ballroom she may as well have been fighting off an army of orcs with a beget. A small symphony was playing, although he did not recognize any of the songs, and the still

energized crowd had filled the center of the floor to dance. As the fox, albeit an unusually short one, it seemed it was every unmarried young witches incentive to bag him for at least one dance and every concerned parent and jealous suitors prerogative to interrogate him. Fleur could only shield him so much.

He really really needed to learn French.

So he danced(luckily the dances were all pretty much the same here as in Britain even if the music wasn't) and made nice (which was difficult, because supposedly he was supposed be simultaneously flirtatious and respectful, and he wasn't very good at either) for some indeterminable length of time that left him almost desperate to escape. Finally, finally, Her Majesty, Queen Ophelia IV made her appearance.

The music stopped, the herald called out with a magically amplified voice, and everyone turned towards the entrance. She stood at the top of the stairs for a moment, surveying those below with the sort of regal affection Harry had never seen adequately replicated in another. Draped in a silk wedding gown studded with pearls and diamonds, she wore no mask, just a pair of white wings behind her ears to pin up her elaborately corded hair. It seemed no matter how many times he saw her, it always felt like love at first sight.

As she reached the bottom, the gathered guests all bowed and curtsied low. Harry followed their example, but never tore his eyes away. He started when the queen's gaze suddenly found his, and she smiled just so.

She made a brisk gesture. The music began where it had left off, the menagerie straightened to begin follow their example. In the brief moment of re-orientation, he found himself snatched away from his dance partner, a tigress in a Chinese cheongsam, by Fleur. She led the dance, moving them just slightly out of step so that they made their way to the other side of the dance floor.

There was a small alcove off the main ballroom with a thick curtain that could be drawn for privacy if need be, in which the queen was sitting comfortably in a chair. Musketeers in their uniforms, each with wolf masks, stood guard just outside, while a sole lady-in-waiting

stood at attendance just behind her. Harry realized belatedly, that Fleur was moving him straight towards them.

"Wait! What are you...?"

"You wished to speak to 'er Majesty, yes?" she said, leading him rather precariously through the whirling maze of dancers. "She looked at you as she entered. Zat means she iz ready to speak."

That was the entire purpose of his visit, and yet now that the moment arrived he found himself wholly unprepared to handle it. He had never spoken to Queen Ophelia alone before, and those few times he had even spoken to her directly he had bumbled through it like a fool. His liaison, date, and somewhat questionable friend ignored his flustered state and moved him off the dance floor and towards the curtain. She even had the audacity to nick his wand out of his sleeve while he was distracted, and hand it over to one of the wolf guards. She entered first and practically dragged him in behind her.

"Your Grace," she said, curtsying respectfully. "May I present Lord Potter."

He bowed for the second time that night, this time feeling rather too timid to look at her while doing so. He hadn't even straightened completely before Fleur was hurrying back out the entry way. It was then that he noticed that while the curtain appeared opaque from the outside, it was transparent on their side and the ballroom and its occupants were clearly visible. He didn't have time to wonder at the magical mechanics behind it, however.

He was alone with the queen of France.

"Er... Good evening, Your Majesty."

"Good evening, Harry. Are you enjoying your visit so far?" she asked, lifting her hand to gesture him closer.

His eyes were shy, but his body moved forward with a confidence that belied that fact and boldly took her outstretched to kiss, "I can not

recall a time or place I have been more hospitably received. You have been more than gracious."

It had taken him twenty minutes of thought and another ten of practice in front of the bathroom mirror to figure out how to thank her without sounding like a socially awkward teenager. Fleur had recommended the kiss if he could manage it without slobbering all over her or tripping over his feet. He thought he mostly succeeded. He was glad for the mask, however.

She seemed to take his initiative positively, tilting her head in acknowledgment.

"Then I am pleased. It is my hope that your return to France might assuage some of the unpleasantness of your last visit."

"I don't know what you-" he began, but then stopped as he realized what she was talking about. The last time he had been in France was during his hospital stay, recovering from the disastrous results of Fenrir's possession and impromptu war against Berlin, which had itself begun within the borders of France. "Your Majesty, I do not know how much you have been told about what happened last winter, but I assure you I have never blamed you or anyone else in France for it."

"You must think you are either being very honest or very gracious, young man, but in truth you are being rather conceited."

He stiffened in alarm, but her expression didn't change. She did not even look annoyed.

"The belief that my people were incapable of affecting the outcome of what occurred or rather, that no one outside of you yourself or your own people could have done anything to stop it is quite conceited, wouldn't you agree?"

Having it explained to him like, it certainly seemed that way. Reluctantly, he nodded.

"Do not worry. I know it is a common trait of the British, particularly those of English decent and I do not take it personally. It did not even occur to your mentor that he might in some way hold me responsible, and given the political advantage it would have provided him at the time, it is indeed remarkable that he did not seize the opportunity."

He felt himself bristle a bit at her assumption that Voldemort had made a mistake. Perhaps it was English conceit or arrogance, but he didn't like the dig, no matter how gently delivered.

"I imagine he found greater advantage in stirring public sympathy. Demanding you take responsibility would have only made everyone defensive or resentful in the long run."

Something in her eyes warmed.

"Ah, very good, Harry. Did he tell you that himself?"

"That he preferred long term public sympathy over a short term political maneuver? No. I just know he prefers public sympathy. He calls it 'orphan-hugging'."

She laughed, startling him. He had never heard her laugh like that before. It was not particularly elegant, but it was warm and filled up the room, just like her personality.

"Does he really? That is terrible. What a terrible, wonderful creature he is."

That pretty much summed up Harry's assessment of him, as well.

"Or he may just like you. He can be surprisingly forgiving to those he likes."

He knew this very well from past experiences, including the debacle that forced him to flee to Germany for his life and the bungled invasion of Berlin via possession of a werewolf god. It used to keep him up at night, wondering if it was all a trick and when the other shoe would drop.

Sometimes it still did.

"Would that not be lovely?" she said, whimsically. "Two monarch with genuine affection for each other. I suppose if there were ever an age when it were possible, it would be this one. But come, you did not cross the channel and get all dressed up just to exchange gossip, and I am afraid there is something of a line waiting outside. Your letter said you wished to speak to me of a private matter?"

"I... yes."

"How private of a matter? Does your mentor know of it?"

"Yes."

"And does he know you are coming to see me about it?"

"I am not hiding it from him, necessarily."

"Why, Harry, you are not trying to get me into trouble, now are you?"

He quickly shook his head.

"N-no, of course not. I don't...er... if you want to tell him, I don't mind. I doubt he'd try to stop me."

"Very well, what is it?"

"Ah, well, you see... I have this friend."

He gave her a general outline of the situation. Of his friendship with Hermione, her adopted status, her contentious relationship with her foster father, the betrothal that potentially threatened her life, his promise to protect her, and the attempted manipulation by Lord Malfoy to place Harry under his thumb. She listened raptly, at first with a degree of skepticism, but gradually her eyes grew ever wider in wonderment.

Then he told her of his plan to smuggle her into France.

"I will grant you this, young man, when you make a promise you take it very seriously," she said. She gestured to her lady-in-waiting, a pheasant dressed in a gown composed entirely of multicolored feathers, who promptly moved to stand outside. "It is not my habit to interfere with familial affairs of this nature. The nobility and merchant class both find such personal interference in private lives overbearing and inequitable. In this instance, it presents the very real possibility of agitating relations with both Britain and France."

He felt his insides sink. She was right. He had been thinking of this all as a private matter between Lucius, Hermione, and him, with perhaps a few referees on the side in the form of Lord Voldemort and Queen Ophelia, just to make sure no one died. That couldn't really be the case, however. The Malfoys were one of the richest, most powerful families in Britain. Harry had been moving up the political hierarchy since he was eleven, and had become a national figurehead in the process. Behind both was the Dark Lord, and who ever he chose to side with depended on a logic he did not fully understand. Adding the ruler of France to the mix was only asking for more trouble.

But this was the only chance both Hermione and he had of pulling themselves out from Lucius' long reach.

"No one needs to know of your involvement. You do not, in fact, have to be overtly involved. I can have everything set up through third parties. By the time she comes to France, she will already be emancipated and legally independent. Lucius Malfoy would have no authority to try and have her brought back to Britain. All I want is to have the freedom of movement to set it up for her and to make sure that she has the protection she needs while she's here. If I can get her into France, I can almost guarantee Voldemort will not allow General Malfoy to make a big fuss out of it."

"Perhaps there will not be a 'big fuss' in Britain, but you forget that France has a free press. I have very little authority on what is or is not reported here. When it becomes public that a British National, the foster daughter of a very prominent military figure and your very close friend, has sought asylum within our borders, they will be like wolves. Ah, perhaps that was not the best analogy."

Another thing Harry had not considered. As annoying as the press could be, he had stopped worrying about them long ago. In Britain, there was very little they could say that could truly hurt him or those he cared about while he remained under Voldemort's protective wing.

He floundered. This was not Skeeter or an Italian soldier or even Lucius bloody Malfoy. He could not trap, trick, bully, or fight the queen. She could not be cajoled, flattered, sympathized, or entreated. Magically, she wasn't Harry's equal. Intellectually and politically, however, she surpassed him in every way. She was much closer to the Dark Lord in that regard, but neither her ambitions nor her philosophies were known to Harry and he could not work in ignorance.

He had no idea what to do.

"Harry, don't make that face. Everyone will think I am being terribly cruel to you."

"They can't see my face," he said. He felt immediately embarrassed when he realized how petulantly childish that sounded.

"Your ears are drooping."

Oh. He had forgotten about those silly things.

"You won't help me?" he asked, resigned to a denial.

"I did not say that."

Ears that had apparently been drooping suddenly perked.

"While it is not my habit to create trouble for myself, neither is it practical to be too timid. I have been accused over the last few years of being England's lap dog, unable or unwilling to defy the Dark Lord even at the expense of France's wellbeing. I find it is within my best interest to make a display of independence, while at the same time insuring my relationship with Lord Voldemort is not unduly harmed. It would seem you have provided me an opportunity to do this."

If he had a tail, he was certain that it would be wagging at this point.

"Choosing to take Ms. Granger under my wing, against General Malfoy's and potentially Lord Voldemort's will, on moral grounds and on behalf of yourself, a popular and less powerful individual, would do much to improve my reputation."

"That sounds like a wonderful plan to me," he agreed.

"However, if she causes me undo trouble, I expect you to take responsibility."

"Yes, yes, absolutely. I mean, I doubt she will. She's not a troublemaker."

"I also expect a favor in return."

"Okay."

"The speed with which you agreed is worrying to me."

"Nothing is for free. I knew you would probably ask for something."

Voldemort would have.

"He has you well trained."

"He hasn't managed to teach me 'stay' yet, so that is arguable."

That earned him another laugh. She gestured for him to stand beside her. He did so, and she directed his gaze with an elegantly pointed finger towards a small gathering of young men and women. The young men seemed to be busy vying for the attention of one of the girls standing in the middle of the others. They were not succeeding. The young woman... girl... whatever she was, was stubbornly refusing their advances. In fact, she was looking furtively in the direction of the alcove. She was a swan, and Harry suspected that was a highly prized mask amongst the witches present.

"Do you see the swan? That is my niece, Serafina. She is fourteen and an avid fan of yours."

He suddenly felt very awkward.

"I promised her a dance with you tonight, and I dare say she is intent on you being her first dance of the evening. If you would be so kind as to do so and put her and her suitors out of their misery, I would be grateful."

"A small enough price to pay," he said, although he wasn't entirely sure of that. As fond as he was of pretty girls, he had a healthy fear of them as well..

The queen must have noticed his trepidation, for she added.

"Do not feel obligated to kiss her. Even if she pouts. Especially if she stomps her foot."

"I shall remain firmly English. No kissing masked strangers."

"An excellent policy. Now, if you do not mind? I am afraid our conversation has run rather longer than intended."

"Of course, Your Majesty. You have my thanks."

He bowed one more time, and made his way to back to the main ballroom. Fleur was at his side instantly, slipping his wand back into his sleeve with the same ease with which she had removed it. Another figure, this one adorned with the notorious lion's mask, moved passed to take his place, brushing his shoulder ever so slightly. Harry felt his nerves tingle as the other's magic lapped against his. By instinct, he tried to turn and identify the source of the familiar feeling, but Fleur's position on his arm made it awkward and he had a more immediate goal before him.

Hidden behind the magic curtain, the masked man knelt before the queen, took her hand, and boldly kissed the inside of her wrist. He grinned up at her, pure predator, and she indulged him with an amused smile.

"Perhaps you and young Harry should have traded masks," she suggested. "You are incorrigible."

"A Gryffindor in a lion's mask? That would be entirely too cliché."

"I have no idea what a Gryffindor is."

"It is a house."

"I am assuming you are not referring to architecture. Never mind. Have you come to ask for a favor, as well?"

"Is that what he was doing? What did he ask you for?"

"Perhaps it is a secret."

"There are no secrets between my protégé and me. At least, none that I do not allow him to keep. I have him on a short leash."

"At yet, you have not taught him how to 'stay' yet."

He grinned.

"Well, I suppose he is somewhat like a sight hound in that regard. No matter how well you train them, once they have their sights set on something there is no stopping them from running off. Now tell me, what did he ask for?"

"Do you think I am so meek that I will tell you just because you ask?"

"Shall I use my bedroom voice instead?" he offered.

"I want to ask your opinion on something."

"Is my opinion worth the revealing of secrets? I should wonder what you have been telling your attendants about me."

"Attendants are there to feed my vanity. Advisers see only what they want to see. You, on the other hand, I believe would give me an honest reply."

He personally found it very funny that she thought he would be honest with her in any capacity, but nodded anyway. She gestured over to Harry, who was now insinuating himself between several young suitors to gain the attention of a swan princess. He did not bother attempting conversing, he had no idea if the girl even spoke English, and simply smiled at her impishly, his pointed ears flickering at her like a wink. The girl giggled behind her hand, and allowed him to lead her towards the floor.

"Do you think they make a cute couple?"

He glanced at her briefly to make sure she wasn't joking.

"I... I suppose they make an attractive pair. As much as we can tell under the circumstances."

"They appear to get along rather well."

Considering they had only been in each other's company for two minutes, he thought she was being overly generous.

"Harry's at that age where he gets along with any pretty girl, I am afraid," he said, voicing his skepticism.

"You needn't look so put out. I am quite aware that they are not an equal match. Serafina is a ninny with hero worship. Harry will overshadow her in everything he does."

Here, she caught him by surprise. He was not expecting her to be so openly disparaging of her own flesh and blood. Additionally, while he knew she was fond of Harry, he hadn't realized she held so much respect for him as well.

"Nevertheless, she is next in line for the throne, and should that day come I want her to have a strong and trustworthy husband standing beside her, someone capable of compensating for her weaknesses."

If he had been startled before, he was completely floored now. In all the time he had known her, she had never so much as hinted at a

possible union between her niece and his protégé. In some ways, it made a great deal of sense. Britain did not have an official monarchy, but unofficially, he was king and Harry was prince. It was not recorded anywhere, not even said directly in the press except humorously or even sarcastically, but ask any child in Britain who the prince of Britain was and 'Harold Potter' would be the instant and natural answer.

Voldemort had been entertaining the ideal of creating an official monarchy for some time, and he had intended for it to come about through marriage. Ideally, he wished it to be marriage to Queen Ophelia whose royal bloodline was ancient and well respected. He had even entertained the idea of Harry marrying into a royal family to the same affect, but had gradually lost interest in the idea.

Past experience had taught him he did not like the boy outside of Britain. His visit with the queen that night had been a result of this anxiety, a 'just in case' his protégé decided to run off on a fool's errand or get abducted or face an attacking army. Additionally, he did not like Harry left to his own devices, outside of his influence, for long periods of time. His young friend was precocious, and he was entering an age of growing independence and self-confidence that would soon lead them into conflict if not readily curbed.

Give Harry a country of his own, a weak willed queen, and public zeal and Voldemort would find himself facing someone potentially as scary as himself, if entirely different reasons.

Which while theoretically intriguing, was probably a logistical nightmare to deal with.

"It is far too early for decisions such as that to be made," he suggested. "They are both young, war time politics are different from peace time politics, and more importantly, you are still quite young. The chances of you producing an heir are still high."

She gave him a knowing look.

"I am starting to think you are reluctant to let the boy go."

"Absolutely," he agreed. "Have you seen what happens when no one is watching him? Have you seen what happens even when they do? It is all marvelously entertaining when you are not the one dragged into it."

"You love it, though, don't you? It all must be terribly exciting compared to being an evil Overlord."

He smiled at that.

"One does need to keep entertained. Now, I have given you my opinion. Will you tell me what you both talked about?"

She told him. He sighed.

"Again, with the Granger girl. He needs a new hobby."

"You do not object?"

She sounded genuinely surprised.

"Do you want me to?"

"It would be helpful," she admitted. "At least a little."

"I will make the effort, but only because you asked."

"You are too kind."

"I try. Would you like to dance?"

"I would love to, but I have other business to attend to first. Can you keep yourself entertained in the meantime?"

"That is Harry's job. I will let him know he is being remiss in his duties."

Her hand, which he had not let go of and had in fact been rubbing sensuous circles over with his thumb, found its way once again to his mouth as he kissed it. He pulled away, and slipped out of the alcove

with her guards and lady-in-waiting glaring bloody murder into his back. Honestly, he thought, she is a grown woman. She doesn't need anyone to guard her virtue.

~ Page Break~

Harry danced two dances with Princess Serafina. He could not say they were particularly memorable. She did not speak English and he did not speak French, which she didn't seem to notice as she nattered at him about something or other without waiting for him to reply. Despite his propensity for being attracted any female between the ages of fourteen and forty and her own fey attractiveness, he found himself very quickly bored with her. He was so used to the company of strong and unique women, that it did not take him long to realize his partner was not among them. It became obvious that she was depending on him to do or say something, rather than making it happen for herself. He did not know what she was expecting and he did not much care.

Making the excuse that he needed to find his chaperone (he doubted she understood a word he said and look very near devastated when he handed her off to an eager young man), he left the dance floor once again and begged off any who approached him. He managed to find the professor entertaining a small crowd of men and women. Slughorn seemed to be enjoying himself, and not wanting to get drawn into his social scheming, he decided to look for Fleur.

Turning around, he found her standing right behind him.

"Merlin, don't do that!"

"It iz not my fault you are oblivious," she pointed out, leading him back out to the relative privacy of the dance floor. "'Ow did your dance go with Zerafina?"

He shrugged, taking her into his arms and falling into step. He felt the immediate chemistry that had been absent with Serafina spring up between them.

"She iz ze 'eir to ze throne. Did you know?"

"No," he said. He suspected he would be seeing a lot of her over the years, and perhaps should have made more of an effort to get along with her. Maybe Hermione and she could be friends? Somehow, he doubted it.

"You are 'ard to impress," she said.

"I am impressed with accomplishments, not circumstances. 'Merit over inherit', I guess you could say."

"That's very bourgeoisie of you."

He had no idea what that meant, but before he could ask, he suddenly found his arms empty. Disoriented, he stood there stupidly for a moment, blinking at the empty space that had previously been occupied by an audacious white rabbit. He looked around.

It didn't take long to spot her. The long white ears were hard to miss. She was now in the arms of the man who brushed passed him as he left the queen's antechamber. The lion, dressed in medieval wizarding battle gear, was leading her off the dance floor. Harry stood there, wondering what exactly was happening and perhaps more importantly why. He had never had anyone steal a dancing partner right out from under him. At least, not at a formal party.

Additionally, why wasn't Fleur breaking away?

Finally, he had to move if only to avoid the other dancers, and began his chase. He followed them off the dance floor and into the crowds, then through the crowds and up the stairs, the menagerie behind them murmuring in speculation over what was happening. In the hallway, the escaping duo was moving even more quickly and Harry found himself having to jog just to keep them in sight.

No one attempted to stop them, and again Fleur made no attempt to escape from her abductor. Harry was becoming simultaneously irritated and concerned. He checked his wand to make sure it slipped in and out of his sleeve easily, and broke out into a run. The halls seemed endless, stretching on to infinity, guards or attendants

standing outside doorways acted as the only solid proof that he wasn't stuck in some sort of infinity spell or running in circles.

The music of the ballroom soon faded away to the sound of their thrumming footsteps and Fleur's gasping laughter. Clearly this was a joke of some kind. Had Bill Weasley managed to sneak into the event? If he had, how had he gotten the lion's mask and audience with the Queen?

And suddenly, it clicked.

Finally, the corridors ended and he followed his query through what appeared to be a music room and through a set of French doors into the palace gardens. It was passed eight in the evening, and the sky was dark, but the gardens were brilliantly lit with lanterns and fairy lights. The autumn air was cool and slightly damp, but after his run it felt marvelous.

His run, it seemed, was over, but not the chase. The palace gardens had a maze.

"Oh, very mature!" he shouted.

The only response he got was the sound of Fleur giggling from somewhere behind the well manicured hedges of the maze. Rolling his eyes, he moved to follow. He wondered what Queen Ophelia would think of them running around her home like naughty children in a game of tag.

"This isn't funny!" he insisted, stalking down the path, then turned around again when he realized it was a dead end, and again when he reached another dead end. This happened several times, and in his haste he knew he had become hopelessly turned around. He didn't bother worrying about it.

"Oh, lighten up! Titillo!" a masculine voice called out behind him.

"Protego!" Bringing up the Shield Charm, he blocked the Tickling Hex just in time, and charged in the direction of the attack. A Laughing Hex and Slipping Jinx were both easily blocked in the narrow

confines of the maze, and when he finally managed to catch up to his attacker, he physically tackled him into ground.

"Oompf!"

Harry couldn't reply any more articulately. He was breathing heavily after the chase and mock-fight, and couldn't get an adequate breathe to gloat. In fact, he was having a hard time climbing to his feet. Partially underneath him, the Dark Lord was laughing, his lion's teeth bared in a snarl. Harry pushed himself up just enough to punch him in the stomach, earning him another 'oompf'. It wasn't until he flopped onto his back to catch his breath that he noticed Fleur seated on a bench, clutching her sides as she laughed mutely behind a Silencing Charm.

"Did you have fun?" he finally huffed out. "Or shall we go up to the roof and toss water bombs* at passersby?"

"Well, if I had my personal preference..." Voldemort began, still chuckling as he finally climbed to his feet. He helped Harry to do the same. He cast a cleaning charm on himself, and tried to do the same to his protégé, but his wand was push aside distrustfully. "I don't remember you being this uptight."

"I don't remember you being this... silly. Everyone must think Britain is filled with loons," the Gryffindor replied indignantly.

"When did you figure out it was me?"

"About half way down the hall. Who else could have had a meeting with the queen and then felt the need to steal my date? Don't you have one of your own?"

"Of course. Queen Ophelia is my partner for the evening."

Harry was honestly taken back. Voldemort grinned at him. He had enjoyed himself greatly. It was nice to have the boy running after him for once.

"She was busy, so she let me loose on the flock."

He crossed his arms, looking skeptical, but he was already feeling his agitation thaw under the Dark Lord's strange humor. Across from them, Fleur had stopped laughing and was watching their interaction with rapt attention. He flicked his wand at her and instantly rendered her deaf. She gave him an annoyed scowl. Chances were, she could undo it at any time, but it would be fairly obvious when she did.

"What are you doing here?"

"Boredom."

"Are you drunk?"

"I don't drink to relieve boredom. It doesn't work on me. Besides, occasional spontaneity is important in any relationship."

"I think our relationship is pretty much defined by its spontaneity, my Lord."

"Who says I was talking about our relationship?"

"Then who..."

His eyes widened.

"The queen? You're in a relationship with the Queen of France?"

The elder wizard looked entirely too smug suddenly.

"You knew I was courting her," he reminded.

"Through letters. Maybe some flirting during private meetings, but... really? How far... no, wait, I don't want to know."

"I never do anything half way."

"I don't want to know!"

"She thinks I am a very generous lover."

"Stop!"

"There is this one spot, just between the shoulder blades that drives her absolutely crazy."

"Enough!"

"Have you ever seen the night dress of a French witch? Miraculous."

Harry pointed his wand at his tormentor.

"Die!"

Fleur watched all of this from her perch on the bench, mute and having no idea what they were saying, she was, nevertheless, laughing to the point of tears.

~ Author's notes~

Remember Allbright? Probably not, but he was a rookie duelist in books III and IV.

If the banter with the queen seem a bit excessive and/or quirky, I blame it on Fletch novels I've been reading the last three weeks. They're 90% quirky banter.

Water bombs are essentially water balloons, except they're magical so they hold about ten times as much water as water balloon of the same size.

Book VI

Chapter 12: The Tavern

Returning to the ruins of London after the splendid otherworldliness of Paris was psychologically jarring. Crooked, tidy streets Harry had once wandered in a childish daze of excitement and curiosity, every corner and back alley bustling with activity, were now ghostly from the burnt out ruins of shops and homes to the near empty streets. Despite having cleared the city weeks ago of enemy forces, few London natives had returned yet. Homes had been systematically destroyed during the siege, and with the weather turning cold and competition for magical constructionists high, few families had returned and it was mostly the men folk and younger couples without children that were braving hardships to come back and rebuild by hand (and wand) themselves.

Out of the entire city, Knockturn Alley appeared to have weathered the invasion the best, with most of the shops still standing and some of them seemingly untouched. Harry asked Slughorn if it were luck.

"No," the professor said, eyeing the gloomy lane with some trepidation. Despite being the most intact area in the city, it was no more inviting then it had ever been, and specters that loomed in the windows or shadowed through alleyways seemed somehow more sinister and more powerful than ever before. "It's not luck. Knockturn Alley is the oldest surviving section of wizarding London. It's built on top of an old graveyard, and that graveyard's descendents continue to live on there after more than a millennium. It has survived fires, wars, plagues, dragons... and no one really knows how or why. There are a lot of theories about it and a lot of superstitions. Most people agree that Dark Arts are involved."

Harry didn't say anything more until they were well out of sight of the ominous neighborhood. There were forces in the world known to appear by merely speaking their name at night or standing in from of a mirror or at a crossroads, and standing in the shadows of Knockturn Alley seemed as likely a place to summon something malevolent as any of those things.

"I would have thought it'd be in better shape if it were under some sort of protection. I mean... it always seems on the verge of ruin."

"Yes, I imagine whatever keeps Knockturn alive also keeps it from thriving. The Dark Arts are like that. You have to sacrifice something of equal or greater value to achieve an ends, so there's no real way to get ahead with that sort of magic."

Harry looked at him curiously. He had been in DA&D for five years now, and while the concept of 'sacrifice' was a standard definition of a Dark Art, none of his teachers had suggested that you couldn't get ahead because of it. In fact, most suggested just the opposite.

"I don't understand. You think it's bad?"

"Bad? Not necessarily. It's naturally destructive, but destruction has its uses. There is always a sacrifice though, be it physical or psychological or spiritual. Every. Single. Time. If you don't gage the value of those sacrifices properly, Dark Arts can destroy you and those dearest to you."

That was also a familiar anthem of the Dark Arts; that a majority of those who destroyed themselves through the Dark Arts were delusional, addicts, narcissists, and fools who could not accurately determine what they were sacrificing and gave more than they intended or else not nearly enough. If you were careful and responsible, then you should be fine. He was starting to get confused about what Slughorn was trying to say or if the man even knew what he was talking about. The professor seemed to sense his trepidation and explained.

"I simply mean you should never rely too heavily on the Dark Arts if you want to accomplish something other than destruction. Even the Dark Lord doesn't rely very heavily on Dark Arts for his day-to-day affairs... not like he used to during the war in any event. But you still see wizards and witches who do... you'll soon notice there is something inherently wrong with them. Sickness, paranoia, inability to focus, sadism... all signs of an over use of Dark Arts."

Harry thought back on McNair, who seemed so fundamentally flawed as a human being, and then on Lestrage, who showed similar signs of derangement. Even Snape didn't seem quite right at times, nearly incapable of sympathy and never completely happy. All of them had been Death Eaters, renown for their use of Dark Arts during the war, and to some extent even after it was over. He thought about Ron, whose dabbling in a form of Old Magic that was clearly Dark Arts, was slowly killing him.

But had that been the Dark Arts or a fallacy in their own character that made them apt to abusing it? It was a 'the chicken and the egg' sort of question, and one he did not have the answer to.

He thought about the Solstice rituals and sacrifices he had performed with the Dark Lord, and wondered if they could be considered Dark Arts or not. They had required sacrifices of goods and life, and yet the rewards had been great. He wondered about the hidden cost, and if some of the most painful events of his life hadn't been a result of what he had done. How was he to know one way or the other? And would he... could he stop even if it turned out to be the case?

He was suddenly filled with questions. Questions he couldn't expect Slughorn to answer or Snape to listen to or Hermione to understand. He needed to speak with Voldemort.

But not right now.

He had other responsibilities he needed to attend to. They continued on for several blocks, the clear blue autumn sky about the only cheerful thing amid the ruined city, until they found their destination.

The Stranded Selkie was a small tavern slightly less devastated (or else more quickly repaired) than her surrounding neighbors, with most of her roof in tact and enough debris free area to allow patrons entrance. Inside, the tavern was a contradiction of fire blackened walls, shiny new photographs and paintings, and piecemeal furniture. Two young men moved around the tavern scrubbing the ash from the walls and partially destroyed ceiling and floor with limited success, while a girl little more than fourteen wandered about tables taking orders or bringing drinks. She gave them a cheerful, tired smile as

they entered and directed them to a half square half circular table (it seemed to have been two tables transfigured into one) where a gentleman was already seated and eating a large plate of fish. They were immediately graced with a mulish glare.

Harry instantly felt a familiar sense of trepidation and loathing he had felt around his muggle relatives and the currently jobless MacNair. Chancy Truberville was the Director of the National Public Wizarding Library of London, the largest and most prestigious library in Britain and one of the top five wizarding libraries in the world. He was a thick man with a small head and even smaller eyes, made smaller by thick blond eyebrows. He had a weak chin and a ruddy complexion which he had unsuccessfully tried to hide with a thick beard and mustache. He was perhaps in his late fifties (which looked about the late forties for muggles), but his expression reminded Harry very much of a petulant First Year.

Or rather, of his Uncle Vernon, may the abusive bastard have a heart attack and die.

"Mr. Truberville?" Slughorn said, when Harry didn't immediately step forward.

"Doctor Truberville," the man snapped, startling the professor.

"Er...yes, terribly sorry. I am Professor Slughorn, and this is Mr. Potter, who wished to arrange this meeting." He offered his hand to Truberville, who completely ignored it.

The man took a bite of his fish, and chewed it slowly as he stared at the both of them. Harry kept his expression bland, although he was finding himself increasingly irritated. Slughorn smiled nervously, and after a long awkward moment, sat himself down. Harry remained standing for a moment, his expression unchanging, before he joined them with an obvious display of reluctance.

"I was told this would be a private meeting between Potter and myself," he said at last, after chewing his fish into a fine puree.

"It is. I am merely Mr. Potter's chaperone, as his safety is the responsibility of Hogwarts."

"Aren't you a little old for a chaperone, boy?" he sneered, turning to Harry.

"Aren't you a little boorish for a doctor?"

There was a sudden and deafening silence, and the Gryffindor suddenly realized he had spoken out loud. Oops.

The young waitress who had been approaching their table with some water glasses, abruptly stopped and hurried back in the direction she had come from. A table of young Constructionists, tilted their heads and leaned over to get a better view of what they probably assumed was going to erupt into a tavern fight. The two young men cleaning off the ash stopped what they were doing to watch as well, but with considerably more trepidation.

"Excuse me?"

The words were deceptively soft, just as Vernon's had been before he flew into one of his rages. Subtly, Harry pretended to look contrite, but flicked his wand out into his hand under the table.

"I apologize," he said, "We've been traveling all morning from France and fatigue has put me in a poor disposition. Shall we start over? Good day, Dr. Truberville. I am Harry Potter, thank you for taking the time to meet with me."

For a moment, Truberville hesitated. He was obviously used to dealing with only two types of people. His superiors and those he viewed as his inferiors, and while he had approached this meeting with belief that Harry fell into the later category, he was not cooperating. Potter was not at first glance very intimidating. He was shorter than most boys his age, somewhat on the thin side, a friendly face, and with the glasses he looked more like a naïve, young scholar than the dangerous fighter the papers had made him out to be.

The eyes though. Something about them was off.

The 'chaperone' was looking distressed, his eyes flickering nervously between the two of them, the category he fell into perfectly obvious.

"Very well. I will overlook your transgression this time. What is so important that you had to drag me out to this hovel on my day off?"

There was a myriad of flaws in what he had just said, not the least of which was that the man had chosen the place to begin with, but Harry knew he had to remain focused on his goal. A life hung in the balance, and even though it was only Ron's, it was still more significant than poking holes in this blowhard's ego.

For now, at least.

"Since your time is so precious to you, I will keep things brief and to the point. I am currently working on a research project on mathematical principles of Old Magic-

"Old Magic? They're treating that superstitious nonsense like real magic up there?"

Harry continued as if he hadn't heard him.

"-rituals and diagrams with Professor Vector, the Arithmancy professor, and we have come to a point where we cannot continue without the necessary research materials. Considering the subject matter, I am sure you can imagine how rare and hard to come by these materials are. According to your catalogue, your library has several texts that would be of use to us."

"So what? You want to use the library when everyone else has to wait until January? You can't wait two months?"

"For various reasons, our research needs to be concluded by the end of the school year, so no we cannot spare two and half months, particularly when we both have limited free time to devote to it."

"I don't see how that's my problem. You should have chosen to study something else. Something useful. You are wasting time, mine and yours with that nonsense," he sneered.

"The Dark Lord doesn't see it that way."

The sneer vanished.

"Lord Voldemort is an avid practitioner of Old Magics," Harry continued, trying not to smile as the man suddenly lost color, "He is very interested in the research Professor Vector and I are conducting, and it is his hope to promote further research of this type. I imagine those who prove themselves helpful in this would receive... what's the word I'm looking for?"

"Recognition?" Slughorn offered.

"That too, but I was thinking of something else."

"Compensation? Financial endorsement?"

"Yes, that second one! You are a public library, after all. Your funding is entirely reliant on the Court's indulgence and private donation. You're going to be short on both until the war with Germany and Italy is over and the economy recovers."

Money, it seemed, was what earned the most respect from this man, because he was finally starting to look at Harry as something more than an insect. Unfortunately, now he was starting to look at him like the goose that laid the golden eggs. He pulled at the edges of his mustache thoughtfully, as he considered.

"Are you offering financial incentive for me to help you?"

Harry blinked. Uh oh. He may have overplayed his Voldemort hand. As far as he was concerned, the Dark Lord need never know about his research, or at least not the books he wanted, one of which he would instantly recognize as having no value to arithmancy whatsoever.

Luckily, Slughorn jumped in before the hesitation was noticeable.

"You mean, like a bribe?"

Truberville grimaced, and glanced at the other patrons, who were still watching them, now because they found themselves in the presence of Harold Potter, Prince of Britain and were curious.

"Of course not. I wouldn't be taking the money personally."

Harry suspected he would have if Slughorn hadn't clumsily outed him.

"I simply want proof of this so called interest Lord Voldemort has in this project. It is all well and good to claim such a thing, but I have no intention of investing valuable time and effort on an errand without something to back it up."

An errand that would only have cost an hour or two at most, and not even the man's own time, the Gryffindor wanted to point out but knew that wasn't really the point and if he pretended it was he would only make the man irate.

"And what would you consider proof, Dr. Truberville? Lord Voldemort knocking on your door?" he asked.

"I'd settle for a letter and a certificary*"

The negotiation stalled as Harry considered his next step. Could he get what the director wanted? Probably. Just as likely he could get the Dark Lord to threaten the man into cooperation, especially after the 'Old Magic is nonsense' comments, which would be infinitely more satisfying. Did he really want to do either? No. That would be complicating an already delicate situation. So what now?

He was going to have to take a different approach altogether.

"I am sure you would. I'll see what I can do."

The man smirked, believing he had won. Harry refrained from smirking back. He didn't want him... or Slughorn for that matter,

suspecting him. Although he loathed remaining in the man's company for any long, he and his chaperone ordered lunch. He still managed a parting shot, however, when Truberville got up to leave and offered his hand. Harry glanced at it blandly and kept eating his fish.

"That was rather rude," Slughorn pointed out afterwards.

"Sorry."

"It was strange though. I suspect you handled the situation better by being rude than you would have being completely polite."

"I'm familiar with the type. If you're not as nasty as they are, they think you're weak."

"Oh?"

Harry considered telling him about his uncle, but decided against it. By all accounts, he shouldn't even remember his uncle after leaving WYRA. If Slughorn were curious and asked around, he would probably end up assuming he was referring to MacNair or Lestrangle for that matter, who were both a whole different sort of nasty.

"Do you mind if we make one more stop before we get back to the castle? I have some friends in London I wanted to see."

"I suppose we can spare a few hours, supposing Sentinel Seitler agrees. Anyone I know?"

"Undoubtedly. It's the Weasley twins."

"Er... I see. Um... is there any particular reason?"

"I haven't seen Fred and George in a while, and they've been inviting me down since they opened shop. They might have some advice on how too cool down this prank war going on at Hogwarts."

"As I remember it, they were more known for instigating pranks than stopping them, but I suppose... 'to catch a thief' as the saying goes."

They asked the waitress for directions, which she was able to rattle off by heart. She appeared very familiar with the tavern and the Weasley twins themselves, who she knowingly called 'Minions of Chaos'. So did the table of constructionists, who after overhearing their conversation, launched into several stories about the mischief the infamous Fred and George had gotten into on any given day before and after the Italian occupation. The more Harry heard, the more he was convinced that his friends were in fact doing well financially and personally.

Finally, they went to see the infamous 'Red Weasel'.

They nearly passed it completely the first time, so completely blended it was with the row of ruined shops and pubs surrounding it. It was only the sign board propped against the half collapsed doorway that signaled they really were in the right place. Uncertainly he crouched and squeezed under a half fallen beam to get through. Once inside, however, he knew instantly he was in the right place.

Even on a Sunday afternoon, the tavern was packed with patrons, filled with laughter and music. An Irish fiddler was sawing away in a corner, adults clapping and stomping their feet along, while children squealed underfoot as they raced between tables chasing after a toy snitch. The walls were warm, bare oak and were decorated with display cases of strange artifacts, funny pictures, Quidditch memorabilia, small animals, Weasley Wizarding Wheezlies prank toys and candy, and one even had a collection of Italian insignia and plaque that read 'Strangers in a Foreign Land, Met Their Ends at the Strangest of Hands'*. The furniture here was piecemeal as well, but this was obviously by design, especially the tables and chairs hanging from the ceiling (along with an elderly witch who seemed to appreciate being out of the way of the chaos beneath her). Waitresses in red dresses and white aprons bustled around taking and giving orders and stopping to talk or laugh or give a little pinch at every table.

"Harry, bless my soul!" a waitress cried happily as he entered, and after a moment he realized who it was.

"Madam Rosemerta?"

Her cheeks dimpled as she smiled, and she hugged him with her one free arm, her ample bosom still managing to near knock the breath out of him.

"Just Rosie here, dear. I'm helping the boys out until my own tavern is up and running. No point in letting my skills get rusty, and I never did care for lousing around and feeling sorry for myself. What brings you by, dear? Aren't you supposed to be at the school?"

"I had some business to take care of in London, and thought I would drop by to see how Fred and George are doing... obviously they've to be doing well," he noted. By all accounts, this seemed to be the only cheerful place in all of London, and perhaps that was the secret to the twin's success. The twins had always had a gift for lightening a mood, and no where was the need perhaps greater and therefore most appreciated than here.

"Ah, they're up in their laboratory right now, but I'll tell them you're here."

"Laboratory?"

But she was already bustling off, setting down pints of butterbeer and ale as she headed for the bar. Behind the bar she picked up what looked like a can hanging on a string from the ceiling. She shouted something into the can then held it to her ear to listen. He wanted to believe it was really an enchanted can and string, but knowing the Weasley twins, it might very well have been exactly what it looked like.

Rosmerta seemed to have gotten her reply, because she gestured towards a corner where a narrow elevator was slowly descending from the ceiling.

"Er... Professor, do you mind if I speak with the twins in private? I promise I won't take long."

Slughorn, who was looking about in curious fascination, smiled at him.

"Of course not. I think I'll sit and have a butterbeer. If it's anything like the Three Broomsticks, it's bound to be good."

The elevator played 'Pop Goes the Weasel' as it went up, clearly audible even over the din of the tavern noise, which had Harry smiling even before he stepped off of it. His mood might have instantly been lightened, but his quick reflexes were not so easily lulled into complacency. His wand was up and he snapped out a protego before he even fully realized something was hurtling towards his head. What ever it was immediately exploded into a flurry of feathers.

"Bugger! It wasn't even close!"

As the curtain of feathers fell, Harry was able to make out the 'laboratory'. Which despite his initial skepticism, was exactly what it was. There were beakers, flasks, cauldrons, goggles, potions ingredients, and scientific looking equipment resting in cabinets and along potion proof tables that would have been perfectly at home in Snape's potion lab. There were also schematics covering the far wall, notebooks and files flooding out of a filing cabinet, glass jars filled with the half melted remains of failed experiments, and others such laboratory-like things. Except instead of potions or medicine or dark arts, the twins were experimenting with pranks.

Which meant the mad scientist routine was somewhat ruined by the fact that it looked as if someone had exploded a giant toy chest in the middle of the room.

"I don't know, I thought that went pretty well, George. I mean, look at that size of that explosion. A good eight or ten feet in every direction and barely any visibility!"

"We can't count that as a viable test. The Shield Charm clearly lent some energy to the explosion. Plus, lack of visibility only last about two seconds. We're on the right track, but I think we could do a lot better."

Harry blinked at the twins, who were standing in lab robes and goggles, and holding clipboards on which they were jotting down notes.

"Um... did you both just experiment on me?" he asked.

They both smiled cheerfully.

"Not on you, Harry. Just at you. There's an important difference," George said.

"And what difference is that?"

"You didn't explode."

"Good point. What did you just experiment at me then?"

"Exploding Bludgers. They act just like regular bludgers, except when they hit you they explode into feathers. We're thinking of other things they'll explode..."

"Slime," Fred offered.

"Spiders."

"Candy."

"Joke Candy, of course."

"Flowers on Valentine's day."

"Or weddings."

"Or funerals, but maybe ashes would be more appropriate."

"Or bones."

"Or grave dirt."

"Maybe you should just let the prankster decide what to fill it with," Harry suggested. "Then it could be customized to every victim and circumstance."

They both blinked.

"My God! Why didn't we think of that? We are still novices before you, oh great anarchist! All Hail Lord Chaos!"

"Hail Chaos!"

"Hail Chaos!"

Something in the lab broke out into thunderous applause. Fred picked up a stuffed bear and hurled it at the wall. It let out a terrified shriek and then fell silent.

"Er... sorry about that. We're still working on how to turn it off. So what brings you here, Harry? The castle still stands?"

"As if the Lord Chaos would tear down his own castle," the younger boy admonished. "I was actually hoping you could help me with something... well, something probably illegal."

"Oh, I love the 'probably' illegal requests," George said. "They're almost as good as the 'slightly' illegal ones."

When Harry told them what he wanted, they seemed almost disappointed. It did not seem that exciting a mission as they had originally hoped, but they were certainly game for it. Apparently, they had spent a majority of their time doing 'probably' and 'definitely' illegal things during the invasion, and now that things were quiet they had focused primarily on their private line of wizarding pranks.

"Diversification, Harry, is the key to good business. Always have something to fall back on for when you grow mind-numbingly bored."

They negotiated for services, because that was also good business and apparently part of the fun. Harry had to spend either Christmas Eve (and since Harry wasn't a Christian he didn't see any reason why he would have to be somewhere else) or New Years at the Red Weasel and have his picture taken with the twins. They had already selected a perfect spot behind the bar for their Shrine to the Lord

Chaos, which happened to be directly above the Weasley's Wizard Wheezes storage space. They felt it would bring them luck.

Business completed, they got down to talking about what was going on in each others lives and those of their mutual acquaintances. Harry gave them details of Hogsmeade's destruction and the hall set up to house the refugees, of the attack on the castle and everyone pulling together, of the prank wars, about Ginny and Ron's trouble agreeing on how to run the smuggling business, about Snape's marriage, Hermione's betrothal, and Fleur's eagerness to see Bill. They told him about the long days and nights during the invasion, of exhausted refugees stumbling in for a bit of cheer or a sign of a lost family member or friend, births and birthdays and marriages even when things seemed at their worst, singing all through the night while knowing they would not have a home or a job or a loved one to go back to the next day, raiding the remains of the city or the Italian's supply houses to stock the tavern's larder, of people too stubborn to leave and too frightened to stay, and vengeance dealt out in the night on unwary soldiers. They tell him they never felt more proud of anything they had ever done, but that the tears their mum had cried for them had never left them feeling more ashamed.

"She won't even come to see the tavern. Even now that it's safe, she won't come. I don't think she's forgiven us yet. We can't really blame her," Fred said at length, his perpetual good humor dimming somewhat.

"Have you tried to go and see her?" Harry asked. George shrugged.

"Can't really leave the tavern unsupervised for long. We're understaffed right now, and it's hard finding people who won't rob you blind when you're not looking these days. Once we get things where we want them, we'll take a day to go grovel to her. Maybe if you sent her a letter for us?"

"Er... I wouldn't even know what to say."

"Something about orphans. She's a sucker for orphans."

~ Page Break~

Bobby could feel his sanity slipping. It eroded by tiny fraction each day in the acidic monotony that defined his captivity, an existence that never changed and accomplished nothing. The aviary was self sustaining, and it had been weeks since Voldemort last deigned to taunt him, meaning his sole company was that of the menagerie of birds that shared his prison. He knew all of them by sight now and had named each in its turn, but for all his efforts to be sociable they were still only birds and neither understood nor were interested in his plight. He prayed often to Raecellos, who could theoretically both understand and care, but had yet to answer him either.

The only conversations he had anymore are in his head and with the increasingly absent Dark Lord. The only reason he even knew he was loosing his grip was because he'd actually started to miss the arrogant bastard. Perhaps 'miss' wasn't quite the word. It was not the man... creature... his tormentor that he truly wished for, but the anger and resolve that always rose up when ever Bobby was in his presence.

Despair was the enemy now, and while Voldemort was its face, it lingered even in his nemesis' absence.

It had been nearly two weeks since he had seen the Dark Lord, which in addition to leaving him bored to tears it also left him uneasy. This was not the longest he had gone without seeing the other, but lately they had been bothering him more and his moods seemed to darken with the weather.

The sky outside was his only indication of the passing seasons, and on this particular day it was gloomy and wet, leaving the aviary lit in the muted tones of a faded photograph. Inside, the temperature was constant regardless of the light, just this side of warm, despite the mood that seemed to demand it somehow be chilled. Bobby flew laps around the room like he did every day, keeping his wings and heart strong for when he would at last fly the open skies again. It was harder today than usual. The light and the warmth made him want to sit somewhere and sleep, but if he broke the routine he knew something else inside him would break as well.

On days like this, he was reminded of Shakespeare's Hamlet. He had seen the play once at a muggle festival in Canterbury, performed in a local park. At the time, he hadn't cared for it, finding it unbearably depressing. Despite that, the play remained rooted in his memory nearly twenty years later. The words always jumbled in his head, but the impressions lingered like a familiar song whose lyrics had been forgotten.

His melancholy thoughts were suddenly broken by the tell tale squeak of the door opening. Instinctively, Bobby halted his flights and dived for cover in the thickly growing vegetation. There was a momentary wave of noise as the resident birds warned each other of the encroaching company, but it fell away soon enough. While not all of the birds were or could ever be called 'tame', they had all become used to their captivity and adjusted to the point of domestication. All except Bobby, who cautiously hopped and fluttered within the shadows of the foliage, until he was able to see the visitor.

It wasn't who he was expecting.

Lucius Malfoy stalked into their prison radiating disgust, anger, and frustration like the reek of alcohol that wafted off of him with equal strength. In one hand he held his wand and in the other a bottle of... something. Bobby could probably guess, but he was far more interested in why the man was there in the first place.

No one ever came there except for the Dark Lord. As far as he knew, it wasn't even possible. But obviously it was, because there was no way this arrogant wizard could have simply stumbled in. Bobby felt hope swell up inside of him at this sudden, unexpected deviation. He was half a breath away from breaking cover and rushing towards the wizard, when the man pointed his wand at the small table and summarily melted it into a puddle of molten iron.

Bobby immediately came back to himself, his euphoria broken by the harsh, bitter reality of his situation. Lucius Malfoy was the Dark Lord's right hand. One of the original Death Eaters and now general to the largest wizarding army the world had ever known, it was unlikely the wizard would be moved or motivated to free the imprisoned raven out of the kindness of his heart or a sense of justice. In fact, if his current

behavior was any indication, he would need to be careful not to simply be blown to pieces by Malfoy in a drunken fit.

Nevertheless, this had to be a sign. Or at least an opportunity, and Bobby couldn't let it pass without at least trying to take advantage of it. So he hung back cautiously, moving among the branches slowly to assess the situation and try to devise a plan. It didn't take him long to realize Malfoy was exceptionally drunk. This was... strange. He couldn't claim to know the pureblood very well or of having any real desire to do so, but from what he did know the man wasn't an alcoholic or prone to reckless behavior. Self-possessed and motivated would be the kinder words he would use to describe him, so the fact that he was behaving so strangely was a sign of something.

He felt a tingling rush of excitement.

Perhaps something have happened to Voldemort? Something that would drive his second-in-command to imbibe heavily and storm into one of the Dark Lord's private spaces? It was too much to hope for, and not enough to act on.

So what should he do?

Gather more information.

Lucius had taken a deep swallow from his bottle and was aiming his wand haphazardly at the chair, when Bobby gathered his nerve to speak.

"I always did hate that thing. It looks about as inviting as an electric chair."

Lucius swung around, his wand following belatedly.

"Who's there? Show yourself! That's an order," he said, slurring through the 's's and 'f's. Not wanting to land on the chair that was about to be obliterated and yet knowing he would be entirely missed if he remained in the trees, Bobby fluttered down to land on the ground

a few yards from Lucius' feet. It was not the ideal position, but if necessary he thought he could duck for cover in time if he had to.

The wizard barely glanced at him, his eyes instead flitting nervously to the shadowy greenery beyond.

"Down here."

Lucius glanced down, then up, and then back down again.

"Yes, the short, but devilishly handsome fellow in the front row."

A wand was instantly trained on him.

"Oi! That's extraordinarily rude, you know!"

"Change back," the man demanded.

"Change back? Change back into what?"

"Into a wizard, you fool! I refuse to have this conversation with a bird."

"I'm not an animagus. I can't change back into anything."

Lucius looked skeptical. Well, bleary and skeptical.

"Bollocks."

"In case you hadn't noticed, you are in a bird cage."

He looked around, stumbling a bit as his eyes traveled upwards. Seemingly without thought, he took another swig from his bottle. He closed his eyes and rubbed his forehead against the glass. Bobby watched, missing nothing.

Something was wrong with the wizard, more than simply being inebriated. His eyes were shadowed, and his face held the signs of prolonged exhaustion and pain. Was he ill? Cursed? In either case, he shouldn't be here. Wizarding kind had a terrible sense of social justice and a severe lack of common sense by Bobby's estimation,

but one of the things they did do well was take care of their sick and injured. Plagues had nearly wiped out the entire wizarding race in Europe almost a millennium before, and in the centuries that followed medical arts and social norms had been honed to razor sharp precision. If Lucius was suffering from any kind of ailment, and clearly he was, he should have been home or hospitalized while undergoing treatment. Not wandering around unsupervised while he 'self-medicated'.

Curious.

This might be the window of opportunity he was looking for.

"You are ill," he pointed out to the other man.

"I've a headache," Lucius replied dismissively.

"Hangover?"

Lucius hissed at him like a cat, then came back to himself and straightened.

"No, I am much too drunk for that."

"So you are ill then?" Bobby persisted.

"I have a headache," he insisted. "And who wouldn't under these circumstances? Jesus. I can't work like this. It's ridiculous. I'm talking to a bird. Jesus H. Christ."

"I shall choose not to take that comment personally. What are these ridiculous circumstances?"

"Why should I tell you?"

"Why shouldn't you? Who would I tell? The pidgeons?"

Lucius seemed to consider a moment, then decided he had nothing to lose.

"Voldemort is shacking up with the queen of France, leaving me to handle the army and clean up the fucking mess the Italians left behind. Meanwhile, he has Lestrage and Crouch frolicking in Germany with their Polish neophytes holding up the train of their skirts as they go. It's a plot, I tell you. A goddamn plot to ruin me. He's scared of me. They're all scared of me. They left me to be run ragged cleaning up their messes so they could get together and figure out how to get rid of me. Jesus, fuck. They're idiots. Every god damn one of them... But... Jesus, Jesus... it makes my head hurt."

The rant continued for several more minutes, waxing and waning between intense paranoia and outlandish claims. Bobby stood motionless, hoping he didn't look as surprised as he was.

Wow.

This was one sick puppy, and not just in the way Bobby had originally thought. He was clearly delusional. How had no one noticed yet? Well, obviously Voldemort was out of the country and therefore couldn't notice, but surely there were others around, just waiting to jump at the first sign of weakness Lucius displayed so that they might usurp his position? Then again, who was to say others hadn't noticed, possibly even orchestrated Lucius degeneration, and were simply waiting until the man was completely and irrevocably insane or dead before they made their grab for power?

Bobby certainly wasn't above using it to his advantage.

"You're probably right. That is just the sort of thing the Dark Lord would do. He's not exactly known for his gratitude towards his supporters. I should know."

Lucius gave him a look; part curiosity and part skepticism.

"What did he do to you?"

"He locked me in a fucking bird cage!" Bobby said, as if it were obvious. "This is not my idea of a grand resort, you know?"

Recognition broke through the glazed insanity for a moment.

"Ah. I think I recognize you now. You were there at the battle in the Berlin Underground. He was carrying you around in a little cage for a few days afterward."

"Yes, that was me. The entire plan would have fallen through completely if it hadn't been for me, and did I ever get a thank you for it? No. All I got for my troubles was a room with no exits."

The wizard was definitely interested now, and Bobby was starting to form the framework for a plan. All he needed to do was convince Lucius that he could help him if he agreed to set him free.

"He never did explain exactly what happened. I thought that Potter had just gone crazy, but the entire thing was just... odd. What did you do exactly?"

"What I always do. I brought everyone together to exactly the right place at exactly the right time. Even then the dunderhead nearly mucked it all up. I practically handed him the battle on a silver platter and he barely scraped by."

Lucius fell into a silent consideration, which seemed to be exceptionally painful, because he took a particularly long gulp from his bottle. Bobby did his best to act as if he had done nothing more scandalous than take a sip of tea, and given crow body language didn't readily translate into human body language, he thought he did a pretty good job.

"Why?" the wizard finally asked.

"Why what? Why lock me up?"

"Yes."

In his mind, Bobby was practically dancing at the question. It was too perfectly set up.

"That should be obvious. If I could make things come together for the Dark Lord, then obviously I could do the same for someone else. I am

a very valuable asset, and not one he wishes to fall into the wrong hands."

Lucius snorted.

"If you're so smart, then why haven't you escaped yet?"

Well, crap. He needed to think fast.

"Why should I tell you that?"

"Why would you tell me any of this?"

"You can't figure it out?"

The wizard frowned, not liking the raven's taunting tone. He didn't come there to be insulted by a bird. He came to vent. He had received a missive that morning that Voldemort was remaining in France to organize the fortresses along the French border and plan several key battles in southern Germany, leaving Lucius behind to handle not only Britain's defense but several other projects he had neither the time nor the energy to see to personally. His wife was sending him notes every day demanding he make time to see her, going so far as to threaten to send a Howler at him. Likewise, he had been hearing whispers in the corridors about his appearance, his supposed failure to perform, parroting Crouch or LeStrange or else sending these messages onto them in 'secret' reports. Some even had the audacity to suggest he go see a medi-wizard. Why? So they could leak to the press that he was unfit for duty?

Scavengers, all of them. Just waiting for him to fall so they could tear him to pieces, looking for the first sign of weakness. Even Stratus was giving him odd looks these days, as if he were just supposed to smile and let all the lies and plotting simply roll off his back. Little idiot. He had been in this game before Stratus was old enough to hold a wand, who was he to judge the severity of the situation?

And the headaches were only getting worse.

All he had wanted was a little time to himself to vent, preferably not in his own office where he would then be left stewing in the aftermath and feeding yet more rumors about his mental state. So he had found one of the Dark Lord's private rooms, where there would be plenty of time to pick up the mess or else pass the blame without anyone able to point any fingers. Yet even this simple endeavor had been compromised by one of the Dark Lord's stranger pets.

He had had enough. He had no intention of putting up with an uppity feather duster on top of everything else.

Sneering, he turned on his heel to leave, and managed to do so with only a slight stumble. Behind him he could hear the raven fluttering after him.

"Where are you going?"

"I have better things to do than listen to your sob story," he said.

Bobby wanted very much to point out he waited patiently enough while Lucius ranted his own lunacy, but wisely held back. He needed a way to stop the wizard, who was likely his first and only opportunity to escape his prison. Failing that, he at least needed to create the opportunity for the man to come back.

"You're dying, you know."

Lucius paused.

"They're killing you. I can see it, clear as day. They're killing you slowly. If you don't do something soon, you're going to be dead and one of the Dark Lord's cronies is going to be sitting on top of all your accomplishments. I can help you prevent that."

There was a long silence that followed, during which neither of them moved or spoke. Bobby held his breath and let loose a prayer to Raecellos.

Please, my Lord, let him fall for it.

Without turning, Lucius spoke, his voice still slurred and thick with aristocratic condescension. "I don't need help from the likes of you to prevent that. I was born to play this game."

And then he left, reactivating the wards and leaving Bobby standing alone in the middle of the floor, mute and devastated as his one last chance at freedom stumbled out the door.

~ Page Break~

"Do you actually intend to write anything this semester or have you just decided to start working on your penmanship?"

Ron gritted his teeth in irritation as Hermione's sarcasm needled at his concentration. He was working on an article right now, and he knew she knew that, so he thought it particularly stupid of her to ask him that. It seemed she was looking to start a fight. In fact, lately, it seemed they couldn't be within a hundred feet of each other without getting into a spat, often over absolutely nothing. Ron would be the first to admit, he tended to have that affect on certain people... most people in fact, but Hermione had been the exception to the rule for some time now. It used to be she was the only person he really looked forward to seeing during the school day.

Now she was just a constant nag.

"I'm writing now," he bit out.

"About what?"

"When I'm done, I'll show you."

"Like the last article?"

"Yes, just like that one."

"And if I don't like this one either?"

"Then you can pull another snit-fit and not print it," he snapped. He was still sore about the last article. It had been a quality piece, but

this current incarnation of his editor had nothing but complaints about it.

"Or you could just tell me what it is about and we can save each other both some wasted time." He could tell she was losing her temper, and part of him was satisfied about that, but another wondered what the hell was wrong with the both of them.

"Save you some wasted time, perhaps. But since I already went through all the interviews and paperwork already, it doesn't save me much of anything. I'll give it to you when I'm done."

He hadn't looked up from his parchment for the entirety of the conversation, but it was easy enough to imagine what she looked like. Her tone, her pauses, her deep calming breaths, and aggravated sighs played out as clearly as those radio dramas he had listened to as a kid.

"Ron, just tell me."

"Hermione, just wait until I'm done. It'll take half an hour, tops."

"Not in half an hour, now."

He slammed his hands on his desk and stood, knocking his chair over.

"Jesus Christ, Hermione what is your problem? What scruple or moral sensibility did I shit on this month that's got you all up in my face? Did I laugh when someone tripped in the hallway or something? Or is this just some sort of adolescent histrionic phase you're going through?"

Now that he was looking at her directly, he was amazed to find it wasn't anger or indignation that was staring back at him. It was hurt. Jesus. Had she really not expected him to snap at her when she was harping on him? Only now that he had snapped at her, and she was hurt, he felt guilty about it. Maybe that was her intention.

Or maybe this was her way of turning the rest of the office against him. More than half the staff was present, working on their next edition, but the room was deafeningly quiet and all eyes riveted to the fight playing out between them. He couldn't help but notice that a number of them were glaring at him accusingly, as if he had somehow started this.

Oh, she was a wily one.

"Forget it," he said, tossing the draft in the air and letting it tumble to the floor. "I give up."

He stormed passed her, ignoring her when she called after him. He wasn't her dog, and he wouldn't be ordered around or manipulated by her. Not when she was this crazy, and not when he had his own issues to deal with. If that meant he had to quit the paper, on top of Dueling Club, then that was what he would have to do. When he was well again, he could worry about extracurricular activities.

And solving the mystery that was Hermione Granger.

Maybe she had been fooling around with Dark Arts when no one was looking too.

Maybe Potter would know. Thinking of the Gryffindor brought about another wave of frustration. They had never been friends, and likely never would, but Ron knew he owed the other. A 'Life Debt' if he or other boy ever asked for it, but he doubted he ever would. It didn't mean he wouldn't owe him, it just meant he was left to his own discretion on how to pay him back.

Assuming Potter was able to keep up on his end of their plan.

Homework was unappealing and having already delivered the latest round of smuggled packages that morning, he decided to hunt down his business partner and co-conspirator. He checked the library, the Gryffindor dorms, and the greenhouse, but came up empty. No one else seemed to know where he was either, which might mean he was in Yugoslavia for all he knew. Locating charms didn't work on Harry

either. He was either charmed against him, nowhere near, or in a warded room.

He decided to assume he was in a warded room and work from there. There were over twenty in Hogwarts, but Ron only knew where four of them were and only one Potter would have any business going to.

The Hogwarts Art Studio was warded against thieves and vandals. Professor Rollings was an eccentric and known for being somewhat paranoid about her students and their pieces regardless of their quality or lack thereof. For years she had banned anyone who wasn't an art student from the studio, including other professors, but eventually she had been forced to open her doors to the rest of the school body and left to rely on more conservative protection. Ron had done an article on her last year, and Hermione had forced him to re-write it three times until the woman hadn't sounded like a complete and utter quack.

His investigative instincts proved to be spot on, and sure enough he found Potter alone in the art room. He was seated towards the center of the room with a large sketchpad and charcoal pencil, drawing sketches of a falcon seated on a perch. The falcon was wearing a hood to keep it calm, but it still fidgeted on its post anxiously, eager to spread its wings.

"How did you find me?" Potter said, not bothering to look towards him.

"I'm a reporter. Nowhere is safe."

That actually earned him something resembling a smile. The world must have gone mad, Ron decided. He was fighting with Hermione and making jokes with Potter. Maybe the curse was starting to affect his mind.

"What is it you wanted? I told you before it would be a few days before the book should arrive. We won't be able to finish this until Friday or Saturday at best."

Friday or Saturday, this could all be over, and he felt a distinct thrill at the prospect. He had been living on borrowed time for so long it felt almost novel to own it again.

"It's not about that. I wanted to ask you something."

"Fine. I can't promise I'll answer though."

"Why is Hermione crazy?"

Harry paused, and looked back at him as if he were the crazy one and therefore couldn't be trusted to stand behind him.

"I'm serious. Is there something going on with her? Is she on any kind of potions I should know about?"

"Why are you asking?"

"I don't know, because she's gone crazy?"

"I haven't noticed anything odd."

"Well, you're not the one she's harping on all the time. She's been nagging me about stupid shit for weeks, and I finally just snapped at her today and she acts all hurt or something. I mean, what the hell?"

"Perhaps you're the crazy one, especially if you expect me to side with you on this."

"Fine, don't side with me, but at least explain it in non-crazy terms that I can understand."

Harry rolled his eyes and returned to his sketch.

"You're an idiot."

Ron had gotten over the Gryffindor calling him that a while ago. He said it almost every time they spoke, so it had gradually become a standard segment of their conversations that fell somewhere between the greeting and goodbye.

"Then explain it in idiot terms."

Potter let out a sigh of long suffering.

"What did you expect her to act like? I mean, she's under a lot of stress, and it doesn't help that you- a guy she's actually gone on a date with and who has shown some interest in her- doesn't seem to give a damn one way or another. I mean, if I didn't know about the curse... and remember she doesn't... I would have come to the conclusion that you threw her away as soon as you found out she was betrothed."

There was a long silence after this, which Harry used to add some finishing details to his sketch. The silence stretched, however, until it became unusually long and he turned around to see if Ron was even still there.

He was.

And he looked like he had been hit with a stunner.

"Weasley?"

"Hermione's betrothed?"

Harry just looked at him.

"You are such an idiot."

~ Author's Notes~

1. A certificary is the wizarding equivalent of a check, but is typically only used when dealing with large sums of money no one would carry around on their person and only with official business since it leaves a clear record of the transaction. Unlike money, it can't be stolen before it is cashed, although they can be faked (just not when being cashed since goblins can spot fakes a mile off).

2. If you're wondering if that display case of Italian insignia means what you think it does, then, yes, the Weasley brothers did assassinate Italians. They were fighters in canon despite their playfulness, so they're definitely fighters here too.

Book VI

Chapter 13: Coming Together, Falling Apart

Looking up at the domed fortress of magical wards, two foot thick stone walls, and gargoyles patrolling the eaves and awnings, Fred and George realized they may have underestimated the extent of the challenge Harry had handed to them. The British National Library of Wizardry was a national treasure, but unlike many of the other national treasures in London this one was still standing and mostly whole, and not just as a result of Italian disinterest. Scorch marks and bits of chipped stone where curses had struck and rebounded were scattered around the enormous oak and iron doors and around the tall, thin glass windows, but nothing significant had given against the assault. Indeed, given the way the lion doorknockers snarled savagely as they drew near, they both suspected no one had entered since the wards had been activated. At least not through the main entrance.

"What do you think the chances are of someone still hiding inside? I mean... this might be the safest place in London," Fred remarked with growing respect.

George didn't have an answer, although a quip or two was at the tip of his tongue. Someone with a real answer, however, chimed in before he had an opportunity.

"Not a chance in hell. The Director hermetically sealed it after it was closed, so if anyone were unfortunate enough to be left behind they would have suffocated," the young woman beside them said knowingly, shifting her glasses up the bridge of her nose in a nervous gesture. If anyone would know this, it would have Mary McGulligan, who was one of the innumerable and under paid pages charged with the day to day trivialities that real librarians had neither the time nor inclination to handle. Mary had the additional knowledge that came from being seen as Director Truberville's personal assistant. Knowledge was about the only benefit to the position, as she could attest.

"There's no air inside?" George asked.

"There's no oxygen inside. Oxygen and moisture causes books to rot if no one is there to care for them."

"Then how are we supposed to walk around?"

"I know a spell... Just don't sneeze or you'll be in real trouble."

She led them around to the back of the building, where the stately columns and decorative stone masonry gave way to the less than majestic loading dock and service entrances. The damage there was more obvious, but there had been no more success breaking in from there than anywhere else. The twins helped Mary climb a pile of rubble that used to be a set of stairs. Perched above this rubble was a narrow door that may have once been green but had since faded and pealed to an ugly gray.

The page pulled out a ring of iron keys from her black cloak, but didn't yet open the door. She glanced nervously between them.

"You promise I'll get the books back? You absolutely swear?"

"On our poor mother's grave," Fred promised. George nodded in solemn agreement.

She didn't look like she believed them. Their attempts to look innocent had not improved any since they had graduated. Letting out a resigned sigh, she slipped one of the key's into the door. There was no key hole to be seen, but the key slid in smoothly. Turning it was another matter altogether.

"Aargh... stupid... rusty... piece of...." She grumbled, attempting to twist it this way and that.

The door let out a terrible shriek, like metal grating against metal, and then opened with a rusty sigh. All of them looked around quickly to see if anyone had heard them. The loading dock was open only to the loading docks of other offices and warehouses, none of which were open. The only people who might have noticed them sneaking into the library were the dozens of patrolling Sentinels who stalked the city,

night and day, protecting the abandoned houses and businesses from looters and odd magical beasties that had quietly invaded when the dead began to outnumber the living. Looters and beasts were treated equally in the eyes of the law, and the three didn't like their odds if they were stopped and asked what precisely they were doing just then. Cloaked from head to foot in black hooded cloaks, they weren't exactly the picture of innocent intent.

They stayed silent and still for a long moment, all of them holding their breaths and listening. There was only the chill silence of the October night and the sound of muggle traffic in the far distance. Mary spoke first.

"Okay...before you go in, there are a few rules-"

"Despite what you may have been led to believe, we have been in a library before," Fred objected lightly.

"We have the arrest records to prove it," George said helpfully.

She didn't look amused.

"Rule 1: Don't touch anything. We'll probably have to go to restricted sections of the library for some of these books, and that means a lot of highly volatile protection spells or else very rare and very fragile pieces. Sometimes they're both. So don't mess about them or you'll be found just in time to be buried next to your mother for Christmas."

This might have actually been a bit intimidating, if it weren't such a funny thing to say. They bit the insides of their cheeks to keep from giving the joke away.

"Rule 2: Don't wander around. Some of the rooms have motion activated spells on them, and will turn on lights and equipment if you move into them. Plus it's easy to get lost."

That sounded like a great deal of fun, except for the fact that they would be working under the threat of imminent asphyxiation and they couldn't risk getting separated. Additionally, even they had to admit it was not in their best interest to draw the attention of a Sentinel.

"Rule 3... do whatever I tell you."

Fred grinned at her. "That sounds a bit dubious as far as rules go."

"Well... you have rather dubious reputations."

"Point. Shall we go? I don't fancy getting caught standing out here like this. We're as likely to ruin your reputation as a virtuous lady as we are to get arrested for trespassing."

She let out an indignant huff, but quickly tapped them each on the head with her wand and muttered a spell. Fred and George could not feel any difference, and followed her inside with a fair bit of caution. They were able to breathe, but whatever they were breathing definitely wasn't the air they were used to. It didn't have an odor or even a taste, and that certainly made the difference noticeable all its own, but it was the strange weightiness of each inhalation that was the real proof that there was something off about it.

After closing the door behind them, they lit their wands and moved inside. The service entrance opened to the interior loading dock which was filled with unopened crates, loading equipment, and heaps of dead insects and spiders. The floor crunched as they walked, and Mary cringed with every step.

"They must have..." she stopped when her voice came out in a masculine baritone.

The twins burst out into giggles, which came out as rumbling laughter.

"It's the heavier air," she said, sounding very much like thirty year old man rather than a teenage girl. "It makes our voices lower. Like breathing helium, only in reverse."

"Helium makes your voice high? How do you know that?" George asked curiously.

"Haven't you ever sucked at the end of a balloon?"

"What's a balloon?"

She gave him an odd look, but then just shook her head.

"It's a muggle thing. My father used to give them to me on my birthday."

They stopped grinning, and shifted in embarrassment. Half bloods were envied even less than muggleborns among wizarding society. At least with muggleborns, they could forget their birth parents and move on, but half bloods were rarely allowed that opportunity. They were stuck with the unenviable position of having half a family, and knowing the other parent was either dead or else oblivious to their existence.

"Anyway..." she continued, trying to dissipate the awkwardness her admission had left. "The lack of oxygen must have killed all the insects and vermin. And without oxygen or humidity, nothing rots. It's a tomb of bugs."

"I just had a wicked idea for an exploding bludger," George murmured softly to himself.

Mary shuddered.

They moved out of the docking bay and into the back offices, which were also filled with crates, but these were open and seemed to have been in the process of being loaded onto book carts when they were abandoned. Further in, there were special rooms dedicated to the care, restoration, and preservation of deteriorating books and still more rooms dedicating to removing protective spells and curses, and still others for cataloging. One room was filled with glass cases, behind which books flew about like manic birds trying to escape. Another held books written by the faerie races, which held some of which were no larger than a finger nail and others made entirely of black obsidian or silver.

The twins longed to explore, but Mary was not to be distracted from their purpose. She had seen the wonders of the library many times before, and while they still held an intense fascination for her, she

knew she would return again later to explore at her leisure. Right now, she had a job to do. One that would help her and her family rebuild their London flat, which had been partially destroyed during the seige.

They moved into the public section of the library. In comparison to the back rooms, the collection here was actually surprisingly small. It was only about three times the size of Hogwart's library, which while certainly impressive for a school, was by no means comprehensive. Much of the space was consumed not by books, but rows upon rows of large study tables and overstuffed reading chairs, all looking nearly a thousand years old.

"I thought there would be more," Fred said.

Mary shook her head.

"Of course there is more. We have vaults the size of warehouses in the basement for most of it. It has to be requested though. Everything else you see here is just the eighty-five to ninety percent the public actually uses fairly regularly."

They blinked in surprise.

"That sound like a huge waste."

"It is. Funny thing is that in twenty years most of the books you see here will be thrown out. They won't even bother archiving them. It's all just common commercial publishing. Universities and some of the more esoteric magical practitioners are the only ones who seem to bother with the really good stuff."

They wandered around the public area for nearly twenty minutes, gathering some of the books from the list they had provided her with. It would have taken considerably less, but by now they had fallen into a conversation about 'the good stuff', which the twins were eager to hear about and she was flattered enough by their attention to give them.

It turned out that there were some items on the list that were qualified to fall into this category. To get to the basement required not one but

three different keys to three different doors, several more spells neither of them recognized, and a trip down an oversized elevator. There were three vaults in the basement. The South vault, the North vault, and the West vault; each of them protected by thick steel doors that required a special combination to open. By this time, the twins were convinced that even if the Italians had somehow managed to get inside the library and not suffocated, they never would have managed to find the valuable items, let alone get past the myriad of defenses and subterfuges that littered the building. It seemed whoever built the national library regarded the knowledge stored there with the same vicious covetousness of goblins and their gold. Fred and George practically held their breath in anticipation to see what was behind the thick iron doors, expecting to see something that would somehow rival Solomon's tomb in grandeur.

The reality was much less glamorous.

It was actually quite depressing. There wasn't a book in sight. In fact, there was nothing to see at all except a seemingly endless number of cardboard boxes, stretching out for nearly a quarter mile in either direction on rows of twenty foot shelves.

"Where are the books?" George asked.

"In the boxes of course," she replied.

"How do you find them?"

"Magic. And the catalog. And practice. Lots of practice."

Mary apparently needed more practice, because it took over thirty minutes to find just one book, and then another fifteen to find the second. The twins grew bored, and inevitably started looking for ways to entertain themselves. Which led them to breaking Rule 1.

Despite Mary's dire warnings, the only things of even mild interest they managed to find was a manual on head shrinking and a dissertation on the magical benefits of cannibalism. They didn't dare to open the second book, as it appeared to be bound in the hide of an animal of questionable origin.

"Found it," Mary called out, appearing from behind a row of shelves, and making her way towards them. She wasn't looking at where she was going, but at the book she held instead. It wasn't a particularly fanciful looking book or event that old, bound in clean, red leather with bronze fitting to protect the corners. She had it open at random in the middle and was perusing the contents curiously. "What on earth would you use something like this for?"

The twins shared a look and pounced to see what had her so intrigued. The page she had opened to was written in both English and what they assumed was some form of Gaelic. The pictures depicted strange images of dryads lured out of trees, swans half transfigured into children (or vice versa), and gods and goddesses of every shape and nature inked by hand against every page as if illustrating a tale from Beadle the Bard or some ancient Gaelic legend. There were also images of runes, diagrams, ritual wards, and any number of highly specific demonstrations that suggested the fantastical images before them could be achieved through practical application of a strange, highly specialized art. They followed along as she flipped page after page, revealing one strange image after another, the contents steadily growing darker as it progressed.

Benign and ambiguous spell craft gave way to Dark Arts which gave way to Dark Curses with such cruel and insidious natures that they grew pale to imagine them practiced on anything more than just ink and paper. Craft that summoned creatures of the netherworld, of the Unseelie Court, and the dark potential found within the human soul. Curses that aligned one's fate to misery and death, that deformed the body, the mind, and the spirit, and some that granted immortality by shattering the soul.

They stood there a long time, Mary flipping one page after another, unable to linger on the pages and yet unable to stop herself from looking at the next. The swish-swish of paper was the only sound, growing out of the deepening silence like waves breaking against a beach. The light around their wands seemed to shrink or perhaps the darkness to squeeze in.

She turned one more page, this one holding an image of a dementor-like creature transformed into the body of a child. She slammed the book shut. The twins nearly jumped clean out of their skin.

"What are doing with this?" she shouted at them in accusation.

Jumpy from what they had seen and her sudden accusation, they could only look at each other helplessly. What should they tell her? Harry's secrets were his own, but they did not want themselves to be associated with what they had seen in anyway. What was he doing with this book? The craft was clearly pagan, and aside from Lord Voldemort, Harry was the only other person they knew who practiced that form of magic.

"Er... it's for a friend," Fred said.

"What kind of friends do you have?"

"Um..."

"I'm putting it back," she said pointedly, turning to do just that.

"Wait!" George said, a thought quickly coming into head. "It's not what you think. It's... our friend is a Curse Breaker. He's... run up against a particularly nasty curse and thinks it might be some sort of Old Magic. He thought this book might hold some clues."

She hesitated.

"Please," Fred said, picking up on his brother's ruse. "He's really a good guy. I can't imagine him using this for anything other to help someone."

And for the most part, this was true. Harry was a kind soul, even if circumstances didn't always let him be kind. Their friend had a steel constitution, but his heart was pure gold. They had to believe, because it was impossible to conceive otherwise, that Harry either didn't know the entire contents of the book, was only interested in the benign material, or he was only using it as reference material for his research project.

This made lying to her much easier, because if they weren't convinced themselves of the Chaos Lord's good intentions they would have struggled selling the lie even to someone as trusting as Mary. As it was, they cajoled and reassured her relentlessly for several minutes until she finally, reluctantly relented.

"Thank you, dear heart. You've probably saved someone's life," Fred said.

"Or damned someone's soul. If you're going to use this..."

"We frankly have no intention of touching it after tonight," he promised.

After that, it was a simple matter of checking the books out, which even Mary could not figure out how to get around and still take the books out of the building, though it still managed to work using pseudonyms. They shrunk the books down and slipped them into a little pouch Fred tied to his waste. It was past midnight by the time they were done, and the library was beginning to feel as inviting as a cemetery. They headed back towards the loading dock, barely glancing at the wondrous spectacles that had so intrigued them when they had first entered. Their thoughts were held by darker mysteries of what they had found and in doing so what they had made themselves a part of.

They were so distracted by their thoughts; they forgot to look around before stepping out into the back alley. Unfortunately, they were also very jumpy, so when someone shouted 'STOP!', Mary screamed and the twins spun around and shouted out a blasting hex without even realizing who they were blasting at. In the flashing light of their spells, the glimmer of silver of a Sentinel's emblem and the tell-tale cut of the uniform cloak stood clearly for only an instant.

It less than an instant for them to realize their blunder.

One of the Sentinel's was struck and flew backwards from the blast, but the second had thrown up a shield in time to spare himself. The standing Sentinel sent out a stunning hex that luckily missed them

entirely and hit the door behind them. The light of the spells, diminished their ability to see for a moment, but already the twins had seized their companion's hands and started to run half blind through the back street.

"Oh my god, oh my god, oh my god," she chanted as they ran. "You kill him. You killed a Sentinel!"

"Hardly, my sweet," George said laughingly, but even his voice was touched with a hint of hysteria. This was bad. Terribly, horribly bad. It was one thing to pick a fight with Italians; them you could fight seriously and not feel bad about, but a Sentinel? It just wasn't done, and the consequences weren't something either of them wanted to face. They had to escape. They couldn't have been identified with their cloaks up. There was still a chance they could get away with this.

"Oh my god, oh my god, oh my god."

"Pray if you must, but please do so quietly," Fred requested, trying for nonchalant. "We're escaping. Stealth is key."

"Oh god, they're going to know it was me. They're going to report a robbery to Truberville and then he'll see someone with a key had to have opened the library and then he'll figure it out that it was me and...oh my god, oh my god... I don't want to go to Azkaban!"

"Don't worry, luv. I know someone who can put in a good word for you with the werewolves instead," Fred laughed. Mary started to cry.

"Shit! He's still there!" George muttered, as the Sentinel turned a corner behind them. They ducked down another street, and he threw up a blocking charm to buy some time. They didn't stay out in the open long enough to see if it worked before they ducked into the remains of a half collapsed house. Not daring to light their wands lest they be seen again, they stumbled blindly over broken timbres and bricks, feeling their way with their free hands. As they exited out the back of the house and into a tiny brick littered garden, the sky above suddenly bloomed red. George sighed heavily.

"A flare. He's called for backup."

"Should we hit the sewers?" Fred asked.

"It rained hard this afternoon. If we don't drown down there, we'll freeze. Besides, our best bet is to get back to the tavern and I don't know how to get there from the sewers."

"Yeah, you're right. We'll just have to risk it."

The frightened page shook her head.

"W-wait... shouldn't we... maybe if we just surrender. I mean... we didn't... it was an accident. We could explain..."

"Too late for that. All or nothing now. Come on."

Placing Mary between them, George led the way and Fred guarded the back, each of them casting Silencing charms and Notice-me-nots and what ever spell was needed as they moved through the rubble and shadows of London. Several times they heard the sound of shouts and running feet, saw the hazy light of lumos charms beyond collapsed walls and from around the corners of shops, but no one crossed their paths directly.

The terrain proved to be in their favor. There was a never ending supply of hiding places in the street and among the rubble, and too few Sentinels to look through it all effectively. Twice they had to duck behind a wall or a bush, and wait, crowded so tightly and so tensely together they could feel every heaving breath and fluttering heart beat in each others body as a Sentinel hunted for them mere feet from where they hid. Then the danger passed, and they still didn't move until the embarrassment of their intimate position gave them the courage to move on.

Gradually, the shadows and the wand lights faded away, and they reached the familiar street leading to the Red Weasel. More cautious than ever, the twins took Mary around the rear of the tavern, slipping through the back door. The kitchen was closed this late at night, so no one saw them enter and no one heard them slip up the narrow stairway to their private rooms, Mary still safely between them. It

wasn't until they were all seated in the private office that they managed to breathe a sigh of relief.

At least the twins did.

"They're going to catch us. All of us. It won't take them long to figure it out."

Fred shrugged.

"If they bother looking into it. No one was really hurt, and its not like they have any idea who we are or what we did."

"Truberville will figure it out. He'll know it was me-"

George shook his head.

"No he won't. He might figure out it was an employee, but you specifically? Where's the proof? Where's the motive? There has to be nearly a hundred people who have keys to that place, and there's no way they'll know we went into the basement. Anyway, we'll provide you with an alibi just in case. We'll say we had you cleaning the kitchen for some extra money all night. No one else here will contradict us."

"And where are your alibis?" she pointed out.

"Why, we were here, of course," Fred said, smiling confidently. "Like he said, no one here will contradict us. Not for Sentinels, anyway."

This was very true, and even Mary could see the logic behind it. There was a fair bit of resentment among Londoners over the Sentinel's lack of response during the Italian invasion. Culties had a sort of excuse, being stretched thin in both Europe and at home, but Sentinels were assigned to localities, which they should have been protecting at all costs. Their absence during the siege had severely damaged their relationship with the city's citizens, and the chance of anyone giving up local heroes to them over a little bit of harmless mischief was slim to none.

Slowly, Mary managed to calm down as she realized they had, in fact, gotten away with it. A smile suddenly spread across her face that almost rivaled the twins in its impishness.

"Oh, I wish I could see Truberville's expression when he finds out."

~ Page Break~

By Thursday, the entire school knew Harry had been in France over the weekend, and that he had been a big hit with France's crown princess and there were rumors of romantic interest. The Gryffindor would gladly have dismissed these rumors as nonsense, but he really didn't have any proof to the contrary. He had knowingly and willingly danced with the princess, she did like him, and he had the approval of both the Queen and Lord Voldemort. The possibility of something between them happening proved stronger than the reality of it.

Natalie hadn't spoken to him since he got back.

Ginny kept asking if he was positive he hadn't been even a little interested.

Otherwise, it was business as usual. He went to class, he studied with Hermione in the library, he fulfilled his liaison duties in Hogsmeade Hall, practiced for Dueling club, and spent his free time either working art projects or hanging out with his friends. His schedule tended to lean towards the frantic side, so he had had little opportunity to worry about anything other than what was immediately important. In his distraction, he had failed to notice the signs of an impending confrontation, until he found himself suddenly surrounded while walking to breakfast on Thursday.

Three students had stopped him in the hall, two of them blocking his movement forward and a third the chance of retreat. Normally, he would already have his wand out and maneuvered himself so his back was facing a wall, but they had caught him at a vulnerable moment. His arms were full of books, and his wand stuck up his sleeve. Putting his back to the wall now would only leave himself cornered, and the only way to get his wand was to drop the books

which were heavy and not in the sturdiest of conditions. He wasn't afraid yet. He was annoyed.

"What do you want?" he asked shortly.

Gerry St. James smiled at him haughtily, his arms crossed and his wand resting clearly in view. Trudy Sabbat mirrored him. Harry didn't recognize the stooge at his back, but he assumed the ratty-looking boy was mimicking them.

"What have you got here, Potter?" St. James asked innocently enough, snagging a book from the top of the pile in Harry's arms. "Runic Traditions of Ireland? Well, that's... suitably freakish. Sacrifice any chickens lately?"

Sabbat tittered insipidly.

"Why? Are you volunteering?" the harassed Gryffindor said smartly. The amusement on the boy's face evaporated. Maliciously, he threw the book in his hand to the ground, where it burst and the pages scattered across the floor. Harry's mind blanked for a moment, stunned by the pointless destruction of school property.

"What are you doing?" he snapped.

"What's the matter? Aren't you going to run to Snape to come and punish us? Or can't you? I can't help but notice you're not exactly the Headmaster's favorite person anymore. You've been on the outs for months. That's why he didn't stop the pranks when they first started. He's left you to fend for yourself."

To prove his point, he reached out to snatch another book, but Harry was faster and twisted away. The goon at his back blocked his retreat, and before he knew it his arms were pulled behind his back. His books fell to the floor, but he wasn't concerned about them anymore.

He threw his head back, smashing the goon in the nose. There was a yelp and the hold on him loosened. St. James and Sabbat's wands were up and already shouting out Stunners. Still not quite free of the hold on him, Harry twisted so that he and the goon were turned

around. The Stunners hit his captor straight in the back, and they were both thrown forward. He was not hit directly, but he was so close some of it managed to seep into him so that when he was thrown his arms and legs were too numb to catch him. He rolled across the floor from the momentum of the spell, before slowing enough to scramble to his half numb feet.

He flicked his wand into his hand, but it fell out of his numb fingers. He summoned it back into his hand with a wordless commander, just in time to throw up a Shield Charm. The force of the spells as they struck shook him, and he stumbled but kept to his feet. He tried a medium Blasting Hex, but the wand gesture was too complicated and he fumbled his wand, but recovered fast enough to spit out yet another spell.

"Expecto patronum!"

The white, ghostly stag leaped from his wand gracefully, knocking aside two spells with a wave of his ethereal antlers. St. James and Sabbath were forced to duck as the their own spellwork ricocheted back at them.

"What the bloody hell is that?" Trudy shrieked

"It's just a patronos! It can only hurt dementors!" her cohort snapped back at her.

"Screw this! I'm not messing around with it!"

She turned and fled without looking back. Meanwhile, Harry staggered towards his patronus, slipping his arm over its back for support. Warm magic lapped against his body, dispelling the residual effects of the Stunner. The numbness receded from his body, and as it did, his anger took to the foreground. His venomous green eyes turned to St James, promising bloody, painful murder.

Or at least that what the other boy interpreted it as. If it really had been Harry's murderous gaze, than he would have been frozen in place and pissed himself. What he was actually seeing was the 'I'm going to curse you naked and then throw you in the lake' look. Which

was still plenty scary enough to have Gerry turning tail to follow after Sabbat.

"Confringo!"

St. James was blasted off his feet and into the air, where he spun around like a top before crashing back to the ground. Harry stared at him dumbly, then at his wand. It hadn't been him.

"You alright, Harry?" a voice floated towards him

"Draco?"

The Malfoy heir appeared from around the corner, his wand drawn and looking arrogantly pleased with himself. He spared Harry a glance before strutting towards his fallen target.

"Come to save the day," Draco said in wry humor, kicking the groaning body beneath him lightly.

Harry rolled his eyes.

"I had him on the run already."

His friend did not seem fazed by this in the least.

"Then I am merely fashionably late. I don't suppose you've hammered in the lesson before you sent him scurrying back into his hole?"

"Lesson?"

Draco's responding eye roll was epic. Harry was certain that it had tilted the Earth's axis by a fraction of a centimeter with the power of its centripetal motion.

"Yes, the lesson. The most important part of a power demonstration. The one that teaches them that they are merely insects who must scurry out from under your foot if they do not wish to be trod."

"You need therapy, Draco. Years and years of therapy."

"Says the sixteen year old cuddling Santa's reindeer in the middle of the hall."

"You're just jealous because yours is a flamingo."

"It's an ibis, not a flamingo!"

"Mmhmm."

"Oh, be silent, you ignoramus. I'm teaching him a lesson, so you might as well learn something too."

Harry felt some trepidation at letting Draco proceed, but not enough to stop him. Gerry was a nuisance he had been willing enough to ignore, but this blatant attack against him had dissolved his tolerance. As long as his friend didn't do anything permanent or dangerous, he was willing to sit back and watch. He ran a caressing hand down his patronus' back, silently communicating his thanks before dismissing him back to his own plane of existence. When he turned his attention back to the Slytherin, he was straddling Gerry's chest.

"Innervate."

Instantly, Gerry started to struggle violently, kicking his feet and wiggling his trapped arms. He was getting nowhere fast. Draco's position was perfectly stable and perfectly immobilizing. He smiled down at his victim with perfect white teeth.

"What's your name again? Never mind, I'll only forget it again by the time we're done. The important question I suppose is whether you know who I am. Do you?"

Gerry glared at him hatefully.

"Yeah. You're Potter's bitch."

Harry was renowned for his speed as both a quidditch player and as a duelist, but even he didn't think he could have moved as quickly as a

Malfoy whose honor had been insulted. He barely even saw the boy's hand as he smashed it straight down onto Gerry's nose. He did hear the crack, however.

"AAAaaahhh!"

Harry jumped, startled.

"Merlin, Draco! Silencio encumbante!"

A dome of silence rose up around them, holding Gerry's scream, which was now becoming gurgled as blood surged into his nostrils. Draco gave Harry an apologetic shrug.

"Sorry."

"Thuck, you bwoke my noes!" Gerry gurgled, struggling to breath as blood flowed down his nasal cavity and into his throat. Draco's wand reappeared from up his sleeve, and with a flick of his wand, there was another sharp snapping sound and another scream of pain. This time, however, Gerry's nose was straightened and the blood had disappeared.

"Prove it," the Malfoy heir said, cheerfully.

Gerry eyed him fearfully. His eyes flickered towards Harry, as if asking to be saved, but he found nothing but annoyance there. It would take more than that to inspire a rescue attempt. Harry rather suspected that if he hadn't been able to defend himself, St James and his minions would have done at least as bad and probably worse.

Draco's wand disappeared again. A moment later, a long, slender dagger took its place. Gerry's eyes widened. So did Harry's.

"Uncle Severus gave me this knife as a birthday present. He says magic is all well and good, but sometimes something more... visceral... is needed. I have come to see the wisdom behind these words, so I carry this with me everywhere I go. Just in case. I haven't had a lot of opportunity to make use of it, which is why I am actually quite pleased to have found you today."

"W-what are you going to do?"

Draco made a show of giving it some thought, tapping the blade gently against his lip.

"I don't know. How much time do we have, Harry?"

The Gryffindor just stared at him. Draco turned and winked at him with the eye Gerry couldn't see. Harry blinked, then scrambled for his pocket watch.

"We only have twenty-three minutes until our next class."

His friend sighed, and turned back to his victim.

"Bother. I haven't even eaten yet. Well, I'll just have to assume you have something vaguely resembling intelligence then, and give you the lesson summary."

Again, his hand lashed out in lightening speed, slashing open Gerry's cheek. The captive boy's scream was more out of fear than real pain, the wound too shallow to have done any real harm. Even so, Harry was already moving to put a stop to it. Draco speared him with a look that made him pull up short. Beneath him, Gerry was now shaking and crying, tears and snot running down his face.

"Mess with any of my friends again, and I'll cut you into teeny tiny pieces and feed you to the owls. Mess with me, and I'll ruin you; mind, body, and soul. Do you understand?"

"Yes, yes! I'm sorry! I'm sorry!"

Draco grinned.

"Good thing I'm such a nice guy. I forgive you," he said, and jumped to his feet, startling Harry yet again. "Come on, I'm starving. There's no way I can sit through one of Toure's lecture on an empty stomach."

Harry spared a glance at Gerry, who was still cowering on the floor and the other boy who remained in a stunned heap on the floor. He looked back to Draco.

"Er... me neither."

After a few minutes spent collecting and repairing the books he had dropped, they left. They wandered away from the scene of the crime at an amiable pace, both of them pretending absolutely nothing of interest had just happened until they were at the bottom of the stairs.

"Therapy Draco... therapy and calming draughts."

"Pssh, like you didn't enjoy that."

"I did not. That was freaky. Impressive in a twisted sort of way, but freaky."

Draco was only looking more and more smug.

"You're welcome."

"You didn't save me. I told you I had him on the run already."

"Yes, but I prevented him from trying again. That's one less idiot you have to worry about. I'll have Parkinson have a talk with that Sabbath girl later."

"What? And miss another opportunity to show off your knife?"

"Don't be daft. I don't threaten girls. I'm not a barbarian."

He sounded genuinely insulted by Harry's insinuation, which was mind boggling to the Gryffindor after what had just happened.

"How did you know I was being threatened?"

"I didn't. I came to find you, and just wandered in on the scene. Lucky you."

Harry closed his eyes and counted to five, then opened them again. They were both just two friends heading to breakfast together. Nothing strange had happened. It had all just been a weird dream best forgotten.

"So what did you want to talk about?"

"Have you heard anything more about Hermione's sponsor?"

"Nothing since the last time you asked. Don't worry. Skeeter's reliable when it comes to getting things done. She'll pull through for us."

"If you say so," he said, but there was no reassurance in his expression. Harry gave him a friendly nudge.

"What is it? Something happen you're not telling me about?"

Draco shook his head.

"It's nothing. Just... I got a letter from my dad. It was... off... somehow. He asked about Hermione. He never asks about her. He asked about you too. It could be coincidence, but... I don't know. I don't like it."

The Malfoy's unease was contagious, and no sooner than he had finished speaking than Harry was infected with it as well. He was suddenly aware that he was juggling several problems at once, and it wouldn't take much for it all to come tumbling down around him. He felt his heart rate begin to quicken, and his palms began to sweat. He closed his eyes and counted backwards from one hundred. The panic attack receded as quickly as it had reared, but he could feel it lingering around the periphery of his senses. He would need to go back to his room for his anti-anxiety potion. He didn't like to take it if he could help it, but he wasn't going risk it when the signs were this obvious.

"You okay?" Draco asked, catching the sudden quickening of his breathing. "You didn't get hit during the fight did you?"

"I'm fine. Don't take this personally, but thinking about your dad and Hermione at the same time just pisses me off."

The Slytherin chuckled at that.

"Yeah, I get that. He's an asshole, but he's still my dad."

"Better you than me."

~ Page Break~

"Mr. Potter!"

Harry jumped, nearly dropping his letter. Mentally, he let out a sigh. He had hoped to escape the Great Hall so that he could return to the dormitory to get his potion and read his letter in peace before he had to go to class. It seemed it was not to be, and he plastered on a patient smile as he turned to greet Vector.

"Professor."

"Good news! Those books you requested just arrived! We should have plenty of research material now to get started!"

Harry's smile turned a bit more genuine. The twins had managed to pull off another miracle. That meant he would soon be able to cure Ron, and wash his hands of the fool with a clear conscience. Similarly, perhaps he would soon be able to get Vector off his case as well. She was nice enough as far as teachers go, but her stalkerish tendencies were starting to grate on his nerves.

"That is good news. I'll try to take a look at them after class, but I'm afraid I won't be able to do anything tonight."

Vector looked startled. As a teacher, she wasn't used to her students refusing her anything directly. She didn't immediately know how to react.

"Oh? You have plans tonight?" she tried, her expression stuck somewhere between benign interest and annoyance. Harry pretended not to notice and smiled pleasantly.

"It's the full moon tonight, Professor."

"Oh. Oh! Of course, how silly of me. Tomorrow night then?"

"After dinner?"

"An early dinner?"

"Sure. I'll see you tomorrow night then," he agreed. Not exactly how he wanted to spend a Friday night, but these days there weren't really many ways to entertain oneself.

"Excellent. The books are in my office if you to take a peak. The password is 'Fibonacci'."

"Thank you, ma'am."

"Ah, and before I forget, there was a letter addressed to you among them."

She handed him a envelope, plain except for the his name painted in overzealous calligraphy. He took it.

"Thank you."

"Good day, Potter." With that, the Arithmancy teacher exited, practically skipping out of the Great Hall. He sighed, and turned to leave but nearly ran face first into Hermione. She had snuck up behind him without him having even noticed. He really was off his game that day.

"What was that all about?" she asked in benign curiosity. There were a lot of things these days she didn't ask Harry about, either because she didn't expect him to tell her or because she wouldn't have known what to say if he did, but when it came to anything school related she

was unrepentantly nosy. He tolerated it was a sort of resigned good humor and accepted it as a strange form of affection.

"The same thing as always. Research project."

Hermione looked plainly annoyed.

"I hope she gives you credit for all the work you're putting into it. It would look really good on your college application."

He just laughed.

"Don't laugh it off! You might think you can get into any school you wanted with your reputation alone, but you're going to need to prove your academic ability if you want to impress your teachers."

"Okay, okay. I get it. I'll make sure I get a byline."

"Make sure you do. What else do you have there?" she asked, pointing to his other letters.

"Follow me to the dorm and I'll tell you."

"We're going to be late!"

"It's just History of Magic!"

"Which you shouldn't be skipping. You're way behind as it is."

He shrugged. He had his priorities in order, so attempted to use logic against him was useless. Letters and his anti-anxiety potions trumped History of Magic essays any day. Despite her misgivings, Hermione's priorities were also in order as well, and she followed after him.

He opens the letter Vector gave him on the way. As he guessed, its from the twins, but it was not the humorous exaltation he was used to. There was no humor in it in fact, and the words are written with such careful politeness he never would have believed the twins had written it except no one else could have known the things in the letter.

Harry

We got the books like you asked. We need to know what you are using them for. Especially the red one. And don't say it's for research. That's not going to cut it this time. We expect an answer soon or we're going to come looking for one.

F&G

P.S. If you hear we've been arrested, we expect you to make bail for us.

Okay, so maybe that last part was a little funny. Maybe. Unless they were serious. He wondered what it was that had them so upset? Ron's book, most likely, but then what could have been so bad about it? Well, he supposed books that used Old Magic to kill people might be found as offensive to some people, including the twins. He'd sort it out with them soon enough, but in the meantime he might want to sneak off with 'the red book' before Vector decided to take a gander at it. Good thing Snape hadn't managed to catch the letter, or he was positive he would never even have seen the book let alone made use of it.

Thinking of Snape brought on a moment angst he had been happily avoiding for the last couple of days. They hadn't spoken in weeks now, and while that wasn't something he would have considered a bad thing, it left him feeling anxious that the man might be intentionally avoiding him. They had had no weekly visits since Hogwarts had been attacked, and what little contact they had had during the tumultuous days after had been cool and distant and had eventually tapered off into nonexistence as they both busied themselves with their own responsibilities.

He didn't like the distance, but he didn't know what to do about it or if there was anything to do. They weren't friends. They certainly weren't family. Most of the time they were barely civil towards each other, and if it weren't for Voldemort forcing them together they probably wouldn't have given each other the time of day. And yet...

And yet nothing.

It didn't matter. Whatever it was that stuck them together in the first place wasn't going to last forever. They both had their own lives and inevitably those would go in separate directions. If not now, then soon. It was only natural.

No point thinking about it now anyway.

"Is something wrong, Harry?" Hermione asked, reaching for the letter that seemed to have bothered him so much. He quickly tucked it into his robes.

"For the sake of plausible deniability, I don't think you should look at that."

"What?"

"I don't want you to be an accomplice to a felony."

"What? What did you do?"

"I didn't do anything. Well, I might have commissioned a crime. I don't know what they call that in legal terms. I didn't pay anyone money though, so maybe it doesn't count."

She gave him a horrified look. He wondered what her response would have been if she had seen Draco half an hour ago.

"Um... what's the penalty for stealing from the National Library?"

"Merlin, you didn't!"

"Hypothetically speaking then."

"Oh god."

"I promise it was for a good cause."

"Oh really? And what cause is that?"

"Er... can't tell you that either, since it also involves a possible felony."

"Harry... are you involved in organized crime?"

"... organized isn't the word I would use for it..."

"What are you thinking? Seriously, what are you getting yourself involved in? Do you think there won't be any consequences just because you're in Voldemort's favor?"

"Um... no... strangely enough, most of my crimes are committed trying to keep him from finding out about things. And Snape. And all those University application committees of course."

"Harry!"

~ Page Break~

Harry opened the second letter by himself in the dormitory. Hermione had fled in a frustrated huff, possibly to research rehabilitation methods for juvenile delinquents. This was for the best, as the letter was from his godfathers, and if his criminal behavior bothered her it was nothing compared to her icy disapproval over his continued relations with Britain's Head Alpha.

This was Harry's first letter since the beginning of term, and he felt a mixture of elation and dread to hold it in his hands. He loved his godfathers dearly and was always eager to receive news about happenings in the colony, but that didn't keep him from acknowledging that happenings there tended to have negative consequences for him. Sirius and Remus had been adamant about keeping his involvement with pack politics and intrigue to a minimum recently, but he doubted those feelings would mean much if circumstances didn't cooperate with them.

Chances were, he wouldn't cooperate either, if he felt circumstances required his participation.

He wasn't even half way through the letter before he was certain that his intervention would prove necessary. There had been an attack recently on one of the new colonies in Ireland. Sirius was pointedly vague on the details and intentionally overbearing in his assistance that Harry's involvement was not necessary. He had only been informed so that he wouldn't overreact if he saw some outrageous story in the paper or Snape decided to torment him over it. Snape would never do that of course, as provoking Harry to misplacement himself had never been one of his hobbies. His was correct, however, in assuming Harry would have potentially tried to run off if this story had caught him off guard. At the very least, he would have been severely pissed off.

Sirius went on to say that it was being investigated and would eventually be resolved without his interference. Which was an odd thing for him say. Why would there need to be an investigation? Hadn't the attack been by Italians or Germans? Neither was mentioned, but who else would...

Harry suddenly remembered his discussion with Draco. The boy had been disturbed by Lucius' letter, and the inquiry about Hermione and Harry seemed... strangely coincidental.

Had Lucius known about the attack?

Well, of course he did. That was stupid to ask even in his own head, but had he been asking Draco about Harry's reaction to the news? Was he testing the waters for his next proposal, demand, threat? He had been so wrapped up in fighting the circumstances around Hermione's betrothal and his myriad of other problems that he had nearly forgotten there was a very real villain lurking in the wings. A man both willing and eager to manipulate him until he was securely under his thumb.

Willing and eager to stage an attack on a werewolf colony to do so?

Unease from his talk with Draco returned, this time with the strength of a mountain troll and an even worse temper. He could feel his heart quicken, pounding against his lungs, making hard to breathe. Oh God, had Lucius arranged an attack on the colony just to gain Harry's

attention? He had said himself that he had the means to make life not only difficult but down right precarious for everyone Harry held dear. Had anyone in the colony been hurt? Had anyone died? For what? Because Harry was dragging his feet in getting back to that pompous ass?

He clambered off his bed and stumbled towards his trunk, throwing it open. Half a dozen protective spells activated instantly, sizzling against his skin like a low grade acid, but he even in his frantic carelessness he managed to keep himself from triggering anything. Pulling a small vial of purple liquid from a hidden nook in the lid of the trunk, he uncorked it with his teeth and downed the contents in one gulp. It tasted predictably dreadful, but sharp kick to his senses was invigorating. His heart jumped twice, painfully, then settled and the world seemed suddenly quiet and peaceful.

He had to give Snape credit. He knew how to make a potion, and his anti-anxiety potion was its own miracle. There was neither fatigue nor numbness, indeed, everything seemed strangely clear and focused and there was a novel idea that he could understand the world completely if he just took a moment to really think about it. Which was just a side affect. Snape had warned him that he would think himself terrible clever for about twenty minutes after taking the potion, and it was best to keep his mouth shut and not attempt any potentially dangerous spell craft until the feeling past.

He climbed back onto his bed and laid down. He was already fifteen minutes late for History of Magic, and it seemed silly to go now. Professor Toure would expect an explanation and if Snape were to be believed it was probably best he didn't offer her one until he was more himself. Besides, it would be considerably more productive to stay where he was for a bit and consider this latest situation.

Stopping to think about it, it seemed silly now to think Lucius would attack a werewolf colony. Voldemort would crucio him until Christmas, if nothing else.

Then again, the Dark Lord was in France now... or possibly leading an advance in the south of Germany and organizing their new allies into a usable fighting force. But still...

Something about the entire situation seemed off. Why would the Germans or Italians attack a colony? Admittedly, there was the whole anti-werewolf sentiment going on, but strategically it was a waste of resources and, more importantly, counterproductive. The werewolves were removed from the fighting, but that wouldn't last if the Germans decided to provoke them personally.

If the attack had even been that serious. Perhaps the 'attack' hadn't been anything more than harassment, vandalism, or something like that. Something Lucius might stage and possibly manage without earning Voldemort's ire.

His thoughts chased themselves in circles, until he let out an annoyed sigh. He needed more information before he decided what to do. He needed to know more about the attack on the colony; how serious it was and who was behind it.

This was easier said than done.

Snape might tell him, if he even knew or if he weren't avoiding him lately. It was unlikely his godfathers would cooperate, as hell bent as they were in keeping him out of it. Additionally, it would take weeks for him to get a letter out to them and then receive a response. This was true of everyone he knew outside the castle, and no one inside would be much help. He didn't have weeks to waste.

That left him with only one option left.

Unconsciously, his right hand rubbed against the invisible mark over his stomach.

~ Page Break~

Harry never made it to History of Magic. He did not make it to Herbology either. He did make it to Potions, but only so he could ask Slughorn for some ingredients from his stores. When asked, he told the professor it was part of his research project with Professor Vector. He wasn't worried about him asking the Arithmany teacher about it. Vector had a bad habit of talking incessantly about her research until

everyone grew mentally numb from listening. Now no one knew what she was really doing and no one wanted to.

No one questioned Harry either, although it wasn't because they didn't want to know. Quite the opposite, in fact. Through the entire day, people had been watching him curiously and yet remained deliberately out of his way. Maybe they had heard something from Gerry, maybe they were nervous around him because of the full moon, or perhaps something about his eyes screamed of an intentness that would not be distracted, waylaid, or defied.

He was on a mission.

Hermione was not impressed.

"What are doing Harry? You missed two classes and barely did a thing in Potions! Are you trying to get into trouble?" she demanded as they left Potions together. Draco trailed behind them, more curious than concerned and like everyone else unwilling to ask directly.

"Of course not. I just have something more important going on. I can make up those classes this weekend."

"Does this have something to do with the letter from your godfathers? I thought they weren't going to involve you in their problems anymore!"

He felt himself bristle at the accusation in her voice.

"It has to do with Lucius," he said pointedly.

Her anger instantly fled, and she visibly wilted into contrition and guilt. Her adoptive father had always been a plague to her existence, and it didn't sit well with her that she had dragged Harry into his line of sight. Or rather, that he had thrown himself between the two of them.

"What about my father?" Draco asked, finally motivated enough to ask.

"He's issued me a challenge. At least, I believe he has. I'm going to find out."

"You're not sneaking out of the castle again, are you?" she asked.

"I'm not going anywhere. I'm just going to gather some information using a spell. Don't worry so much."

"A spell? What kind of spell?"

"A very old one."

Which was pretty much Harry's way of telling her to stop asking. Hermione admired the magic he did, but part of her feared it too. It was one of the few things she refused to learn for herself. That was just as well, as part of Harry feared teaching her. It wasn't something that he could simply hand her a book on and expect her to learn on her own. It required an introduction by someone already more familiar, and the intimacy and trust that was required from that sharing was both terribly enticing and frightening.

It was difficult enough handling his relationship with Voldemort, he didn't think he could handle another relationship of that intensity with someone else and survive it.

The conversation ended there. Harry still had preparations to make in the green house and Hermione and Draco had their own plans to study in the library. The siblings watched with unresolved tension as their friend left to do those strange, mysterious, dangerous things he was renown for.

Harry spares them only a moment's thought before his focus was once again on his plans. He has spent most of the morning and afternoon gathering supplies, skipping not only classes by lunch as well. He would skip dinner as well, because for what he intended a ritual purification was necessary and that meant only water for the rest of the day. For the few remaining hours of daylight, he cloistered himself in his private greenhouse, tracing runes onto an empty space between plant boxes and a collection of empty pots.

Inana sunned herself on top of the pots, the rusty orange terracotta far warmer than the cool gray stones around them. The greenhouse was always warm, but even here the Queen of the Nile could feel the changing seasons, and she prepared for her upcoming winter hibernation by sighing listlessly and complaining to Harry about him never visiting.

The sun set and the greenhouse became dark. He didn't want to perform the spell until after curfew, when the halls would be mostly empty so he left for a time to continue purification rituals in the prefects bathroom. Technically, Harry wasn't allowed to use it, and normally he didn't feel any desire to do so, but he always knew the password to get inside and tonight he felt the need for privacy. He showered in lukewarm water, then then filled the ridiculously large tub with cold water and submerged himself.

He didn't dare close his eyes. Every time he did there was a memory of drowning. Instead, he kept his eyes open and trained on the tall, narrow windows, tracking the fat orange moon as She rose slowly into the sky. Even through the distortion of the water he could follow Her easily.

Eventually, he climbed out and took another shower, this one scolding hot to driving the icy ache from his bones. He felt purer in body if not soul afterward.

Back to the greenhouse, passing by the few remaining stragglers as they made their way back to their dorms before curfew. The prefects eyed him suspiciously but didn't stop him. At some point, Sentinel Seitler started to follow him.

"What are you doing?" he asks.

"Waiting out the moon. It's full tonight."

"I thought you got that fixed."

Harry spared him a glance, but didn't answer. Seitler didn't ask again, but followed him to the greenhouse where Harry pointedly shut the

door in face. He'll pay for it later, but for what he intended he didn't want an audience.

Inside, he burned fragrant herbs in tiny terracotta pots, filling the air with autumn smells of apples, cinnamon, pumpkin, wet leaves, and smokey wood. He breathed deep. He exhaled slowly.

Inana watched him motionlessly, without so much as a flicker of her forked tongue.

Carefully, he removed his school robes, folded them and set them aside. He took off his shoes and socks, unbuttoned his shirt and rolled up his sleeves. The greenhouse was warm and the light shining through the skylight was the color of burning coals, but his hands trembled as he reached for charm he had spent the better half of the afternoon making.

It was not pretty by any stretch of the imagination. It was an amalgamation of leather, wool threads, bits of bone, silver coins, dried monkshood, tiny vials with drops of Inana's venom and honey, and other things he himself didn't know the name of. It was a frightening mess of things and made his wrist itch as he secured it around his left arm, but he didn't dare do this without some form of protection.

The runes scattered around the room began to glow faintly. There was no pattern to their disbursement. For this particular ritual, there was no need for ritual wards. His charm would provide him the necessary protection, at least for next few hours. The runes were only there to set a mood, to offer an enticement to Rhiannon to turn his way. He would need to seduce Her to get what he wanted.

Finally, he reached for the small box he has set aside for last. He ran his hands over the wood, fingers tracing the intricate carvings etched there, before opening it. Inside was his ritual dagger, slim and deceptively delicate. He had not touched it since that summer, but still he could feel the currents of his own magic at its most intense throbbing against skin.

He took another deep breath of the fragrant air. Held it. Released it slowly. Then reached for the blade.

~ Page Break~

Snape sent Ira back to their quarters early that night. There had been small happenings all day, and the rise of a harvest moon left him with a premonition of danger. He was not typically a superstitious man, but when it came to the castle he had learned to trust his instincts. The day he had officially accepted the title of headmaster, a magical connection had been formed between him and the school; one that grew stronger with every passing day. It was nothing overt, merely a mild pressure on his subconscious, but enough that he had a general sense of where problems might arise.

Three students had turned up in the infirmary that day with injuries and refused to explain the cause.

Professor Vector had received a delivery of books from the National Library, which should have been impossible according to Slughorn's account of 'Doctor' Truberville.

Harry had been behaving like a juvenile delinquent all day and the teachers had been less than useless in handling the matter. If McGonagall hadn't been put up with the flu, the situation would never have been tolerated.

None of these incidents were particularly alarming on their own, but all of it happening in one day made him nervous. So he stayed in his office late, reviewing the latest list of complaints filtering up from Hogsmeade Hall, and trying to ignore the low hum in the back of his brain that warned him something was happening. He was so absorbed in not thinking about it that he failed to notice when he was no longer alone.

"Headmaster-"

Snape leaped up from his chair, his wand jumping into his hand. The chair fell over, his papers scattered, and his scotch glass tipped and spilled its contents over a pile of supply inquisitions. Harry tilted his

head, smiling in bemusement at the chaos he had inadvertently caused and Snape's ruined composure. The headmaster spared him a withering glare, but it quickly receded as he took in his intruder's appearance.

If Snape's desk were a mess it was nothing compared to Harry himself. He was half naked, with only a pair of trousers and a truly hideous bracelet on his wrist to cover him. Blood was splattered and smeared randomly across his body, although the greatest quantity seemed to originate directly below his naval. Most alarming of all were the absence of his glasses, and a familiar, eerie glow to his eyes.

"Potter, what have you done?" he demanded, fighting down the wave of panic. He had dealt with a moon crazed Harry plenty of times before, but he could not help but be shaken at having been caught off his guard, especially since even at his craziest he had never seen the boy in such a state.

"Don't worry, it's all mine," he said, referring to the blood.

It honestly hadn't occurred to Snape that it could have been someone else's, although it really should have.

"What did you do? How did you get in here?"

Harry shrugged and stepped further into the room. Snape fought the urge to take a step back.

"I did magic." He laughed softly, like it was a joke, and therefore didn't warrant any further explanation. The headmaster scowled.

"I can see that. Where is Seitler?"

Because the man should have been watching Harry and prevented this from ever happening, or at the very least warned the headmaster that it was. The maddened youth was as uninterested in this question as the ones before it. He changed the subject.

"I've missed you, you know."

"What?"

"I've missed you. You're a right pain in the ass, but you're the closest thing I have to a father. It's not fair for you to ignore me."

"Christ, Potter, just stop talking."

It was as much a plea as a demand. He didn't want to hear this. Harry moved slowly closer.

"I am sorry about the baby."

Closer.

"Shut up."

"Do you blame me for that too? Like Larousse?"

Closer. Closer. He was standing right in front of his desk now.

"Shut up!"

"If you want me to, I'll make it up to you. Ira would never miscarry again."

An unnameable, unspeakable dread came over Snape at the thought of this mad creature laying so much as a finger on his wife. He didn't understand the forces that governed Harry and the Dark Lord's lives, but he wanted no part of it for himself or his family. Their fates would be their own to decide.

"There is nothing I want from you."

The boy fell silent, his expression disappeared and he merely stared at Snape for a long moment. The moment passed, and emotion once again flickered across his face. Unfortunately, it was anger.

"I need to speak with Lucius Malfoy."

"Absolutely not."

There were a hundred reasons to keep Lucius and Harry as far away from each other as possible. Thirty of those reasons were for Lucius' sake. Another thirty were for Harry's. The rest were either for everyone else's benefit, including his own.

"He allowed one of my brothers to be killed."

Snape felt a moment of confusion, before he realized the boy was referring to a werewolf. His mind began to race. He could recall looking through the letter from Sirius Black, and finding his evasive wording suspicious but nothing to indicate that Lucius was somehow involved. But then again, Black had not really given a clue as to who really had been responsible and that meant he was worried about Harry trying to hunt the culprit or culprits down.

The question after 'who' was 'why'. What could he gain from killing a werewolf? A message? To whom? The Head Alpha? His own followers?

Harry?

That was ridiculous. Voldemort would never have allowed... except Voldemort was across the channel and unlikely to return any time soon, leaving the werewolves vulnerable. But it still didn't answer 'why'? If it were Lucius, it made no sense to him.

"How do you know this?"

Harry flung his arm out sharply, pointing to the window. Outside, the yellow moon leered at them. Snape rolled his eyes.

"I hardly think the moon counts as a reliable source. If you recall, it rather convinced you to go to war with Germany."

"That was Greyback. Rhiannon played no part in that."

"Potter, look at me. This is me not caring."

Green eyes flashed with anger. Snape's hand tightened around his wand, but he did not move to use it. Potter had no wand, a small blessing, and he would rather not use his own if he didn't have to.

"Well, that's just typical of you, isn't it?" he sneered, and on his face it was not so different from a werewolf's snarl. "I don't suppose I should be surprised. You have a tendency to 'not care' whenever it involves Lucius."

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

"You don't give a damn about the werewolves. It probably makes you smile to think about them cut down one by one. You'd keep me here just to see if it would happen more often. Damn you, I won't just wait around while he threatens my family. I am not you."

"What are you accusing me of? Helping Lucius, who you still haven't convinced me is guilty of anything, to kill werewolves? I have enough to deal with without involving myself in recreational lycanicide."

"I am accusing you of not keeping your promise because of Lucius. Have you done anything for Hermione since you learned of her betrothal?"

Snape was struck mute. Hermione. He had every intention of helping her, but he honestly did not know where to start. Lucius was avoiding him completely. Narcissa was caught up in the fantasy that marrying Hermione to a pureblood would secure her future, and if he tried to disillusion her and failed, he would have succeeded in nothing but alienating both his old friends which would not help his goddaughter in the slightest. If he could only find the time and energy to spare, he was positive he could have found a solution already, but neither were in abundant supply as of late.

He had no intention of making excuses to Harry, however.

"I will do my part," he snarled back. "I always do."

"Then do it, already! And allow me to do the same."

"Potter, I know it escapes your notice from time to time but you are not an adult. You are my ward-

One moment the boy was standing there perfectly still and the next he was atop Snape's desk, crouched on all fours and baring his teeth. He threw his wand out in front of him to cast a Stunner, but Harry knocked his arm aside with one hand and then swung it back around to smash it into the man's face. Snape stumbled back, tripping over this chair and falling heavily onto his back. He barely had time to inhale some of the air that had knocked out of him, when the crazed youth leaped at him to resume the attack.

Snape caught him his foot, kicking him in the chest. Harry flew back across the desk and over the other side. It bought him the time he needed to climb back to his feet. His wand was still in his hand.

"Potter, you crazy son of b-

"You don't get to do that!"

The voice drifted up from behind the desk, but the boy didn't stand. He was using his position to avoid Snape's wand.

"Do what? What is wrong with you?"

"You don't get to tell me I'm a man and then treat me like a child when its convenient for you. You don't get to ignore me for over a month and then pretend like you care! Be my enemy, be my friend, or be my father. Be one thing or the other. I am sick of you trying to be all three."

Ira had told him that he was guilty of being to Potter whatever was most convenient to him at the moment, but it hadn't occurred to him that the boy would also be aware of this. He never figured Harry to be more observant than himself.

He never figured him to be faster either, but when that skinny little body moved it was damn near inhuman. His shot off the stunner instantly, but Harry had anticipated it and thrown file of papers

snatched up from the desk. The file and spell collided, exploding into a cloud of confetti. Harry burst through it to continue his attack. Knocking aside Snape's wand hand again, he tried for another punch. Never one to be caught by the same trick twice, the elder fighter caught the fist and jerk it forward to land a blow of his own. Harry flew backwards again, rolled, and fell into a crouch.

Blood streamed down his forehead where Snape had smashed him with his elbow, but his mouth curved to bare his teeth in a vicious smile. He coughed out a laughed, wretched and mad, mad, mad.

"I always wondered... how good of a fighter you were. I only ever saw you fight Moody, and I was really too distracted to see much."

Snape fought to remain in control of his anger. He wanted nothing more at that moment than to give the boy a real demonstration of what he was capable of, but he had more self control than that. He did not truly want to hurt Harry, and the chances were that Harry didn't truly want to hurt him either. He was just crazy. Moon mad. He would find a way to stun Harry and then dole out a suitable punishment when he came back to his senses.

"What do you expect to accomplish by all of this? Do you think I will let you see Lucius if you beat me up? Even you are not so asinine."

The mad child laughed. Listening closer, Snape could now make out a hint of desperation.

"I don't know, I don't know. I made protection for myself so Rhiannon couldn't control me completely. And it worked... all of it, just like I planned it, but... I... I... Merlin, it's all wrong. I feel... I feel what she wants me to feel, but my thoughts are my own and I can't... I can think clearly, but I can't control myself. I feel strongly, but my mind won't tell me what I'm feeling strongly for."

Sane enough to know you are crazy, but too mad to stop yourself, Snape interpreted. He aimed his wand.

"Just hold still, Potter. I'll put you under until you come out of it."

"No!"

He was on his feet and charging again with his incredible speed, and the headmaster didn't even try to get off another spell. He braced himself, and caught his smaller attack as he careened into him, spinning and twisting so that he was thrown off his feet. Harry, however, seized his upper arms as he threw him and didn't let go, pulling Snape along with him so that they were both thrown to the floor, knocking over a display case as they went. They rolled over shards of glass, tearing skin and cloth as they went. They stopped rolling, and Harry landed on top and resumed his attack, clawing at the man below him. Snape clung stubbornly to his wand with one hand, and held his attacker up off of him with the other.

Snarling in frustration, Harry drew back enough to pull free of his hold, before diving in again to sink his teeth into his hand. For Snape there was a single moment of absolute terror. Harry was biting him. Harry whose madness was the result of some strange new type of lycanthrosis was biting him.

Infecting him.

"Confringo!"

The blasting hex threw Harry off of him. His flight was almost comical, all flailing limbs and gracelessness, but the deafening crack he made when he hit the bookshelf was anything but. He landed in a mangled heap, books raining down after him.

Snape lay still on the floor, gasping for breathe, still caught in his moment of absolute terror. He lay there for a long time, before reason slowly began to return to him.

Potter's bite wasn't contagious. There had never been anything medical professionals could identify as lycanthrosis-like, and if there had been then surely one of Harry's random girlfriends would have displayed symptoms of it. He was not and never would be a werewolf or go mad at the full moon. He was fine. He was sane.

He had just killed Harry Potter for no damn reason.

Scrambling upright, he stumbled towards where the boy had fallen. His knees were like rubber, but luckily he didn't have far to go. He knelt back down, throwing aside books that obscured his way. Beneath him, Harry lay motionless and unnaturally pale. He could not see him breathing.

No.

He reached out to check for a pulse.

Harry shuttered and flinched away at the touch, his eyes fluttered opened and he gasped for a breath. His eyes were still glowing, but the madness had been replaced by confusion and fear.

"Oh..." he gasped. "I mean... ow."

Snape blinked down at him in disbelief. That spell at so close a range in so confined a space should have killed him. Crushed his ribs, broken his neck, his back, and smashed his skull in. He couldn't be alive. He shouldn't be.

"Ow..." Harry repeated, and took a shaky breath. He tried to push himself up, but flinched and laid back down. He took another breath, then tried rolling over and climbing to his hands and knees. He had more success with this. From there, he managed to climb to his feet with the help of the book case. He swayed precariously, but managed to stay upright.

"I think... I should go to the infirmary."

Slowly, but completely under his own power, Harry made his way towards the exit. Snape could only sit there dumbly as he watched his ward's bruised and bloody back disappear down the stairs. Snape heard the entrance grind open and release him out into the halls.

Once alone, he looked around to survey the damage that had been done. His desk was in shambles, most of the paperwork scattered around the floor or else blown into shreds. One of the legs of his chair was broken. The floors were littered with glass, the display case

completely ruined as well as a number of the incomprehensible curios it had contained. Several books, some of them quite rare, had been thrown from the shelves and a marble bookend had fallen and broken in half. His face and back ached from the fight.

He should be angry, he thought. Harry had just attacked him without cause.

He should be scared. Voldemort would punish him if he found out about his carelessness.

He wasn't either. Harry had been foolish, which was hardly new, and had done no permanent harm. It would only take fifteen or twenty minutes to clean up the damage done. It had all been a spell or a ritual that got out of hand, something he should have seen coming himself and he only had himself to blame for not fulfilling his responsibilities by watching him more closely.

He was not afraid Harry would tell Voldemort. Harry rarely told Voldemort much of anything about his private life, and somehow he couldn't imagine this situation would be any different. If his ward felt the need for vengeance over what had happened, which was doubtful, he would dole it out himself.

No, staring at the shambled mess that was his office, Snape felt neither anger nor fear.

He felt shame.

~ Page Break~

"Mr. Potter? Are you awake dear?"

"Hmm...no..."

"Well, when you are the pain relieving potion is on your side table."

Harry opened his eyes. He made a half attempt to sit up, but immediately gave up when pain flared in his back and ribs. Oh, Merlin, he was in the infirmary. Again.

"What?"

"Oh good, you are awake," Madam Pomfrey said, shuffling to his side. Weak sunlight was shining in through the windows, which meant it was already mid-morning. There was a chair at his bedside, but it was empty now. "Your friends already came by earlier this morning. I dare say you will have your hands full explaining yourself to Miss Granger."

"Ugh."

"None of that now. You were in quite a state when you came in last night. You gave my other patient a terrible fright."

"Who?"

"Miss Sabbat. I don't know if you know her. She's a Ravenclaw."

Well, wasn't that just wonderful?

"I know her."

"Well, she left early this morning. How are you feeling?"

"Sore, but I'll live."

"And so you survive yet again." There was a touch of disapproval in her tone, as if she disappointed in his luck. Perhaps she found it frustrating as a professional to have to keep seeing him so often. If he were so intent on hurting himself in dangerous situations, then he should just go ahead and finish it already. "You had some internal injuries so I've had to rely on potions to treat you. They'll make you feel woozy, so I want you to stay here until lunch, and then I'm restricting you to light work for the rest of the weekend."

He did feel woozy and bit hazy too. He was having difficulty remembering what he had done to get there. He remembered performing the spell, lightly cutting his skin over the ward to allow for partial possession that would allow him to communicate with the

moon goddess. He still had a vague memory of what he had learned, but it was hard to focus. How had he gotten hurt?

"Don't look so disappointed. I've probably saved you from some very nasty detentions. Sentinel Seitler said you attacked the headmaster."

Oh... OH!

"Oh no," he groaned, flinging his arm over his face. "He's going to kill me."

"Yes, well, if he's the one responsible for your condition I would say he came very close. A Blasting Spell on someone of your stature, honestly."

While checking him over, she tutted and scoffed about the entire situation, which she didn't have a clue about. Harry wasn't listening to her. He was thinking about the night before, and the bits and pieces of memory that were starting to come back to him. He had gone to Snape, but his intentions weren't clear even to himself. He had asked to see Lucius, but that hadn't been the reason why he had gone. He had wanted to see Snape, needed to in fact, to make sense of what was happening. His emotions were fluctuating between violent anger and loneliness and hysteria, and none of them matched his thoughts which had been solely focused on learning what had happened at the attack of the colony. Had he gone to Snape for answers or to get the man to stop him?

He didn't know anymore and it hadn't gone as he had intended either way. His anger had made him lash out, his loneliness had made him desperate, and his hysteria had only exacerbated an already volatile situation. Merlin, the things he had said. Had he meant any of them? Had it been the hysteria that made him speak nonsense or had it made him speak the truth he never would have admitted even to himself? He didn't think he could look Snape in the eye again after this.

He had attack the man, his guardian for the better part of six years, and drawn blood. The same man had nearly killed him in self-defense.

Where could they go from here?

Pomfrey continued to cluck like a little chicken in his ear, completely oblivious to his obliviousness.

"And if you absolutely must go to Bristol, please refrain from using the floo. You are likely to knock something loose, and I'd rather not have you dropping dead in the street for no seemingly apparent reason."

He turned to her, flinching as he felt something pulled in his neck.

"What? What about Bristol?"

"Oh, the headmaster brought you a note earlier. Something about an appointment with General Malfoy. Where did I put that thing?"

He watched her owlishly as she went to her desk and started shifting things around. She returned few minutes later with a small yellow note. On it was Snape's familiar sharp, elegant script.

'Potter. A meeting has been arranged for Saturday, 10:00am. Remember that General Malfoy is even harder to kill than myself before you do anything stupid. Kinglsey will escort you.- S.S.'

Huh.

That was... unexpected. Why was he...?

He closed his eyes. It didn't matter. The man was still avoiding him, and would likely continue to do so for rest of their mutual lives. It seemed unlikely that this note was an apologetic gesture. More than likely it was short term exile or like St. James had suggested, Snape leaving him to his own devices and letting him reap the consequences.

The thought left him with a lonely feeling.

Or maybe it was just the potions.

~ Page Break~

Voldemort had almost forgotten how much he loved battles. He had been through a few in recent years, but he hadn't enjoyed them as much then when he had a personal stake in the outcome. Battling across a foreign country, surrounded by veritable strangers who would nevertheless throw themselves off a cliff at his command, however, was a great deal of fun. The fact that there were an inordinate number of dead and living bodies available to practice some of his more intense pagan magics and more traditional dark arts was just icing on the cake.

At the moment, he was inspecting a row of prisoners his Romanian allies had captured during a raid near Freiburg. They were scruffy from too many days spent hiding in the surrounding forests, but otherwise in good condition. He stopped before each one, looking for those traits he found most suitable in a sacrifice. They cringed away when he reached out to turn their face or inspect the texture of their hair. They knew what he was doing and why. He had made it a point for every German resistor to know what would happen if he ever caught them.

It helped to whittle down their numbers, even if it did mean the remaining men and women fought twice as hard to keep from being taken.

He stopped in front of a tawny haired witch. She didn't look up at him, but he could feel her anger radiating out. She had some resistance left in her yet.

"This one," he said to a Romanian soldier.

A prisoner further down the line shouted something, but a soldier immediately kicked him to the ground. Voldemort glanced at him curiously, then turned back to the witch. She wasn't particularly pretty, but she was young and her eyes fierce, which he found to be an attractive characteristic.

"Your lover?" he asked.

Her reply to was spit at his feet. Oh well, it wasn't important. His selection made, he thanked the Romanians for their effort and gave them the night off. They really couldn't go anywhere while in enemy territory, but they would be ridiculously grateful for the empty gesture. He returned to his tent, and found Bellatrix laying on his cot, waiting for him.

She was dressed in her uniform, and as always, he found it suited her perfectly. Sharp lines, perfect folds, and an almost sinister quality. The black cloth made the auburn highlights of her hair and the stark redness of her lipstick stand out more vividly. Her lips curved up in the corners when she spotted him, reminding him of younger days when Rudolphus Lestrage had still been alive, and she and her husband would pass a night with him in his bed or in theirs, carving love notes into each others skin with his favorite pen knife.

He had buried the pen knife with Rudolphus, and with it his carnal relations with his wife. It had seemed disrespectful to continue in his absence.

But Bella had been widowed for over a decade now, and as of late he had found himself growing attracted to her again. The fast paced, day-by-day existence of a soldier suited her far more than the bureaucratic shuffle of a politician or the endless drudgery of a headmistress. Every day her senses sharpened, her speed increased, her joy for life and for death grew. Every day she grew more and more into the Valkyrie he had known and lusted after in his younger days.

Maybe later.

There was so much to do. The Romanians required his attention for the time being. They were not on good terms with the Polish and required a little reassurance that they would not be neglected in favor of the more powerful army. As much as the idea of seducing Bella appealed to him, he would be busy enough seducing the Romanian commanders to fall under his leadership. It would not be difficult, but it would require time and care. Their armies commanders were primarily young men of standing with long pureblood lineages, eager

to prove themselves significant in an occupation their fellow countrymen viewed as ineffectual and obsolete.

If he could grant them the pride and purpose their own Minister of Magic was unable to provide, they would become his men and he would welcome them with open arms.

"How did the raid go?" she asked, showing no interest in raising herself from the cot.

"The usual. We should move again tomorrow. I don't like leaving so much distance between us and the border."

She nodded.

"As you wish. You received a message. It was in your scrying bowl."

The scrying bowl was actually a Mariander's Scrying Bowl, which unlike other scrying bowls that only allowed the viewer to look up current or passed events, it allowed for communication between a select number sister bowls. Only half a dozen people held the sister bowls to his own, and all of them were people he trusted with sensitive information.

"Oh? Who is it from?"

"Snape," she said, dismissively, and then preceded to ignore the eager gleam in her master's eyes as he went to his work table. The scrying bowl was a dull bronze on the exterior, but the inside gleamed like the nacreous insides of a clam shell. The message was written out in black ink, brief and to the point. He frowned.

"Something interesting?" his succubus queried, skeptically.

"Lucius might be plotting something against the werewolves. Or Harry. Or both. Snape's being unusually vague. And Harry's moon madness is back."

"As if the full moon was the only time he went mad."

"Don't be jealous, poppet, you'll always be my favorite girl."

She sighed. If only that were true.

"So what are you going to do?"

"I'll have Crouch look into it. I can't afford to leave the Romanians unsupervised just to chase down a rumor, and there doesn't appear to be an immediate threat."

She looked genuinely surprised. Had she really thought he would drop everything just to go and coddle Harry? If that was the case, she really needed to work on her insecurity.

Though to be honest, he would have liked to do just that.

The return of the moon madness was curious to him, and how it might tie into plots against the werewolves was doubly so. It would have to keep for another three weeks. It would take at least that long to completely enamor his allies with his fighting prowess and unnerve the Germans enough to start making mistakes.

It was all a matter of priorities, and for today those required he remained where he was.

What those priorities would be tomorrow, however...

Book VI

Chapter 14: Learning Curve

He left the infirmary with the intent to escape his thoughts, but outside of it he found no sanctuary. Trudy Sabbat had worked quickly. Everyone knew or thought they knew what had happened between Harry and the Headmaster, and it was just like after he demonstrated his parseltongue ability and the day after he held a werewolf on the castle drawbridge. There was awe, curiosity, and disbelief but most of all there was suspicion. A fear that he was dangerous, mad, and different in ways they could only fear.

In the past it made him feel lonely.

It still did, but now he felt resentment too. Resentment from the fact that he really might be dangerous, mad, and different in ways that were to be feared and unlike them he couldn't avoid himself. He came to believe that resentment was a very adult emotion, for he could sense it from several of the teaching staff throughout the day. McGonagall, wane and pale after her recovery from the flu, was down right frosty with him in class, on the verge of saying something scathing, unfair, and completely true at ever turn. When he went to the dining hall for dinner, the teacher's table was divided by emotion towards him. One was anger and the other was pity.

He preferred the anger. Anger never really frightened him, but pity was something that often came too close to breaking him.

Snape wasn't there that night, but that wasn't uncommon so he couldn't have claimed responsibility for it one way or another. He wondered, somewhat reprovngly, what the man's expression would have been.

His table was excessively quiet when he sat down. Yet at the other tables, the talk was excessively loud, and he could hear clearly his name mentioned several times. The eyes he felt on him were like fingers poking at him, rude and irritating, fanning his resentment and frustration. Stubbornness and extreme hunger root him in his seat,

though he wanted nothing more than to just leave and find some place to sleep.

"Harry."

He looked up at Hermione. He had forgotten she was there. She had apparently visited him in the infirmary that morning, but when he saw her that afternoon she hadn't spoken to him at all. He hadn't noticed before, but he was feeling too vulnerable to be anything but self absorbed.

"Yes, Hermione?"

"Are you okay?"

The poking sensation he felt from the stares he was receiving became so intense he found himself cringing. It took him a moment to realize it was his magus hypersentia; that all that concentration was purposelessly directing magic at him and the sensation was less than pleasant.

"Can we talk about this later?"

She glanced around them, and Harry could feel the stares lighten immediately.

"Sure. The library?"

"I have an appointment with Vector," he said, almost happy to speak of something that didn't center around his screw up.

"I'll walk you there. You're not in any condition to do intense research right now."

He felt a stab of annoyance.

"I'm not broken."

She met his irritation with a bit of her own, her eyes flashing.

"Madam Pomfrey might disagree."

He looked down at his plate and they didn't speak a word until they are both done. They stood and made their way out of the Great Hall. Ginny grabbed his hand as he passed, squeezing it in unspoken support. Across the table, Clyde gave him a wane smile. He tried smiling back, but it was weak and unconvincing and he knew it.

When they were relatively alone in the corridors, Hermione cast a Silencing charm around them.

"Can you tell me if you are alright, now?" she asked.

He thought for a moment.

"I guess that depends on your definition of 'alright'."

She let out an impatient sigh.

"Just tell me what happened."

"...I made a mistake during the ritual I was doing. It went very bad. I wasn't... completely in control. I went to Snape to get some answers and... we fought. And then... then we really fought. I don't really remember all that much. I think I took myself to the infirmary afterward."

Her eyes widened.

"You walked there yourself?"

"Yeah... why?"

"Merlin, Harry, you were half dead! You shouldn't have been able to stand, let alone walk. Are you sure Severus didn't take you?"

"...I guess he must have then. I don't remember that clearly."

Hermione had been wearing her hair down lately, the loose mane of curls making a perfect target for her frustration as she ran her hands

through it, pulling and tugging at the locks harshly as she did so. Taking deep breathes did nothing to calm her, if anything it only seemed to fan the flames of her anger.

"Why did you do it in the first place, Harry? Why do you always do this?"

He frowned at her.

"Do what? I didn't ask for this to happen! It was an accident!"

"Oh, please! It was an accident? Like the werewolf possession was an accident? Like being kidnapped by Durmstang was an accident? Like being trapped in the castle with that psycho Moody was an accident? The acumantula? The duel with McNair? The bloody fucking dragon? God, Harry! How many accidents can you have before you start realizing there is something you are doing that causes these things to happen?"

Harry stood there, completely stunned. His eyes widened, his jaw dropped. Slowly, his hand lifted to point a finger at her. His voice was tight, almost shrill as he spoke.

"You think all of that was my fault? That I did it on purpose? That I'm some sort of crazy attention-seeker?"

It was her turn to look stunned.

"No! That's not what I said and not what I-"

"FUCK YOU!" he screamed.

The magic around him suddenly fluctuated violently, shattering the silencing charm around them. His words echoed up and down the corridor and then back again, over and over until they finally faded. Hermione gasped as she felt it push against her, felt it like boiling water against her skin. She gave soft, frightened whimper and he recoiled as violently as he had lashed out, and with him his magic receded and disappeared.

He turned and strode away, nearly running. She didn't dare follow him.

~ Page Break~

Harry fled to Vector's office, practically shouted the password and ducted inside. Vector wasn't there; just a pile of books on the edge of her desk baring familiar titles. Harry hadn't meant to scare her. He hadn't. It had been an accid- He felt his hands clench in anger. She would think he had done it on purpose. Because apparently Harry Potter didn't have accidents. Everything that ever went wrong in his life was his own fault, something he had done or never learned or did intentionally.

Well, maybe that was true. Maybe he had wanted to scare her and part of him was crowing victoriously that he had. How dare she say that to him? Was that what she really thought? Had she thought that way about him all along?

His anger was deliciously invigorating. The guilty, anxious malaise that had followed him from the infirmary was burned to cinders under the heat of his righteous indignation at a seemingly limitless persecution. He was sick of it. He was sick of being vulnerable to those who caused his grief and being under the scrutiny of witless gawkers, especially if they weren't going to do anything about it except make asinine comments and ignorant theories.

He had never wanted to be Voldemort, and honestly he still didn't, but he couldn't help but think longingly of the Dark Lord's independent self-assurance. For all his moral shortcomings, who could boast a clearer conscience? He regretted nothing he did, he was fearless in the wake of others' judgment, and psychologically immune to criticism. Harry longed to know what that felt like.

There was a knock on the door.

He jumped, his wand flicking into his hand instantly. He put it back just as quickly. There was no threat. It was probably just a student wanting to ask Vector questions about some Arithmancy homework.

He didn't know where she was at the moment, so he didn't answer the door and resolved to ignore it in favor of stewing in his own anger.

"I know you're in there, Potter. I can feel your angst through the door," came Ron's smug voice.

The Gryffindor let out an annoyed sigh. Oh, lovely. The universe decided his day wasn't shitty enough so they had to through in one of the biggest shits of all. Well, at least he could verbally abuse Ron with a clear conscious. He opened the door.

"How did you know I was here?" he asked shortly.

"I followed the screaming echoes. I think Snape heard you from his office."

"Snape can drop dead."

The made the youngest Weasley son grin.

"I find myself thinking the same thing from time to time. Did you at least get in a few good hits before he creamed you?"

"Of course," he snapped shortly. He felt some how dirty saying it, but it was better than feeling as useless and stupid as he had before. Ron's grin turned to a smirk, and he checked the hall one more time before slipping inside. He moved around Harry and went straight to the desk, his hand finding the red book instantly. The triumph in his eyes made the other boy want to punch him.

"Bloody hell, you really did it. You really got it. How?"

Harry waved the question away as irrelevant. Ron was the first person who seemed to be completely unaffected by his fight with Snape, and if the Slytherin was willing to ignore it then he decided he was willing enough to waste some time in his company. He had decided before that he was going to help Ron, and there still wasn't any reason why he should change his mind.

"It doesn't matter. Just show me which spell you used."

Quickly skimming the contents, Ron found what he was looking for and handed the open book to Harry, who read through it quickly. He snapped the book shut and slapped Ron in the back of the head sharply with it.

"Ow! Merlin, what was that for?"

"You bloody moron! What were you thinking using a spell like that?"

"Sshhh! Are you stupid? Stop shouting!" He threw up a silencing charm. "I was thinking it was powerful, untraceable, and barely detectable. Oh, and that it was a miserable way to die."

The cold vitriol in Ron's voice was humbling. Harry's own anger felt paltry in comparison. He shook his head.

"Do you have any idea the level of skill this type of spell requires? What made you think you could pull this off?"

Ron blinked.

"Could you do it?"

"No. Frankly, I couldn't. I wouldn't. It's a wretched spell. It screws around with lei lines, so you're not only messing with the victim but everyone else around him including yourself."

The vengeful boy's face suddenly lost its smugness, and with it a lot of its color.

"Can you undo it? There's a counter spell."

Harry stared at him for a long moment and then down at the book. He opened it to the counter curse.

"The counter curse is only intended to undo the spell after it's been properly performed. I don't know if it will work if the spell is messed up. It might make things worse or change the outcome of the spell. I

honestly don't know enough about lei lines... Maybe if we remove the curse's influence, the lei lines will right themselves."

"Maybe?"

"Yes! MAYBE! I don't know. If you know someone else you want to ask be my guest!"

Ron fell silent then finally shook his head.

"I guess... we should try removing the curse then. I mean, that's the big thing. That's what is killing me. If it does something else, we can figure it out later."

Harry decided not to point out that 'we' would not find out anything. He had no intention of devoting his life to solving Ron's screw up. Saving his life was causing him enough of a headache as it was.

"Fine. Then take this," he handed Ron the book, "And make a list of supplies we'll need, and get it to me before breakfast. I'm going to Bristol tomorrow and this might be the only opportunity we have to pick up supplies for a while."

"You're going to Bristol? Why?"

"None of your damn business."

"Geez, sorry I asked! You're in a pissier mood than usual. I guess Pomfrey ain't giving you the good stuff."

"Ron. Stop. Talking."

The boy saluted him obediently. Harry felt his hand twitching for his wand.

"After you've made that list, I want you to do some research on lei lines. There should be plenty of books about them under magical theory in the library. Try to get an idea of what they might do when they're messed around with."

Ron remained standing at attention in a salute. The Gryffindor rolled his eyes.

"Alright, dismissed."

The hand came down, and the Slytherin marched skillfully out of the office with the book slipped into the folds of his robes. Harry tried to tell himself that he was not amused by his antics, and he was not and never had been funny to even the tinniest degree. He was a stupid, conceited, murderous bastard who just happened to be related to some of his favorite people, and therefore he would try to save.

He wasn't that desperate for friends.

Even if he seemed to have fewer and fewer with each passing day.

~ Page Break~

Harry armed himself like he was preparing for battle before he went to Bristol. He donned his neglected black and silver uniform, thankful the weather had turned cool enough to make it a comfortable and practical choice. He wore his armor as well, and slipped a spare wand into his left sleeve and a knife in his back pocket. His glasses were left behind, and he relied on a potion to keep his eyesight clear. He carried a bottle of anxiety potion and another dose of potion for his eyes in unbreakable vials on the interior of his boots and Ron's list of supplies and silver sickles to buy them with in his pocket.

Kingsley and Seitler eyed him warily when he stepped outside of the castle to meet his escort. His reputation for trouble was well established, but the fact that he was obviously expecting it in some capacity was in no way comforting. They could do nothing to stop him, however. He had Headmaster Snape's permission if not his blessing.

The journey to Bristol was silent. They took the Hogwarts Express, which had been re-routed from London to the nation's military capitol, without saying a word to each other. Harry had wrapped himself in a cloak of anger and Kingsley had sensed it immediately and resolved not to provoke it.

The boy frightened him sometimes.

As they stepped off the train in Bristol, Harry schooled his face into something less fierce. People on the street recognized him immediately, and watched him pass with stunned disbelief as he strode briskly by. Soldiers stopped in their tracks and saluted him, despite the fact that he technically wasn't active military anymore. He didn't waste energy trying to correct them. It made his arrival at headquarters that much simpler as he passed security check point after security check point without pausing, setting off alarms as he went but with no one there willing to pull rank to stop him.

Kingsley knew exactly where Lucius' office was, which struck Harry as suspicious but helpful in this instance as he did not have to stop to inquire for directions. He only vaguely recognized the secretary behind the desk. She was thinner and more harried-looking than he remembered, and she jumped up in her chair when he entered the outer office.

"Ambassador Potter!" she said in alarm. "You're early! Ah, just a minute pl-"

He ignored her, threw up a shield charm, and threw open Lucius' door. It slammed open with a horrible racket, and predictably a curse bounced off his shield the moment he stepped inside. Kingsley shouted in alarm.

"Are you mad, Potter?"

"Undoubtedly!" the boy shouted back, and slammed the door shut behind, locking the man out.

Lucius was behind his desk, and if his secretary looked harried it was nothing compared to her boss who looked down right haggard. Harry found himself stunned by his appearance. He was gaunt, and shadowed, and there was a skeletal quality to him that was not helped by the paleness of his features. His eyes, however, were the same sharp gray, and they tore into Harry the second he stepped into his domain and pulled him up short.

"I don't suppose lessons in manners are a Hogwarts requirement these days. I will have to have a word with the Education Board later," he said smoothly. His wand was not drawn, and it took Harry a second to realize there was another man in the room who must have cast the spell.

The second man wore a lieutenant's insignia and had an indistinct chin. His wand work was impressive at least, although he looked about ready to fall over dead for having sent a curse at him. Lucius gave the man an annoyed look.

"Relax, Stratus, no one gives a damn. Go make us some tea or something."

The man 'Stratus' looked between them uncertainly for a moment, but finding no welcome from either of them, finally nodded and moved out of the room quickly. Harry kept his eyes glued to his adversary. Seeing his enemy was as energetically mean-spirited as ever drained what ever inkling of pity and shock that might have first occurred.

"So you finally managed to make some time for me in your ever so busy schedule," the Malfoy patriarch said sarcastically. "To what do I owe the honor?"

Harry glared at him.

"Maybe your time would be better served convincing yourself that I'm not stupid, and I will make the effort to return the favor. I know about the attack on the werewolf colony in Aoinwig."

Lucius did not seem the least bit impressed with this.

"Oh, and what do you know about the attack in Aoinwig?"

"I know you had nothing to do with it, but you are going to try to convince me that you did."

The man stiffened. Bull's-eye.

"It seems I have underestimated you yet again. How did you come to know this? What little bird has been whispering in your ear?"

"One you would be hard-pressed to throw in Azkaban or toss a cruciatus at, I assure you. My question is why you would even try? Why make an enemy of me, Malfoy?"

The aristocrat's expression turned condescending.

"I have no intention of making an enemy of you, Potter. Quite the opposite. But if there is one thing I can't stand, it's to be ignored. I don't have the patience for it, and frankly, I don't have the time for it either. We should have resolved this months ago."

"Resolved what? You wanting to turn me into your lap poodle?"

"You didn't seem to mind being the Dark Lord's."

If Lucius thought that would provoke the boy he was soon disappointed when Harry let out a harsh, barking laugh instead.

"Yes, look at what an obedient and well trained little pup I am. I come, sit, stay, roll over, and play dead at just a snap of his fingers," he laughed.

Lucius had to admit, he had him there. Whatever relationship was shared between his Master and Potter was not like the one between his Master and himself. Obedience was preferred, but had never been a prerequisite between those two. Affection was a word he didn't like to use, but it hung in the air nonetheless.

"You don't have even the slightest inkling of what that man is capable of."

Harry's amusement died instantly.

"I know enough about him not to confuse him with a man at all."

Lucius almost smiled. He thought he could almost like this Gryffindor, if he could get over this intense desire to throttle him. For the time

being, however, he needed him, and knowing that made what he was attempting that much harder. He didn't have time to win him over. That he could try later. Right now, he needed Potter's cooperation; willing or unwilling was unimportant.

"Will you fight me forever?"

"Will you make me?"

"Always a quippy little come back, but I am asking you seriously. Will you fight me? For what? What do you fear will happen if we should become allies?"

Harry looked at him solidly for a long moment, not saying a word.

"Allies? I am not afraid to be your ally, but that's not what you want. You want a dog or a puppet, or just about anything that all you have to do is pull a string and it leaps to your command. The first sign of disobedience and you'll strangle me with that string, and I'll only have myself to blame for handing it to you in the first place."

The headache that was forever present in Lucius' life was slowly degrading into a full out migraine. The light in the office was too intense and his stomach rolled in protest. He had resolved not to take a drink today, anticipating Potter's arrival and sobriety was making him that much more aware of his own rapidly deteriorating condition. His normally rapid mind felt sluggish, and the idea that he was being outwitted by a Gryffindor teenager was almost beyond endurance.

"Don't be melodramatic. It serves no purpose for me to hurt you or even to subjugate you. Lord Voldemort would never allow it for one thing. Has he not promised to protect you from me? And I from you? We are contemporaries, and while I am loathe to say it, there is much more we could accomplish together than we could apart."

"Like what?"

"Like recruitment for the army for one. The number of applicants has started to wane. Their enthusiasm for the war effort is diminishing."

"My enthusiasm for the war effort is diminishing too."

Lucius ignored him.

"We may not have the numbers we need to maintain our hold on to Germany after they are defeated and continue our offense on the Italian front. I have done what I can, but my influence is limited to the upper crust of our society. You have an appeal to the general masses that the Dark Lord and I need for our plans to take fruit."

"Well, bully for you two. How am I supposed to benefit from encouraging some poor gullible saps to join the Culties and get blown to bits?"

"Simple enough. You use your influence with the plebeians on my behalf and I will use my influence with the aristocracy on your behalf. Think of it Potter. The full restoration of the House of Potter, full rights to your family vault, to your position on the Wizengamot, to the ancestral estates that are your birthright. Now imagine all of that wealth and privilege doubled... tripled... before you ever reach the age of thirty. You and your descendents will have the means to protect your precious werewolves from the vagaries of societal opinion indefinitely. All whom you love and care for will want for nothing. You will have the power to lead nations to glory and your enemies to ruin without ever having to lift your wand. Together, the Houses of Malfoy and Potter can become the greatest powerhouse Britain has ever seen short of the Dark Lord himself."

As he spoke, Harry seemed to listen for once. He listened and followed along, neither speaking nor expressing resistance with his body language. It was as if he were falling under a spell, a spell Lucius had weaved many times in the past and now at his most desperate had to stoop to doing once again. Then Harry blinked and leaned back into his chair.

"If what you're saying is true... then call off Hermione's engagement."

Lucius blinked.

"What?"

"Call. Off. The. Engagement."

"No. What does that have to do with anything?"

"Because according to you, 'all whom I love and care for will want for nothing'. I rather thought that might include the want to not marry an abusive, racist bastard. Don't tell me you didn't think we wouldn't be negotiating this point."

Why did the term 'migraine' and 'Hermione' seem to go together so well?

"I honestly don't know why you care so much. You're not in love with her."

"And you don't love her, which is why I don't expect you to understand. What do you care if I ask for this? What do you lose by calling it off? It's still over six months to the set date, so it's not like you can be sued or anything."

Lucius was startled. What did Potter know about the arrangements he had made? It didn't matter. It wasn't something he was going to forget about. Hermione had been a thorn in his side for too long, and her ungrateful defiance would be met with the punishment it deserved. The sooner she was separated from Draco, and from Potter too, the sooner he would be able to gain their good will. If she stayed, she would only serve to inspire distrust and resentment against him.

He couldn't say that to Potter of course.

He needed something else to tempt the boy with.

He thought about it for a minute, and came up totally blank. Which was impossible. He was never short of ideas or manipulations or games. His mind was a constant churning machine. It never stopped and it never stalled.

But God it was hard to think right now.

He needed time to think. The soft tap at his door was almost too good to be true.

"Enter." Lt. Stratus opened the door cautiously, carrying a tea set. The imbecile had actually taken him seriously and done as he was told. He could work with this. "I need a moment to think about this," he told Harry. "Wait here. Have some tea. I will be back shortly with an answer for you."

Potter looked predictably suspicious, but nodded. Good, let the boy think he was willing to seriously consider his demand. It would help establish the illusion that they were equals. He turned to his assistant.

"Stay here and keep Lord Potter company, Lt. Stratus."

Which was polite talk for 'keep him from snooping around my office'. He stepped out, passing his secretary and the Sentinel whose name escaped him without a glance. He had twenty minutes, thirty if he pushed it, but either way he needed to come up with ideas and possibly get rid of his migraine.

Strong liquor was usually effective, but that wasn't a source he could trust. According to his private physician, the alcohol might serve to alleviate some of the pain, but it also sped up his physical and mental deterioration. His physician had told him a lot of things, except why he was dying.

Oh, he had theories.

Accumulated magical poisoning from too many Dark Arts rituals or proximity to Dark Artifacts. A genetic defect. A esoteric spell cast on him from his youth left untreated for too long. All of it rubbish. The only useful bit of information that he had received was that what ever it was it was killing him, it was the result of dark arts, and it had been in affect for a long time; months at least, maybe even years.

And if he had not spoken to that mysterious raven, he never would have known to look for anything until it was too late. That the raven had also said it was the Dark Lord who was killing him was not something he could afford to ignore.

Which meant the raven might be his only reliable ally at the moment.

~ Page Break~

Bobby didn't fly that day. He hadn't flown the day before either or the day before that. Aside from a little fluttering to move from branch to branch to bird feeder, he hadn't moved much at all over the last several days. His daily exercises had stopped, and he had finally resigned himself to the fact that he wasn't ever going to leave his prison unless the Dark Lord released him from it.

He had not yet descended into madness, at least he didn't think so, but he was getting very close to cursing the gods, which was one of the first signs. Cursing gods was good way to go insane. They didn't appreciate criticism from their subjects, and Raecellos and Madris were no exception.

What he had descended into was a deep, dark depression. Whatever intentions he had had of saving the soul of his brother a second time had been squandered, and he had potentially ruined himself in the process. How long before the Dark Lord tired of having him as his prisoner? How long before he was just another sacrifice or something to be traded to the fairies who prized him so in exchange for some magical bauble? He almost found himself looking forward to it; anything to end his ceaseless boredom.

As it turned out, he did not have to leave his prison or wait for the Dark Lord to drive him out of his funk. Relief came unexpectedly in the form of Lucius Malfoy charging into his domain.

For a moment, Bobby thought he was dreaming. He plucked a feather from his wing to feel the twinge of pain that assured him was indeed awake. Quickly, he flew down to where the man was looking about for him in obvious anxiety. He landed heavily on the tea table (a replacement since Lucius had destroyed the last one), his body not yet able to shake the full extent of his days of inactivity. He cursed himself for having so little faith. Raecellos had always been a generous god, and he had given him a second chance to earn his freedom.

He would not mess it up a second time.

"You are back. Have you come to realize the truth, then?" he said, affecting a knowing voice that belied his own uncertainty.

Lucius did not look much worse than the last time he had seen him, but he didn't look any better either. About the only improvement he could find was the man wasn't drunk as a pickle at this point. He was obviously suffering from pain of some sort however, judging by the way he flinched at the mere sound of his voice. The aristocrat leveled a resentful glare at the raven.

"Yes... I... yes. You were right."

"And what are you doing about it now?"

And how does it involve me?

"I am... working on it. In fact, I am need of some advice."

The man grimaced, but whether it was from pain or his distaste at asking for help, Bobby couldn't be certain.

"Perhaps I can be of assistance, although nothing is free."

"I cannot free you. Lord Voldemort would kill me."

"Lord Voldemort is already killing you."

"And he is taking his time, which means he may not be totally committed to the plan. I... if I can give him proper incentive to let me live..."

"What incentive? You don't even know why he's killing you in the first place."

"Do you?" the man asked, obviously curious. Bobby remained silent. Let him interpret it how he wanted. When no answer was forthcoming, he continued. "I have a plan, but it requires an alliance with Potter.

Something I am having some difficulty acquiring."

Bobby found himself momentarily caught off guard. Harry? What did Harry have to do with all of this? Was he here? Now? If he was here, if he could speak with him, let him know he was being held prisoner... what? He didn't know, but it seemed imperative that he find him immediately.

"Hhhmmm... an alliance with Potter? Against the Dark Lord? Are they fighting already?"

"Don't be daft. They are as smitten with each other as ever. Which is why an alliance with Potter may be just what I need to dissuade the Dark Lord from his present course."

A wonderful idea popped into raven's head, one that might not only free Bobby but bring him back to Harry once again.

"Ah. Yes, very clever. And apropos, as Potter may be the only one aside from the Dark Lord who can break the curse."

Lucius's eyes, which had been clouded with pain, suddenly sharpened on him.

"What? I thought you said you could break the curse?"

"I can... with a bit of help. I know the spell, but I am no wizard. Potter, however, has the skills necessary to perform it... under my instruction... which is somewhat difficult from my current vantage point."

The man began to pace, fidgeting in a frantic way that made the raven suspect his lucidity was beginning to slip away from him. He couldn't afford that. If Lucius couldn't keep his wits about him, all of this would be for nothing.

"I can do something for you now... as a show of good faith."

Lucius paused, and gave him an uncertain look.

"What?"

"I can ease some of your symptoms. I haven't the ability to cure you without help, but I can alleviate some of your suffering."

"How?"

Carefully, Bobby plucked a feather from each wing and one from his tail. It hurt, but it was a small price to pay if it would gain his freedom.

"Take these feathers and hold him in your fist tightly."

If he had been in the right state of mind, Lucius would not have been so quick to pick up the feathers or at the very least he would have cast detection spells to make sure they were not somehow harmful. At the moment, however, his mind was in agony and rusting away by inches.

He snatched up the feathers instantly and gripped them tightly.

Immediately, the feathers began to dissolve like paper left smoldering at the edges until they were nothing more than ash. Lucius let out a small gasp.

The pain was gone. His mind felt clear and sharp again. He was immediately suspicious.

"What did you do?"

"I absorbed some of the magic killing you. It will come back eventually, but for a while you should feel quite good."

"And you say you are no wizard?"

"Not in this life at least."

Lucius considered this for a moment, then turned his thoughts to more immediate concerns. If the raven spoke truth, and it seemed he had so far, then Potter could cure him and he would not need to hope

the Dark Lord would simply change his mind. However, that wouldn't solve the problem of his Master wanting him dead. For that, he would still need his alliance with Potter. A barrier between him and the other man. Perhaps he could pretend he knew nothing of Lord Voldemort's intentions, and that an alliance had sprung up between him and Potter when the boy saved him. Could he convince Harry to save him? Absolutely, he thought, I just wish I knew how.

He asked the raven.

The raven thought a moment and gave him an answer.

"Potter is a very predictable creature in a lot of ways. If you show him your teeth, he will show you his and fight you to the death. If you show him your belly, he will feel inclined to rub it."

"I am not following you."

"You are man who is constantly showing his teeth, Malfoy. He fights you because you are aggressive and dangerous. Show him your vulnerability, show him you are dying, and he will take pity on you."

"I do not need his pity," Lucius snarled.

Bobby laughed.

"Yes, you do. You need it, because you need him and that is the only way you will have him."

The man sneered but didn't deny. He paced the room a few times as he considered it, then stopped.

"He has a demand. He wants to call off my foster daughter's betrothal."

"Then call it off."

"NO!"

Startled by the savagery of the denial, Bobby leaped away and flew for the sanctuary of the surrounding foliage. By the time he had reached it, Lucius had already composed himself again.

"Why not?"

"She.... She will only turn him against me. Just as she has turned my son against me."

"You do that by proving every foul thing she holds against you to be true. Release the girl. Without her, he may be less defensive. Are there any other reasons he would be so solidly against you?"

"... Not that I can think of, but then he is a Gryffindor. He may hold a grudge for perceived wrongs."

"Yes, because that is a wholly Gryffindor trait," the raven muttered under his breath. Out loud he said, "Consider it a trade then. If he will save your life, you will free the girl."

"That will not secure an alliance between us."

"You cannot force an alliance with Potter. If he doesn't want to do something he won't. Make a friend of him, however reluctant, and he is yours. That is how the Dark Lord keeps him."

Lucius considered that. Was that the secret to his Master's relationship with Potter? Friendship? If it was a friendship, then it wasn't like any Lucius had ever known before. They seemed quite near killing each other on several occasions and close as brothers on others; fighting and laughing and manipulating each other in equal measure. It was borderline deranged, and yet made a strange sort of sense.

Could he mimic such a thing? How would it even work?

Sloppily, he thought, but maybe there was a strength to the inherent flexibility of it. It was a relationship that changed according to circumstance, but always fell back into its original shape eventually. It

was would require a quick mind and convincing wit, but he could do it. He could beguile Potter if he had to.

It might actually be sort of fun. Could he perhaps turn the boy against Hermione? Against Severus, who had proven himself a poor friend indeed as of late? Maybe against the Dark Lord himself?

The possibilities tickled at his brain.

They had been at odds for a while now, but there was nothing that couldn't be undone. He had years ahead of him to lure Potter into companionable compliance. What he had told the boy was not altogether false. He could definitely use him at his side, and in strengthening him he could strengthen himself and his family.

"We will see. I will test your theory, and if it holds true... then perhaps something can be worked out between us as well."

Ravens couldn't smile, but had Lucius been able to see Bobby at that moment, he would have seen one supremely satisfied bird.

~ Page Break~

Harry had expected to spend the next however many minutes in awkward silence or stilted conversation with the lieutenant, but the man turned out to be an excellent conversationalist. It had only taken him one failed attempt and a little probing to find a topic of mutual interest.

The campaign in Germany was a subject Harry often found himself distracted by, but there was little information to be gathered at Hogwarts and while he had more opportunities than most to gather information, he never felt adequately up to date. Stratus had been on the fighting lines from the invasion of Berlin and on up until he was transferred to headquarters that summer, and new not only what battles and operations were going on at any given moment but what the soldiers themselves were experiencing out in the field. He even had a few bits of information about Voldemort's movements in Germany and his recent successes there.

Harry thought he could listen to Stratus talk all day about the war, but Lucius Malfoy had other plans. He had only been gone for about half a hour, but whatever he had been doing had been to his benefit. He was still much too thin, but his skin was no longer overly pale and there was more energy to his step than when he had left before.

"Leave us, Stratus."

The lieutenant stared at his commanding officer, more taken back than Harry himself by the sudden change. Lucius gave him an irritated glare, and the man scrambled to his feet.

"It was good speaking with you, Ambassador," he said politely, his gaze flitting nervously between them.

"Likewise," Harry said. "Perhaps we'll have a chance to continue later."

"I-"

"Out Stratus." Malfoy said shortly. The man left.

Harry looked at him and waited. The general stood beside his desk and stared back, assessing him for several moments. Then he turned away and started to roll up his left sleeve. At first, Harry thought he was going to show him his Dark Mark, something he had only seen in books, but there was nothing but some old battle scars on his forearm.

He held out his arm to Harry.

"I am told you have advanced magus hypersentia. I want you to touch my arm and tell me what it feels like to you."

Harry just stared at him.

"What are you playing at?"

"I want us to have an understanding, Potter, because after everything I've tried I think that is the only way to get what I want... what I need from you. My arm, if you would."

He looked back to the man's arm. It seemed a perfectly normal arm to him, but then why...? Only one way to find out. He reached out to touch it, and immediately withdrew his hand and the rest of his body at the disgusting feeling rolled over him, moving to the other side of the room.

Maggoty meat. He knew that sensation. He had felt it on one other before.

He was going to kill Ron.

"Yes, it is quite unpleasant, isn't it? I am told by my physician I only have two or three months left to live and only half of that with my sanity intact."

Harry wanted to wash his hands, but all he could do was rub them against the sides of his trousers, trying to remove the dirty feeling that had nothing to do with germs. His mind raced in circles of 'why's and 'how's and 'what now's.

"Why are you telling me this? Why now?"

"I told you already... I need you. The medi-wizards are useless. You are perhaps the only one I know who has the ability to undo this."

Harry shook his head.

"Voldemort could easily..." He stopped. "You think Voldemort did this to you, don't you?"

Lucius said nothing, but his silence was answer enough.

Well, that was unexpected. Lucius thought the Dark Lord was trying to kill him? Why? He supposed that didn't matter. What did matter was that he had Malfoy on something, something he couldn't or wouldn't go to their unofficial referee over. But why would he reveal such an obvious weakness when he had gone to such lengths to gain Harry's services by other means?

"So you want me to save your life," he said slowly, "I think that is at least worth calling off Hermione's betrothal."

There was really no reason for him to tell Lucius that his problem would likely be cleared up soon anyway. Once he performed the counter curse for Ron, then the man would likely recover as well. No harm, no foul, and Hermione got off scot free. Except for the fact that he was still pissed off at her.

Lucius grimaced, and made an annoyed motion Harry interpreted as 'fine'.

The Gryffindor wanted to laugh and shout with glee, but something told him it wasn't going to be that simple. Not with Malfoy.

"What's the catch?"

Rolling down his sleeve, the man moved to the other side of the desk, the gesture an unspoken reestablishment of boundaries and rank. He took a deep breathe. The worst of it was over now. He had shown his belly, and Potter hadn't kicked it yet.

"There is no point in saving my life if the Dark Lord wishes to take it. I need you to convince him that you want to keep me around, perhaps find out why he is displeased with me to begin with."

Considering Harry didn't think Voldemort was trying to kill him, that made his job exceptionally easy. That didn't mean he was going to do it for free, however.

"I can do that, I think, but I want you to take care of the colony in Aoinwig. The culprits were never arrested."

Lucius shrugged.

"Not my fault. The werewolves were uncooperative. They do not trust my people, and refused to give testimony."

"Then allow me to go to Ireland and speak with them. They will speak to me."

"Are you so sure? I heard you were out of favor at the moment."

"Out of favor, but I never lost my rank. They will answer to me unless Sirius has told them not to."

"Perhaps, but you are not allowed in Ireland."

Harry blinked.

"What?"

"Didn't you know? The Dark Lord has forbade that you enter Ireland except in his company. Something about faeries."

Harry recalled his last visit to Ireland and the remains of the little village of Dunnan Hill, where he had rescued the little girl from the creature that had tried to drag her into its own realm within a hill. Snape had warned him that the fae there would be targeting him now, and it seemed Voldemort took this concern seriously even if Harry hadn't.

And still didn't.

"I won't tell him if you don't."

Lucius looked at him as if he were insane.

"What?"

"You do love running into danger don't you?"

How many accidents can you have before you start realizing there is something you are doing that causes these things to happen?

Oh. Perhaps that was what Hermione had meant. In retrospect, he had probably overreacted. Which meant...ugh... apologizing.

"If you want to send some help along with me, I won't object. A single squadron for a little half a day mission?"

Lucius considered. He did not like the idea of going against Voldemort's orders. If the Dark Lord found out he could use it as an excuse to... Then again, Voldemort was in Germany and unlikely to return any time soon. Doing this mission for Harry... with Harry behind the Dark Lord's back might be the first step in forging that 'friendship' Bobby had been referring to.

What, honestly, was the risk?

Despite local fears, faeries were not known for being particularly brave. Their modus operandi typically involved mortals that were alone and in some way vulnerable. A lost traveler in an unfamiliar wood. A child who wandered too far afield. A maiden who was too trusting of a handsome stranger in the dead of night. Attacking a group of armed witches and wizards was almost unheard of.

"Very well, I will assign some of my men to escort and guard you. You seem to like Stratus well enough, so he'll be in charge. Do as he says at all times or... I'll cruciatus him."

Harry gave him a startled look.

"Why would you punish him for me acting up?"

"Because you're a Gryffindor. Threatening you is pointless. Threatening innocent bystanders is much more effective."

Harry had to admit he had him there. He was a sick and twisted bastard, but he knew what he was talking about. There was no point in arguing over it though. He didn't have any intention of disobeying Stratus. The man would be there to protect him after all.

"Alright, then, General Malfoy. You can have your bloody alliance."

~ Page Break~

Once a course of action had been decided, it only took about forty minutes for Lt. Stratus to select his soldiers and prepare the necessary paperwork. Harry followed him about from place to place,

eager to be away from Lucius, and peppered him and Kingsley with questions. Bureaucracy wasn't something he had to deal with often, so to watch it play out before him in such explicit detail was simultaneously educational and daunting. Visits from one filing cabinet to another, from office to office, department to department, building to building, and always a never ending kaleidoscope of colored forms marching across Stratus' line of sight where ever they went. Harry couldn't imagine how it could possibly be efficient and why all the papers and offices were even necessary.

"It's so everything is known," Kingsley said with a tired expression, as they made their way to the barracks. "And so no one knows everything."

"I don't understand," Harry said.

"Well, pretty much everything that is done in the Culties or the Sentinels is written down somewhere. And once its written down it all gets sorted into levels of clearance. The higher your rank, the higher your clearance, and the more papers you can look at so the more you know. Even then, no one really has clearance to everything. There are some things even General Malfoy isn't allowed to look at."

"Really? What about Lord Voldemort?"

"Theoretically, I guess he can look at whatever he wants."

"Theoretically?"

"I doubt it very much that everything the Dark Lord would like to know about ever reaches his desk. A lot of careers, and a lot of lives for that matter, rely on making sure he never finds out what monumental screw ups are occurring right under his nose."

Harry frowned. Did that mean there were things going on amongst Britain's fighting forces that the Dark Lord would disapprove of? It would be ridiculous to expect perfection, but what mistakes were grave enough to cost someone their life if Lord Voldemort ever found out about them?

"Now, now, Sentinel Kingsley," Stratus chided, "You are giving the Ambassador a very poor image of our leadership. I assure you, all things considered, we have some of the finest men and women serving on the country's behalf."

There was a teasing quality to man's voice that made Harry think he was being ironic, but he couldn't for life of him think of what the joke could be.

The barracks was the last part of their journey and the shortest. It consisted only of Stratus handing the squadron commander a slip of paper containing his orders and then waiting the minute and half for the rest of the squad to grab whatever they needed and to fall into formation. Then it was back to the train depot.

Harry had ridden in military transport trains before, but the train they filed into was not one he was familiar with. It was shiny, glittering black mass of iron plating and black smoke, with one massive engine and only three equally heavy armored black cars. He estimated that it easily weighed twice as much as regular train, and as he stepped inside the first car he could feel the protective magic curl around him. The inside was almost completely bare, with only a handful of crates set about for seating.

"She isn't completed yet," Stratus explained, looking about with some pride. "The Minotaur is a military prototype. She is exclusively designed for war zone transportation. The enemy can tear up the tracks or put a mountain in front of her or cast a thousand blasting spells and you'll barely feel a bump. She is a true monster."

Harry ran his hands along the edge of a window and let himself feel it. The magic was both ancient and modern, and bordered on sentient. Blood had been spilled in her creation, but it was by a creator both proud and benevolent. She was no monster; she was a guardian to all who stepped inside of her from all that stood outside. He felt strangely at ease.

"She's brilliant."

When everyone was loaded onto the train, twelve Culties plus Harry and Kingsley altogether, they secured the doors and the train began to move. Despite The Minotaur's enormous bulk, it was faster than a normal train and they were outside the station in only few seconds and rapidly gaining speed. The other soldiers loitered anxiously about the empty car for a moment, but finding nothing of interest inside and that the higher ranking individuals in the car were ignoring them they finally settled down on the floor of the car or on one of the few available crates.

Harry remained standing at a nearby window, which consisted of an empty square over which a heavy iron plate could be slid over or off. The lack of glass was probably for defense purposes, but he enjoyed the feel of the cool autumn wind in his face and cityscape zipping by. Wizarding Bristol gave way to the muggle part of the city in a blink of the eye, men and women in business suits and little cars and bicycles springing up around them as they leaped the track and entered the street. Completely ignoring the laws of traffic and physics, they hurled through the city, somehow avoiding collision or notice by anything or anyone. It made the Night Bus look outdated and ridiculous in comparison. Harry found himself grinning. It was almost like flying.

Then he noticed the harbor was coming up ahead of them, and it occurred to him he didn't know how they were going to get to Ireland without crossing water. He ducked back inside.

"Um..."

"Yes, Ambassador?" Stratus asked.

"We're nearing water."

"No worries, sir. She's seaworthy."

Harry stared at him, then back at the window. Could he apparate while inside the train, he wondered. He didn't fancy getting splinched, but he didn't fancy drowning either. Then again, anything was possible with magic. There could easily be as many spells to keep The Minotaur buoyant as there were to keep her secure. In any event, it was too late to stop the train now.

He gripped the edge of the window tightly, and braced himself.

It was just as Stratus had said, however. There wasn't so much as 'bump', only a cold spray of water and a moment of weightlessness that reminded him of falling. He stood frozen for a long moment, his senses and sensibilities at war with his phobia of drowning. It could only have been in his imagination, but he thought he felt the magic of the train warring with the ever deepening water; wet, shapeless hands grasping at it to pull into down into its depth and take Harry into the final darkness once and for all. The only thing to spare him a full blown panic attack was the dose of anti-anxiety potion he had taken that morning.

Shakily, he moved away from the window and took a seat on a crate beside Stratus. He took several long, deep breaths to calm himself. The lieutenant gave him a curious look.

"You are afraid of water? I thought that was your element."

"It is. Unfortunately, after my third drowning-" Harry stopped and turned the man sharply. "How did you know water was my element?"

The man's eyes widened for just a split second, before resuming a completely innocent expression.

"Everyone knows that."

"I didn't know that," Kingsley said pointedly from his position across the car. He was standing near an open window as well, just as Harry had, but had not been bothered by the sudden change of terrain. Stratus gave him a look that suggested he wished him underneath the train at the moment.

"Try again," said Harry.

The man sighed. With an annoyed look at Kingsley, he threw up a silencing charm in order to keep their conversation private.

"It was in your file. One of your files."

"I have more than one file?"

"I am sure you have dozens of files floating around the various Court offices. The general's are probably the thickest, however."

Harry wasn't so sure of that. He thought it very likely that the school records maintained by first Bellatrix and then Snape were about the size of a twelve volume library at this point. He couldn't say he was particularly pleased with people having files on him, especially people he had never heard of, but he couldn't say he was surprised. And despite how conceited it might have been, he couldn't help but be curious about what was in them. He asked Stratus.

"Lots of things. Mostly official reports, but there are few personal notes the general kept."

"Like what?"

"Like the time you broke the Dark Lord's nose. I found that notation particularly memorable."

"Pfft. That was hardly the worst thing I've done."

Stratus grinned, a mischievous light glowing in his eyes that didn't seem to match his rather bland face.

"Oh, do tell, Ambassador," he invited.

"Need some more material for your files? And stop calling me 'ambassador'. It's just Harry, or Potter if that's too informal."

"Reginald Mordio Stratus," he said, holding out his hand. "But you may call me Reggy."

Harry rolled his eyes, but took his hand and shook. An intense feeling of déjà vu settled over him, and it took him moment to realize what had caused it.

"Is something the matter?"

"What? Oh, no, sorry. You just reminded me of someone I knew for a moment."

Stratus looked strangely pleased about that for moment, before his expression shifted again to friendly openness. Harry took a moment to ponder it. His introduction to the man had hardly been congenial and circumstances were hardly conducive to starting up a friendship, but they had gotten along almost instantly and it only seemed to be getting easier, as if they had been friends for years instead of just minutes. It was a bit odd for Harry, whose friendships were highly guarded and extremely selective, especially in recent years as his popularity grew.

The lieutenant was obviously a very capable man. He was a decorated officer who had fought in Germany, and situated himself well as Malfoy Sr's underling, while still taking advantage of the resources his position made available to him. He hadn't spent more than a few seconds with Harry before accurately determining his interest and personality.

Harry knew he would have to be cautious not to trust him too much or to allow himself to become too attached, but it was difficult to look at the man and feel anything from him other than beneficent curiosity.

~ Page Break~

They arrived near Aoiwig, within three hours of leaving Bristol. It was early afternoon, and being in the southwestern end of Ireland the weather was cool but mild. The train had stopped in the wizarding hamlet of Traleefore, attracting the attention of the villagers, who came out of the pubs and workshops to watch anxiously as the soldiers disembarked the ominous train. Harry, who had been maintaining an easy conversation with 'Reggy', adopted a reserved demeanor as they exited.

His eyes scanned the crowd, looking amongst the onlookers for enemies but none became immediately apparent. The village elder, an energetic man with a noticeable limp, came out to greet them, but did not seem pleased with what he was told.

"Aoinwig? What ya wanna to go there fer?"

Stratus turned to Harry for an answer.

"A friend of mine was killed there," the Gryffindor said evenly. "I am going there to pay my respects."

A nervous murmur ran through the crowd. The village elder fidgeted uncomfortably for a bit, but left and returned a few minutes later with a map.

"This will show you the way. I'd be recommend'n you stay the nigh' here an' be goin' tomorrow or else hurry there and stay the night. It's not wise to be out and about the woods this late in the day. 'Specially not fer you, if you don't mind my say'in."

Harry acknowledged the warning with a nod, and felt a bit of his coolness towards the villagers thaw. He had been expected more reticence, even resentment, based upon what he knew of the attacks, but his fears appeared unfounded.

"We'll go there on foot and apparate back if necessary. Please warn your tavern owner he's likely to have some hungry guests this evening."

"Very well. Heed my words though. If ya find yerself following the edge of a spring, turn back the way ye came. Best of luck to you then, lad."

Harry wasn't sure what to make of the advice, but kept them in mind. They took the wide dirt road out of the hamlet, the soldiers falling into a protective formation around Harry as they went. Aoinwig and Traleefore's industry revolved heavily around wool and mutton, leaving most of the land a patchwork of pastureland knitted together with low stone walls, but between the two villages was a long strip of forest half a mile wide and thick with moss covered yew and fat, gnarled oaks. Harry felt distinctly uneasy as he stepped into it, and he was not the only one.

The trees and underbrush stretched out around and over them, creating a claustrophobic tunnel effect. The leaves had begun to fall there already, and every step they took rustled and crackled loudly while all else remained unnervingly silent. Even the light didn't seem quite right, a shade too low and tinted faintly green. Three-fourth's of the way through they passed a large pillar engraved with the antlered forest god Cernunnos surrounded by animals. Harry recognized him as the benign god of animals and fertility, but something about his smiling effigy made him shiver.

The feeling of being watched was prevalent.

"I don't like this," Kingsley muttered.

Harry didn't like it either, but wasn't about ready to turn back.

"We're over half way through already."

Despite the village elder's warning there was no spring that followed the road, only a narrow stone bridge. Almost as soon as they crossed it the oppressive feeling around them lightened, the trees thinned until at last opening out into pastureland. Aoinwig was clearly visible, a collection of six small stone buildings and a wooden round house, surrounded by vegetable gardens. A short distance away a flock of sheep grazed serenely, and a large black stallion looked up at them from its paddock. The colony looked peaceful, but for the collapsed roof on one of the buildings and a pile of broken timbers they may have once been a cart piled up beside it.

The figures of men could be seen sitting on a nearby wall, and one of them hurried into a building upon their approach while another moved cautiously forward to meet them. Harry moved from the protective circle to the front of the group, and the werewolf froze at the sight of him.

"You are not supposed to be here!" the man shouted in dismay.

Well... that wasn't how he wanted this meeting to start. A moment later, several more men appeared, amongst them a large man with a

thick black beard Harry identified as the alpha. He looked neither concerned nor surprised by his appearance.

"Hello, Harry," he said.

"Hello, Lysander. Will you speak with me?"

The alpha snorted. "I don't see as I have much choice. Does Blackbone know you are here?"

"No. He told me not to come."

"It is not your place to disobey him."

"I will accept the consequences of doing so. Please, I wish to keep my visit brief."

"I guess you better. It's not long till night fall."

Lysander wasn't exactly what you would call a friend, but Harry knew him from the days when Greyback was still Head Alpha. He was even tempered and deceptively mellow, but if pushed and he pushed back three times as hard. Being nearly two hundred and fifteen pounds of muscle, not a lot of people pushed him. Harry didn't intend to push him either, but he did expect their discussion to be taken seriously. They moved into what looked to be the communal kitchen, leaving Stratus and Kinglsey at the door and everyone else outside. Lysander poured him a tankard of ale, and Harry sipped it politely until the man was settled across the wooden table from him.

"Do you know why I am here?" Harry asked.

"Quiet frankly, no, I don't. Blackbone made it clear you're to stay out of this."

"I would, but for the fact that no one else seems to be doing anything about it. Including yourself."

Lysander stiffened, his expression disappearing. Harry continued.

"You know who attacked the village."

"It was dark. They came in on broomsticks and disappeared quickly."

"But you know who it was."

The man remained silent.

"You lied to Blackbone. You lied to the Sentinels who came to investigate. He knows you did. He may kill you the next time he sees you. With Samhain coming, I imagine that will be soon. My question is... why? Why protect them? They killed our brother."

"Our brother?" the man sneered, "You are no brother to the werewolves. You broke your ties with us when you broke your staff."

"I broke my ties with Greyback! I broke my ties to that role amongst the werewolves. I never turned away from them. Would I be here otherwise?"

Lysander settled back, considering. Finally, he shrugged.

"I guess not. What do you want?"

"I want your testimony. I want you to cooperate when the Sentinels come back and ask for you to tell them who killed Rusofoe."

The werewolf shook his head.

"It's useless. They will do nothing. They will call us liars, and turn away and then those village brats will know they can get away with it and it will happen again. We must handle it ourselves. The next time it happens, we will tear them to pieces."

Harry took a deep breath, and tried to calm himself. To remind himself that the man didn't know the things he knew, and his distrust in wizards was not unfounded.

"If you kill them all the villagers will despise you. Let the law handle it. I promise you I will see justice done."

"Whose justice? Your Dark Lord's justice?" he laughed.

"Do you think it any better or worse than your own?" the Gryffindor pointed out. "Besides, what is the harm? If I am wrong, then you will be free to tear them apart the next time it happens. If I am right, then the villagers will know there are consequences for messing with you, and are less likely to try again."

Lysander rubbed his beard and considered.

"They may hate you for it," he pointed out. "They will know it was your idea to have those boys arrested."

"They are not my responsibility. I can live with their hatred if it means you and the others are safe."

"Ack! Why do you put it like that? Makes me feel guilty already."

Harry grinned at him.

"You'll do it then?"

"Yes. Now get out of here. This place isn't safe for you."

"I would like to pay my respects to Rusofoe before I go."

The man stood, and Harry stood as well on instinct. He soon found himself being herded towards the exit.

"You honor him just by coming here. Go."

"Wait! What is the hurry? It's hours still sunset and we can apparate to the village now that we've seen where we're going. There is still plenty of time!"

Lysander shook his head.

"You cannot apparate from here. You must go a ways into the woods first. Once you have passed the pillar of the forest god, then you can apparate. They will likely try to delay you."

"'They'?" Kingsley asked, as they all moved outside.

"The fae. The forest dwellers here are notorious tricksters. They must all know you are here by now."

Harry felt a slow blooming trepidation. His experience with fae, aside from the monster at Dunnan Hill, had always been enjoyable or at least harmless, but he was starting to become truly worried. Something about all the local's warning made him suspect that he was in particular danger from these mysterious beings.

"We're going, we're going!" Harry let out an exasperated huff, annoyed with himself. There was no danger... yet. They were just being cautious.

"We'll follow you as far as we can," the alpha said, ignoring his outburst. "The paths change around sometimes, if you're not paying attention."

"Lovely," Stratus muttered under his breath, then snapped out orders to the Culties to hurry up and fall into formation. Harry moved briskly, never feeling more protected and more uncomfortably confined in his life. Kingsley walked ahead, Stratus behind, the soldiers in a circle around him, and the werewolves scattered around them. They moved into the forest, and immediately Harry knew something was wrong.

He froze. Everyone else stopped and turned to him.

"What is it?" Kingsley asked.

Harry turned around.

The road behind them was gone.

Book VI

Chapter 15: Faeries

"How many times do I have to say I'm sorry about the betrothal? I am sorry. Do you think I'm not being sincere?" Ron insisted, following Hermione through the halls towards Gryffindor tower. It was late, only a few minutes to curfew and he knew he would be in trouble should Cypher catch him on the way back, but getting Hermione alone had proven problematic. He had her in half a dozen classes and saw her frequently in the Hogwarts Herald staff offices, but since he was reduced to the point of groveling privacy was essential.

"I believe you," Hermione said coolly, without looking at him, "And I accept your apology. Now if you'll excuse me..."

He let out a frustrated sigh.

"Why are you so impossible?"

Without altering her expression or tone she replied.

"I fear I haven't the slightest idea."

He quickly lost all patience with her, and his beseeching look turned mutinous.

"You are incredibly self-centered, you know that?"

"Excuse me?"

"Self-centered. Egotistical. Selfish."

"I know the meaning of the word, Weasley. I don't see the reasoning behind your statement."

Ron felt a sense of progress. She was actually looking at him now, and it bolstered his confidence.

"Don't you think it is incredibly conceited of you to expect me to have just automatically known something was going on with you, when it completely escaped your notice that something was going on with me at the same time?"

She stopped, her expression breaking into something more lively than callous disregard. Definitely progress.

"You mean you being sick?" she asked, though uncertain.

"No, not about me being sick. Although what was going on was the reason I was sick."

"... Why didn't you say..." and she cut herself off, looking suddenly embarrassed. It seemed to finally occur to her how ridiculous she was really being about the whole thing.

"Why didn't I say anything? Because if I wanted you to know, I would have told you about it, instead of making assumptions or expecting you to read my mind. I don't know what classes you've been taking but legilimency isn't taught in any of mine!"

Oops. He had gone too far with that bit of self-righteousness. Her expression darkened considerably, morphing into real anger.

"So you're holding onto your secrets as tight as you can, and I'm just suppose to shout them out to you? No one ever tells me anything! Why do I have to be the one always guessing?" she shouted.

"I'm not Potter, so don't blame me for his Mr. Mysterious routine!"

"Don't point to Harry every time you're feeling inadequate!"

"Ugh!" he shouted, throwing up his arms in disgust. "Impossible harpy!"

"Obstinate imbecile!"

They both stormed away from each other in opposite directions. Tomorrow, Ron expected there would be whispers about their little

spat at the breakfast table. The hallways echoed terribly and with everyone trapped inside, the students were desperate for a little drama to entertain themselves. Draco would probably start making his life difficult. His former 'friend' was frankly growing more and more similar to his father every day, and it made him uneasy while he was still recovering from his illness. He had always prided himself on being self-sufficient, but he was entering a stage of his education where all his fellow Slytherins were learning the art of alliances and he had neither the skill nor the patience for the game.

He was no follower. He had little in the way of influence or finances to entice others to follow him either, and he knew his personality wasn't exactly endearing if Hermione attitude towards him were any indication. He had a tendency to inspire annoyance more often than not if he were honest with himself. Even so, he had little inclination to change.

"Why Weasley, your romantic prowess leaves me green with envy... or perhaps it's just this evening's attempt at flounder," a familiar and loathed voice interrupted his thoughts from somewhere ahead of him, the cadence almost musical in its mockery. She appeared from the shadows of an alcove a scant few feet from the stairwell leading to the dungeons with the silence and grace of a night wraith, and he felt just about as happy to meet one as he was the other.

"Cypher," he said blandly, expecting some ridiculous scolding followed by an over inflated punishment. Her smile was full of venom.

"Oh, Weasley, there's no need to be so cold. I'm not here to get you in trouble," she said with a saccharine tone. "Not if you talk to me for a little bit. I can hardly report you for being out during curfew when I'm the one holding you up, now can I?"

"It's never stopped you in the past. What do you want?"

"Just a little conversation. You know, seeing how you are doing. You've been keeping to yourself so often these days, I can't help be a little curious as to what you have been up to."

He rolled his eyes.

"I've been sick. That's as interesting as it gets," he said, and moved towards the stairs. She stepped in front of him before he could.

"Oh, I am very sure you were sick, but like you said to Hermione, there was something else going on. Still going on, perhaps? Something you've been conspiring with Harry about?"

He felt a swell of embarrassment at realizing she had overheard his fight with Hermione, had possibly been tailing behind them like a demented voyeur. Embarrassment didn't suit him however, so he hid it under a veil of exasperation and disgust.

"You're coming to me about Potter? Seriously? How desperate are you?"

Her expression didn't change even the slightest.

"Shouldn't I be asking you that? My relationship with Harry is straight forward and simple-"

Yes, he agreed mentally, in the alien universe where women make sense it probably was.

"But, you aren't Harry's friend. In fact, you have always been more like an enemy, feeble in that capacity though you may be, which begs the question of why you have been spending so much time with him. And why he lets you for that matter."

"Why don't you ask him? Since you both are so buddy buddy, and I am calculating the odds of getting away with pushing you backwards down the stairs."

"Well, for one, Harry's run off to save the world again. For another, he's a better liar than you."

"Oi! He is not!"

"Alright, then he's just better at keeping secrets. Which means he's just a really good liar-by-omission."

He rolled his eyes and maneuvered himself around her with a nimble little spinning turn, making it to the steps and scot free.

"If you say so. I honestly don't care. We're not friends, we've just been stuck together for some school assignments. There's nothing going on. Goodnight and good riddance."

"For instance," she continued as if he hadn't spoken, her slightly raised voice the only indication that she recognized that he wasn't standing in front of her with his complete attention. "He seems to have been very successful at keeping the secret about Hermione from you, despite all the time you've been spending together."

Ron paused. Mentally kicking himself, he looked back at her.

"Oh, really, and what secret is that?"

"Hhmm... it's quite a doozy. Even I'm impressed with it."

"Uh-huh? And again, what secret?"

"What secret?"

"Yes, what secret?"

"Well, it's a secret so of course I can't just tell you. Not unless, of course, we were the sort of friends that could share secrets."

Oh, she was good. Horrible, nasty little girl, but a fantastic Slytherin. If it weren't for her inferior bloodline, Voldemort probably would have been happy to marrying Harry off to her to create the perfect race of Slytherins with impossible good luck and a propensity for simultaneously pissing off and charming large numbers of people. Ron was secretly glad that nature had created a barrier from such a generation of terrifying predators from ever entering the general population.

But a disinterested admiration aside, he didn't like the idea of playing into her game. He did want to know what secret she was referring to,

as he hadn't had an inkling of it, but he was hardly about ready to hand over his own to someone he shared only mutual animosity with. It could easily be a trick. Also, now that he knew to ask, there might be others who knew about it who would be easier to pry it from.

"I'll think about it," he said, because it wouldn't due to turn her down immediately. She might get testy if she lost the game before it started, and he was still hoping to get out of a detention.

She smiled, and waved him off.

"You do that."

~ Page Break~

For a brief moment, no one spoke but merely stared at the collection of trees and undergrowth standing there as if it had been there for a hundred years when in fact it had sprung up in the course of half a minute. Just as the reality of this unreality was starting to sink in, a single long note bellowed through the forest, shoving them forcefully back to their senses. Lysander expressed the moment aptly with a softly muttered 'oh bugger'.

"Can we turn back?" Stratus said sharply, his militant tones snapping his soldiers back into military attention.

"Go back to what? Even if it's right beyond that patch of forest, our colony doesn't have any protection against faeries. They've never been interested in werewolves, and wards would only have provoked them. You'll have to get to the idol and apparate from there."

"Can we make it?" Kinglsey asked.

"Not if we stand around here asking questions," Harry said unprompted, knowing they were just wasting time. They needed to move. "We can talk while we run."

And he then he started running, and everyone in their party immediately followed. They had no choice, he was their responsibility and their purpose for being there. Stratus had the authority to counter

his command, but he saw the wisdom in it. It was unlikely they would make it to the idol before they were attacked, but if they could shorten the distance between their inevitable conflict and their moment of safety they would have to risk it. They knew neither the enemies numbers nor their nature, which among the hundreds of faerie tribes they were facing; be they the Daoine Sidhe, the Tuatha de Dannan, the Seelie, the Unseelie, the Milesians, or some branch they had no scholarship of. They were as likely to face a pack of savage orcs as they were a couple of harmless if somewhat mischievous goodfellows, and Stratus frankly didn't intend to wait around to find out.

As Tom Riddle, he had only spent two summers under the tutelage of Carrigan before his fragment of soul had been sheered off and placed in the journal, but faerie visitors had been frequent and what he had gleaned from that brief time was that they were not to be trifled with in groups. Looking to Harry, who he was intentionally keeping abreast of, he could tell by the boy's expression that he wasn't intending to take any chances either.

The hunting horn they had heard earlier did not sound again, but rather than reassure them it only made them more anxious. They had no idea how fast their enemy was moving or how close they were. The horn had sounded from the south, but Stratus warned them to look out in all directions, as the horn may only have signaled others that the hunt was on and not the point at which the hunt had started. Harry, being stuck in the middle, took the responsibility of watching above them. He was not as familiar with the fae as he probably should be, but he knew there were several arboreal breeds that were known for swooping down from above or dropping snares down on unsuspecting victims as they sped by beneath them.

He was the first to spot the merlin, a tiny hawk he could identify easily from his animagus studies, swooping above them. Once, twice, three time and then it turned and disappeared back towards the south. He turned to Stratus to remark on this, but was distracted by a sharp yelp. Behind them, one of the werewolves, a gangly young thing with stooping shoulders and evasive eyes, had tripped and fallen. Lysander fell back a moment to pull him to his feet and they hurried after to catch up.

No one thought anything of it, until the squadron leader, Titanhorn, took a tumble a moment later, followed by another foot soldier called Kern. Then Stratus grabbed his arm and jerked him to the side.

"Look out!" he said sharply, and Harry looked down just in time to see a tree root arching up out of the ground and managed to hop over it. "Watch your feet everyone!"

Their feet weren't the only thing they needed to watch. Kingsley was watching the surrounding forest and his feet so diligently, he missed the low hanging branch that suddenly dipped an extra few inches to bean him over the head. Harry half caught him and heaved him upright again before he fell completely. Almost immediately, everyone's paced slowed considerably even as their desire to run faster intensified.

Trees which had been standing docilely one moment, now appeared to be slowly sliding their way onto the road, subject to some unseen gravity. Autumn vines slithered between them, rustling leaves into a serpentine hiss they went and cringing away at the feet threatening to trample them. Stones and broken tree branches rose up from the damp earth like bubbles rising from a swamp.

Within a few minutes the road was gone completely, and with it their tight formation. It was impossible to hold a straight line or hold a position while moving around and between oak trees nearly three feet thick and over tiny ditches and large stones, even when they weren't moving. They did the best they could to hold a rough circle around Harry, but every member of their group was now disappearing out of sight for several seconds at a time and that was just asking for trouble. The only one who remained visible to Harry at all times was Stratus and Kingsley. Kingsley led the way and Harry obediently followed, while Stratus either ran beside him or directly behind when their path made that impossible. Their sense of direction was likewise skewed and although he hated to, Stratus called them to a halt for a moment to regain sense of their surroundings and take stock of their situation.

Everyone who had started the course was still with them except for the werewolf who had tripped earlier.

"I sent him back," Lysander explained. "He twisted his ankle running and he's not good in a fight anyway."

"Is that safe?" Harry said, breathing heavily. He was rather embarrassed about his lack of endurance, but Dueling Club really wasn't a replacement for Quidditch or hard exercise when it came to maintaining stamina.

"I doubt they'll bother with him. Faeries aren't interested in werewolves. Not unless its a full moon at least."

"If they won't bother you, then you should all go back. You're not armed. You'll be nothing more than fodder if we get into a fight."

Stratus looked about ready to protest, but Lysander shook his head.

"We'll escort you as far as we can. You'll need all the eyes you can get."

So instead the lieutenant turned to Kingsley.

"Cast a locating charm," he ordered. "We're becoming disoriented."

The Sentinel frowned, but did as he was told, while the soldiers kept an eye out for danger. His wand balanced on the top of his hand, spinning this way and that like the needle of a compass. After a moment, it stopped and series of numbers glowed on top of it. Kinglsey looked up at them in alarm.

"What?" Harry demanded.

"We're running away from it! It's back there!"

He pointed behind them and off to their far right, where the trees were moving closer and closer together and the slithering vines were snaking between them to form a living barricade. Stratus frowned at it, but merely said.

"How much further?"

"A hundred yards at least."

"Hey!" a slender Cultie witch called Guppy said suddenly, "Did anyone hear that? I thought I heard something moving!"

"Revelo!" Kern cast, but the spell fluttered around uselessly and died.

"That only works on magical objects, genius," someone muttered.

"Well, you think of-"

"Stay focused!" Stratus snapped, then turned towards the green barricade. "Aresco mordicus."

Before his wand, the earth died. Leaves withered and fell and withered still further into brown, half curled little corpses of themselves, turning to dust at the faintest disturbance. Vines shriveled into desiccated veins and dying trees groaned like aged giants.

Harry felt his insides crawl as he took his first steps forward, and flinch when Stratus cast it a second time. He did not have to cast it a third, the forest itself withdrew from them as silently and eerily as it had closed in. What was left was an impromptu road of death nearly ten feet across and stretching out before them. It was Dark Arts, not the most insidious kind, but it had to be flaking away pieces of its caster's soul with every incantation.

"Wicked," someone said, and Harry agreed although not in the same context.

"Focus," was Stratus' only reply. "We're not-"

And then the first attack started.

It came not in the form of steel or arrows or curses. It came on four legs, silent as ghosts and fast as lightening. It came with teeth and relentless training right down its very DNA.

It came in the form of dogs.

Harry caught sight of them first out of the corner of his Quidditch Seeker's eye as a flash of white spiriting between the trees. There was four of them total, all of them with the tall, powerful build of wolfhounds but with silky white coats but for the orange patches encircling their ears. He knew them as a faerie breed, but their names and characteristics escaped him. He had neither the time nor the inclination to wonder about it just then. Their rapid dash towards them told Harry all he needed to know, and he threw out a curse before he even bothered with a warning.

"Celoxis!"

The Cutting Curse sailed between two Culties and straight for the line of dogs, but they scattered intuitively. The curse sailed on until it struck a tree already dead under Stratus' curse and shattered it into a explosion of splintering wood. The others spotting the danger, began to cast their own spells to bring down the creatures that had broken their lines in order to encircle them like wolves around a flock of sheep. Then just as silently as they appeared they disappeared into the underbrush.

"What was that?" Kingsley asked. "Are they gone?"

"No," Harry and Lysander said simultaneously, glanced at each other, and the young wizard let the alpha explain. "Typical pack hunting behavior. They wanted to panic us and make us run, break up our defensive positions, then take down the weakest or the slowest of the group. Now they've gone back to stalking. They'll rush us again later or simply slow us down enough for their masters to catch up to us."

"So what now?"

"We keep going," Stratus said, calmly, "As quickly as we can without breaking formation."

Everyone silently agreed to this, although the instinct to bolt was running high. But they were more than dumb animals, and wouldn't be outsmarted by them. Or that was the idea, until they came came to

natural hill, nearly thirty feet up and eroded half away by the elements. There was no way around it without tripling their time, and they set about scaling it with a equal shares of trepidation.

Guppy went first, being the smallest and the most nimble, and made it most of the way up on two feet by grabbing hold of the numerous tree roots jutting out from the exposed soil, before being forced to drop to all fours to scale over the top. When she was safely over the edge, she looked about and gave them the all clear.

Kingsley and Titanhorn went up, followed by Harry and Stratus, and then the rest of the Culties with the werewolves waiting at the bottom to bring up the rear. Harry was almost to the top, when he heard the sound of hooves. He paused where he was climbing, and so did everyone else, catching what he was hearing. The distance of the houses was hard to determine in the forest, but it was getting steadily closer. Stratus touched his arm, drawing his attention.

"Hurry up, we don't want to be caught with our backs to them when they arrive."

Harry nodded and went back to his climbing, but a terrified shriek alerted him that something was happening above him. He jumped to the side, barely avoiding being knocked into as Guppy fell, but not avoiding the panicked grasp of her hand on his cloak. He was torn from his perch and thrown backward, landing heavily on his back several feet down and then continued to roll several more feet as loosened soil crumbled and gave way beneath him.

He slid the last few feet to the bottom, the breath knocked out of him and dizzy but unhurt, his wand remained in his hand and amazingly wasn't unbroken. A few feet away Guppy was still screaming, and he turned to see that her fall had apparently been assisted by a white hound that was now struggling to drag her away into the forest. He aimed his wand to cast a spell, but had to divert his aim when Stratus yelled out a warning above him.

A second hound was bolting down the hill, dodging effortlessly between the wizards and witches and heading straight for him. He had only enough time to throw up his arms to shield his neck from its

fangs, and miscalculated by putting his wand arm out first. Power jaws clamped down, and he grunted at the painful pressure, but his arm guards held and he kept his grip on his wand. The hound pressed its attack, shaking his arm savagely as if trying to disarm him, but he refused to let go.

Behind him he heard a yelp, this time not of Guppy but of the hound, and he dared a glance back in time to see Lysander wrenching the beast off of the witch by the scruff of its neck, and with a display of great strength he lifted the ninety-pounds of writhing, snarling flesh over his head and brought it down sharply over his knee. There was a horribly snap and the hound went limp.

The alpha let out a triumphant snarl and turned his attention to Harry now, but the Gryffindor had already found his own solution. Drawing his knife, a gift from Draco he had ironically brought as an extra defense against his friend's father, from his boot, he stabbed it into the hound's side. The hound took the wound to the neck, but amazingly it missed anything vital and it released him in order to scamper away with little more than a whimper.

"Harry! Harry!"

Stratus was leaning over him a moment later, looking pale and anxious as he checked him over frantically for injuries. Harry would have batted his hands away if he didn't have a wand and knife in either of them.

"I'm fine. It didn't get through the arm guard. What about Guppy?"

"Who?"

Harry rolled over and climbed shakily to his feet. He could see now that the Culties were now all at the bottom of the hill again, encircling him in a defensive position. Only Kingsley was still at the top, looking about. Lysander was now carrying the wounded Cultie, who was weeping softly and cradling her broken, bleeding arm.

"We've got incoming, people!" Kingsley shouted before he could think to do anything for her. "At least fifteen on horseback and at least twice that many on foot!"

"What are they?" Stratus called back.

"Elves! Bloody mean-looking elves!"

"Well, shit," Stratus grumbled, then commanded his people, "Cast some shields and hurry to the top!"

He seized Harry by the arm and pulled him forward, ignoring his stumbling and swaying and practically hurling up the first slippery steps of the hill. The youth scrambled to comply, shoving his knife into the belt of his pants, so that he could move on three limbs instead of two while Stratus maintained his hold on his wand arm and pulled him upwards at a ruthless pace.

An arrow struck their shield magic and shattered into so much dust. This was followed by several more, all of them having about as much effect as wet noodles thrown in a fire. Harry didn't turn around, he couldn't while being dragged upwards, but it seemed a terrible waste of arrows.

"What are they doing?" he panted.

Stratus wasn't looking at them either, only at the top where their position would offer them an advantage to their pursuers below.

"They're testing the range of the shields."

They reached the top, and Harry felt himself finally coming back to his full senses as Kingsley took his free arm and pulled him up over the edge. He rolled to his feet and turned to face their enemy... only to find to his infinite frustration that they were hidden in a dense cloud of fog.

"What the... what is that?"

"This is worse than I thought," Stratus said, "They have some sort of conjurer in their party."

"Conjurer?"

"All fae have their own innate magic unique to their species, but only a few are true conjurers... able to use and manipulate magic the same way a wizard would. They're typically female. Enchantresses. Aim for any women in their party if you have the opportunity."

Looking down at the wall of featureless gray he didn't see such an opportunity arising and wasn't sure if he would have taken it even if he had.

"Absolutely," he said anyway.

"Good. Fuegoriserpens !"

From Stratus' wand a line of fire appeared, racing down the hill, then snaking its way across the forest floor, around trees and stones and debris, setting withered earth below alight. The fire spread rapidly in the dry kindling, fanning out behind the slithering line of flames, driving back the fog with the intensity of its heat.

As the cover retreated, a number of their enemy suddenly became visible. They were indeed elves. Not the pitiful decrepit slaves of the Wizarding World, or the fey, graceful creatures Harry had familiarized himself with in the Black Forest. These were something else entirely. Their mounts were horse-like, but not true horses; their limbs slender like a deer's, their necks too long and flexible, and a pair of short, sharp antlers perched atop their heads. Their legs were swaddled in protective bindings, their backs, chests, necks, and head covered in flexible, multi-plated armor of gold or silver. They were built for speed and maneuverability, but had more than enough strength to carry their riders, who were no less alien to look upon.

The elves were also armored in silver or gold, but only with breastplates which they wore over rich scarlet or royal blue, and the occasional gauntlet. The mounted elves were all the same species, yet they varied greatly from one to another, some with skin so black it

almost appeared blue, and others so white they shimmered in the rainbow hues of the nacreous side of a clam shell. Some had small antlers like their horses, some eyes with nothing but red, others still with golden scale patterned across their forehead and cheeks.

The only thing that bound them together as a single race was the almost identical structure of their bodies. They all had the same hyper-lithe musculature, small, pointed ears, dagger sharp cheek bones and large eyes set in long, narrow faces. They were all the same height. They were all the same build. The only definitive distinction between the males and females were the slight curve in the women's breastplates and the occasional appearance of facial hair amongst the men. All of them were armed with crossbows and swords, more ready for a war than a hunt.

They were not the only beings either.

There were others on foot, but they were not elves, and in fact Harry could not readily identify them. Their arms were skeletal thin with fingers containing an extra joint, bulging thighs and cloven hooves, and appeared to be covered with short layer of thick green and brown moss except for a neat strip of naked gray flesh from their eyebrows to their unclothed sex. Their black eyes were enormous in proportion to their head and their noses were tiny.

They had no mouths. None that Harry could see from his perch, but it gave them a sinister quality. Creatures without mouths required special means to sustain themselves, and these means were often the things of nightmares. More than the eager, calculating gaze of the elves, the primitive hunger in those soulful black eyes frightened him.

He made a note to himself that they fled quickly in the presence of Stratus' fire spell.

Indeed, they scampered away rapidly in a panic, but the elves maintained their positions even as the their mounts danced away from the flames under foot. Amongst them, only a single rider actually moved forward, clothed in scarlet and without armor, the enchantress stood out as unusual even amongst her varied kin.

She was an elf... or maybe she wasn't. She was not the same breed as the others in any case. She looked almost human, if not for the rainbow sheen in her raven hair and the solid black line that ran from her bottom lip to the underside of chin and down her neck where it disappeared into the rim of her breastplate. She was fairy-tale beautiful. Perfectly pale skin, perfectly large electric blue eyes, a cupid's bow mouth with naturally red lips, and a body that... well...a very nice body.

Harry couldn't help but stare. She caught his gaze for a moment, and smiled at him with warm affection rather than the murderous intent she had been displaying up to this point.

Definitely, the Enchantress, he thought.

Stratus let his curse fly the moment he identified her. It flew straight and true, and Harry cried out in alarm and nearly threw himself at the man. Irrationally, he did not want her to be hurt. He needn't have worried. With a wave of her wand, which was made of silver rather than wood, she destroyed the curse causing the air to shimmer for a moment in a red haze. In the same moment, the blazing fire around them extinguished and the mist lunged forward to conceal the hunters once again.

The soldiers stood at the edge of the cliff, searching for some clue as to what they would do next or discern where they were intending to move. Harry searched for another sign of the enchantress.

His sign came as an arrow, and this time he obeyed his instinct to throw himself at Stratus. He took the man completely by surprise and succeeded in knocking him to the ground. The arrow missed them both by a hair, but continued straight on, nicking Kern in the arm as it passed.

"What the hell!" Kern swore.

"Put up the damn shield!" Kinglsey shouted.

"It is up! It's up, it's up, I swear!" a Cultie shouted back.

Harry rolled off of Stratus, who blinked owlshly at him.

"You saved my life."

"Yep," was all Harry said, and cast a shield charm. A second arrow sailed right through it, barely missing Kingsley. Everyone quickly moved away from the edge of the cliff, including Lysander who had just cleared the top with the injured Guppy slung over his shoulder. "Running would probably be a good idea now."

Again they were running, faster now than was safe or reasonable. They only had a little further to go and they could leave this nightmare before anything worse happened. They had bought a little time, as the faeries would either have to climb the hill themselves or go around, but it wouldn't be much.

"How are they shooting through our shields?" Kinglsey demanded.

"It's holly," Stratus said, "The arrows are made out of holly. They can fly right through most magical shields.*"

"Seriously? How the hell didn't I know that?"

"How many witches and wizard still use bows and arrows while fighting? Even faeries rarely use them. Holly is poisonous to them. The Enchantress is the probably the only one carrying, and she's plenty enough to deal with."

Harry mentally cataloged this information away. He was trained with a bow and arrow, although by no means a master, and this was something he might use in the future. If he survived this encounter, of course. Just as he was thinking of possible applications for it, Kern suddenly stopped running. Immediately, he fell behind, and Lysander's second werewolf drew back to check him. A moment later there was a shout for help.

Harry tried to stop, but Stratus grabbed his arm and pulled him along.

"He's hurt!"

"He's dead," Stratus stated clinically. "That arrow that cut him was poisoned."

"What?"

There was a moment of horrible realization. That arrow had been meant for Stratus, and while Harry's move had saved the lieutenant, it had doomed Kern in the process. He tried to stop again to jerk free of the man's grip, but he wouldn't let go and Kingsley took his other arm as soon as he realized what he was trying to do.

"There is nothing you can do for him, and you'll only put the rest of us in danger if you try," the Sentinel insisted. "You can feel bad about it later, but right now-"

From above, Harry spotted the merlin from before swooping by overhead.

"Incoming!" he shouted, and ground beneath them surged, knocking their party off its feet. One of the Culties thrown several feet and smashed against a tree, and collapsed in a heap at its base. Harry was pulled out of both his guardians' grip and tossed aside, the others similarly scattered and unbalanced. He tried to right himself, but the earth was still moving beneath him, and he watched with horror as an enormous hand appeared from the tossed soil. It reached for him, easily five times larger than a normal hand, and he pulled his legs away quickly. Unable to reach him yet, the arm swung around in search of another victim, and snagged Titanhorn by his cloak. The squadron leader shouted and struggled to remove the cloak, but a second arm broke through and seized him by the leg. Then there was one last subterranean surge and their attacker emerged in a monolith of flesh and dirt.

It was easily as tall as a troll, but its form was less hulking, more muscle than fat, with dirt encrusted skin drawn tight over it. Standing, it was at least twelve feet tall, and if that wasn't intimidating enough its head was completely concealed by a black helm without a single hole for seeing or breathing, only a pair of ram-shaped horns spiraling out of it.

"What the devil..." some one swore.

The helm immediately swiveled to the speaker, and it lurched forward to grab at him with his free left hand while carrying Titanhorn along like a doll in the other. Curses were immediately fired; fire and freezing and cutting and bludgeoning curses but the giant only roared beneath its encasement and swung his massive fist in a one great sweep. Two Culties were hit in the swing, one of them a glancing blow that never the less sent her spinning the other directly, the force and speed of it enough kill the second wizard instantly. Harry had already been crouched behind a tree, and felt splinters raining down on him where the fist had smashed smashed into the wood.

Meanwhile, Titanhorn still hanging from the monster's grip, cast a spell, not on the giant but on his leg causing the limb to become slick. Immediately, he slid out of its grip, and tried to flee, but the giant reach for and caught him a second time. He cast the Slicking Charm again on his chest this time and fell out of his grip again. Frustrated, the giant made several more tries for him, but always he slipped free until he escaped completely by jumping through the split trunk of a large elm.

Enraged, it bellowed furiously at the ensemble, which was now scattered in a loose circle around it, trying to find some weakness. Harry kept his place hidden behind the tree, trying to figure out how any of them where going to get away from it. Every time anyone spoke or move it lunged for them, and only their numbers had kept it's attention scattered enough for them to avoid being taken.

It was like the dogs, Harry realized. It was meant only to break their defensive position and slow them down until the true hunters arrived. Already, he could here the pounding of hooves, the concealing wall of fog closing in on them from a distance. He looked around the group for Kingsley and Stratus, but only Kingsley spotted him from his hiding position. He signaled him with urgent gestures that they needed to move, which only earned him a 'well, duh' look in return. He tried to gesture that they needed a distraction, but it only confused the man, and while they were busy trying signal their communications the giant was starting to move again.

It strode back to the disturbed mound of earth he had first appeared from, and shoved a fist into the ground, then with a massive heave he pulled loose a weapon even taller than he was. It was a sword, but shaped strangely like an elongated meat cleaver. Although it had to have weighed over two hundred pounds at least, the giant gave it a practice swing with only one hand and cleaved the tree Harry was hiding behind in half. The aim was high, but it startled him badly and he couldn't stop the shout of surprise as the blade passed a scant few inches above his head. Immediately, a great hand reached for him. He jerked away even as the tree began to fall, aided by a nudge of the giant's shoulder.

He looked up to see the tree tilt and then rapidly descend in a deafening crash, and he was forced to leap back closer to the giant to avoid being crushed. The noise seemed to have disoriented the behemoth, and rather than take Harry instantly, it felt around the ground blindly for several seconds. Harry realized it was completely blind, and relied on hearing and touch alone.

Not that it would do him any good now that it was practically on top of him.

A rock the size of a bludger suddenly smashed into the giant's head, and bounced off with a clang. It straightened, turning to the source of the attack. The trapped Gryffindor dared a peek over the fallen tree to see Stratus levitating another rock with his wand, a moment later hurling it towards the giant, this time striking it in the chest. It grunted at the impact, then roared, charging towards his enemy.

"Get out of here, Harry! I can handle this one on my own!" he shouted before dashing into the trees with the giant hot on his immediately ran towards the closest fallen soldier, and found him dead. He went to another, this one who had been thrown into a tree. Unconscious, and bleeding profusely from his ears and nose, he felt little hope for him. The third who had caught a glancing blow was curled on the ground, struggling to breathe.

"Arespheare has broken ribs," Kingsley said, "He can't be moved."

"Well, we can't leave him here!" another Cultie snapped, then quickly looked over her shoulder to make sure the giant hadn't heard them and decided to turn around. Harry watched for a moment, but the giant soon disappeared in the encroaching mist, and he could only mark its progress by the sudden fall of a tree. Already, he felt a sense of grief for the man who had saved his life.

It was only a matter of time before it caught its prey.

~ Page Break~

Tom was feeling decidedly stupid and aggravated with himself, as he dove to clear a falling tree. He landed roughly on his chest and stomach, felt a distinct ache in his ribs were a small stone had jabbed him, but rose quickly to his feet again. The fallen tree bought him a moment as the helmet giant climbed over it, but it was already far too close for comfort. It was a stupid thing, and Tom had tricked it twice by casting spells that caused distracting sounds away from him, but it was starting to catch on. Even so he felt he should have figured out some weakness in it by now, aside for its general dimness, but had been too pressed to avoid being cut in half or crushed in a massive fist to think of anything useful.

What had he been thinking drawing the creature away himself? He could have easily cast an Imperius Curse on one of the soldiers and had them distract the creature. It hadn't occurred to him at the time, honestly, although now he could think of nothing else. When it happened his only thought was 'it's going to kill Harry' and that was as far as his intelligence had extended itself. Now he was alone and left to fight off the seemingly impervious behemoth and he had only himself (and perhaps Harry to a certain extent) to blame for it. The enchanted mist had closed in around him, causing beads of moisture to form over him and dampen his clothes in an unpleasant chill. It also reduced his visibility to only about fifteen feet ahead or behind him, making strategical planning difficult when he had no way of knowing what to expect ahead of him and where the giant was behind him (except during those rather panic inducing moments where he could see it and that meant it was too damn close). To make matters worse, he knew the elves were somewhere close, even if he could not see or hear them yet. Hopefully, they couldn't see him either,

although they were making enough noise he didn't see how they couldn't find him easy enough.

He was not particularly attached to his current body, but the position he obtained while in it was something he did not wish to abandon. It had been incredible good fortune, and he had abandoned too many plans already just as they seemed to be making progress. He could... he would keep this body. The dumb brute was not going to be his undoing.

"Silencio!"

Immediately, the world went on mute. The helmet giant hesitated mid-swing only a few yards away from him. Tom sighed in relief, took a moment to catch his breath, and really think for a moment. The monster seemed impervious to spells cast directly on it. In fact, although he doubted anyone else had noticed, they seemed to be actively absorbed by it, making it stronger. This is the only reason Tom had hesitated with using the Killing Curse. Faeries were not like wizards, seeing as they were already half spirit, and life and death had completely different meanings to them. It was like comparing sleep and waking and the hundred states of consciousness between. There was no telling what state the creature was in and if the Killing Curse didn't kill it, then it very well might have made it unstoppable.

What did that leave him then, if he could not cast spells on it?

Perhaps he could just slip away under the Silencing charm? Did he dare let it out of his sight. What if it left the sphere of the charm to hunt him down and he was unable to see it coming in the mist? It was a risk he-

The giant swung pulled back and made another swing with his sword, and Tom was forced to duck yet again. The charm shattered under an unseen magical force, and the area was flooded with the sound of bird song and distant sound of pounding hooves. What the bloody-

Snap!

The helmet swiveled towards him, and he looked down to see the twig broken beneath his heel. Well, that was just typical. There was another bellowing roar and the monster charge him again, eating up the distance between them in two massive strides. Muttering a spell, Tom jumped, flying several meters in the air before landing sideways half way up the trunk of a large, gnarled oak. His feet stuck to the side, and he back up into the branches several feet to get out of range. The giant's brilliant response, rather than cutting down the tree, was to put the sword down, wrap its arms around it, and shake it vigorously. This only succeeded in shaking free a number of acorns and making Tom vaguely nauseous.

In a change of fortune, the oak, which was very large but suffering maladies that were not improved by shaking, shed one of its limbs. Tom managed to avoid the branch, and watched with a great deal of satisfaction when it landed on the giant's head. There was loud clang, the giant lurched, the branch was tossed aside by a clumsy arm, but it left behind a sizable dent and the creature weaved dizzily. Tom's eyes widened in realization.

Of course! The giant might have been impervious to magic cast against it, but that didn't mean he was impervious to physical objects. He quickly cast a transfiguration spell on several limbs of the tree, transforming the half rotten branches into sleek, heavy javelins. Meanwhile, the behemoth had overcome its disorientation, and sensing his prey was up to something, it let out an angry bellow and reached for its sword.

Tom broke the javelins free from the trunk and let them fly.

The result was... satisfying. The wooden spears caught the giant cleanly, throwing it down and pinning it to the earth like a mounted butterfly. It made no sound but spasmed in its death throes, which lingered long enough for Tom to climb back down the tree, and continued when he carefully pulled the giant sword free of its hand. He danced aside as the enormous blade fell over, nearly crushing him as it went. He calculated the possibility of keeping it as a war trophy, a shrinking charm and feather lite charm would make it transportable, but honestly he wasn't sure where he could keep it. Maybe Harry could find a place for it in Hogwarts.

Harry.

"Tabula locus Harry Potter."

His wand spun atop his hand three times before stopping to point due North, and a series of floating numbers indicated the boy was moving but still much too close to have successfully apparated away yet. He still might have been close enough to see if it weren't for the cursed fog. He cast a feather lite charm on the sword and hefted it over his shoulder. He would keep it at its full size for the moment, he decided, just in case he ran into some other magic resistant species. Besides, it would look damn impressive when he caught up with his group, and wasn't above showing off a little.

He was taken by surprise when a masculine voice carried through the fog.

"Almes ne natur, mishas skure."

"Celoxis!"he shouted, aiming his curse at the shadow in the mist. The mist parted for a moment under the force of the spell, revealing no one, before rolling back into a concealing sheet.

"Oohh... sushu ri ne nasis!"

"Celoxis!"

The curse missed, and the shadow retreated. It laughed, but Tom didn't waste another spell.

"Show yourself," he demanded. "Unless you fear me?"

It was an obvious ruse, but there were faeries whose pride would not let them overlook the insult. The laughter stopped, and after a moment the voice returned, this time speaking in English.

"Indeed. You have proven yourself quite formidable. No wizard has slain a fermedi in nearly six hundred years. I hope our fight proves entertaining."

This time when Tom turned towards the voice, its owner's visage made itself known, the mist slowly shying away from him. It was an elf, of the same breed as the ones he had seen in the forest, but strange in that he appeared almost devoid of any eccentric features. Raven black hair, bright blue eyes, and pale skin. Not a scale or an antler to be seen at all, and the affect some how made him look almost child-like in comparison to his extravagant kinsmen. Though if you took the comparison away, there was nothing child-like about him. He was tall, almost handsome except his elven cheekbones made his features a touch too sharp, with eyes that knew murder and a mouth that had smiled while committing it.

He was touched by the same regal grace of the others, but even here it was somehow corrupted by a predator's coiled tension. His hunting attire was black, unarmored except for the arm guards, which shone silvery and nacreaus, the tell-tale sign of mithral, and a helm of the same material, which he was now holding under his arm. The black clothing marked him has a person of rank within his court. The mithral marked him as the king.

He knew this elf.

"Gulandri?" Tom said, taken off guard.

The elf tilted his head curiously.

"Have we met?"

Tom mentally slapped himself. Of course the elf wouldn't recognize him, not in this body. He doubted it would serve him any better if he had.

"In another life, perhaps," he said.

Gulandri continued to stare at him curiously for a moment, trying to figure out where they might have known each other. Nothing came to him, and he slipped his hand into a fold in his clothes to remove an object roughly the size of a Snitch. Tom recognized this too, and felt an instant swell of greed for it.

It was a stone; black, triangular, polished smoothed by a millennium of fast running water, and a perfectly round hole at its center that should have been completely impossible in nature. It was known to be the powerful, naturally occurring object known in any faerie or human realm combined.

The elves called it frrykshimini. Wizard's called it the 'All Seeing Eye'.

Gulandri lifted the stone to peer at him through the hole. Tom stiffened, knowing his secrets were being stripped from him instantly. The elf pulled the stone away and looked at him with recognition.

"Ah. You."

"If you say so. Celoxis!"

If there was one thing that elves had going for them, and in fact they had many things, the most useful to them was likely their quickness. Not only was Gulandri able to avoid his curse, he was able to draw his weapon, a short curved blade sharpened on both sides, and was nearly on top of him before the wizard was able to cast another. Tom managed to lift the enormous sword he had taken from the fermedi to block a lethal strike. The elven blade sunk nearly half way through the crude metal before it became stuck. The half-second it bought him, Tom used to cast another spell, which the elf dodged again but at the expense of leaving his blade lodged in Tom's.

"Well played, wicked child," he said, once again disappearing into the mists, his voice ringing out in every direction. "You have disarmed me."

There was a mocking humor to the tone that made Tom think he was being ironic.

"Ordoro lumus Gulandri Le' Espirriur." he cast, a small red sphere of light appearing from his wand, and zipping into the mist to his left.

"Oh good, you remember my full name. Erisshkyr nimish!"

What the hell? A conjurer? Since when?

The elven spell rebounded off Tom's hastily thrown up shield charm, but threw him off balance. Gulandri followed up his attack by charging forward, the tracking orb trailing behind as it struggled to keep up with its target. The kick to the gut sent Tom sprawling, winded, to the ground. The second kick to his side left him curled about his bruised ribs. The third kick he caught, held, and let loose a Killing Curse.

The elf threw up his arms instinctively to block, but it was useless. Elves were more 'alive' than spirit amongst the fae. The spell would destroy him. Inwardly, Tom crowed at his victory already assured. A giant and an elven king, all in one day. They were going to throw him a fucking parade when he got home.

He had let go of Gulandri to keep from absorbing any residual feedback from the curse, and the elf stumbled back several paces before stopping. Before stopping, and lowering his arms to stare down at him with an amused smirk. Tom's eyes widened horror.

Merlin, the mithral. I didn't factor in the mirthral.

Mithral absorbed magic. It was a major magical component in the Sword of Gryffindor, allowing it to absorb only that which made it stronger. Even in that great sword, there had only been a small amount. Gulandri's arm guards and helmet, however, could be very near pure. But to absorb the Killing Curse... how...?

"That," the elf said, his voice thick with pleasure, "was very, very naughty."

He made a show of moving forward slowly, as if to make himself a more tempting target. Tom was still too transfixed by his survival to do anything other than stare. The elf stopped only when he was once again standing over him.

"Do it again."

~ Page Break~

Harry took stock of their situation. Kern was dead, along with the second Cultie whose name escaped him, Stratus was chased into the wilderness, Guppy was wounded and unable to fight, Lysander wasn't able to do much while carrying her, another werewolf had already been sent away, Aresphere couldn't even be moved, and they had another who was unconscious and unlikely to survive. The mist was closing in swiftly, and with it their clever enemy. That left ten fighters, and some very tough decisions to make.

"How far to the idol?" he asked.

"Twenty yards."

"Can we levitate our wounded?"

"Yes, but even if we get to the idol they can't apparate."

"How many here can do side-along apparation?"

Only Kingsley and Titanhorn raised their hands. It was something.

"Okay then, secure the wounded and fall back into formation. You have thirty seconds."

Without Stratus there, no one questioned this new shift in command, even if it did happen to fall on the shoulders of a sixteen year old boy. It wasn't a time for questions. They just wanted to get out of there, with as many of them alive as possible. Kingsley took care of Aresphere, levitating her into the center of their formation with the unconscious wizard and Lysander still carrying Guppy. Harry took up a side position, while Kingsley led, being their unofficial navigator for their retreat.

The mist was now only twenty feet on either side of them, and they could make out the half formed shadows moving inside, and soon the soft clumpf-clumpf of hooves against the soft forest floor and the shuffle of bare feet over leaves. Their party moved as silently as they were followed, their wands drawn and their eyes riveted to the mist. Harry's breath quickened with every step closer to the idol. Did the

enemy know that their escape was near? If they did, would they allow them to escape or make one last attack?

Why were they even attacking them? Lysander had said the fae might come after him specifically, but this battle felt far from personal. And why kill them? Were they inherently against Harry's group or just wizards in general? Didn't fae prefer to take their victims alive to bring them into their fold? None of this made sense to him.

He could only wonder these things for a short time, before they drew so close to the idol that all Harry could think of was how many things could go wrong. The mist hovered in a ring around them, leaving him feeling trapped. The feeling of eyes upon him made him sweat. His palms were slick, but he didn't dare lower his wand to rub them dry on his cloak. No sign of weakness, not even for a split second. Not when they were so close.

"We're here," Kingsley whispered, and they all tensed, as if expecting his declaration to trigger an attack. Nothing happened, and after a moment, he spoke again. "We should go altogether."

"This doesn't feel right," Harry said.

No one said anything for a moment, too afraid to stay or attempt to leave.

"Yeah," Titanhorn said at last, "This does kind of feel like a trap."

And then the mist began to retreat rapidly, the clear circle around them dilating into a wider one. Harry had known they were being followed and he hadn't even attempted to guess the numbers, but whatever number he might have come up with it would not have been the one he saw before them. The fifteen odd mounted elves had tripled, and they were joined by still more elf or elf-like peoples mounted on horses or deer, or in one case a unnaturally large wolf. The mouthless fiends had been joined by a number of other creatures; goat-headed phookas, saw-toothed bogles, goodfellows and pucks leering at them between the legs of the mounts, and scattered about them were the more civilized young elves dressed in

the heraldry of their masters or holding back a eager white hound with a touch of its hand.

Fear. Harry had known it intimately since becoming a wizard, and it would be a lie to say he hadn't felt this particular type before. He had known it when facing the dragon. He had known it when facing the basilisk and the grindylows. He had even known it in the presence of the Dark Lord. But he had never faced any of those things with such an absolute certainty of death before.

Harry stared out at the sea of faces, and they stared back with the full range of emotion from pity to amusement to pure loathing. He did not move. They did not move. The moment stretched and still no attack and no retreat.

What were they waiting for?

Then by some cue, which Harry was not privy to, Titanhorn apparated away with Aresphere and an audible pop. There was a collective start amongst Harry's group and momentary panic, but from the crowd there was no reaction at all.

"Don't apparate," Kingsley said quickly. "There's something wrong."

"Then what the bloody hell do we do?" Lysander growled.

There was another pop and Titanhorn was there again... most of him at least. Harry only dared the briefest glance towards him, but what he saw left him swallowing back his own vomit. Of Aresphere there was noting to be seen, but of the squadron leader there was only segments of a whole fallen motionless to the ground; large, bloodless pieces of himself missing. Harry had heard of splinching, everyone who learned to apparate did, but the splinching while practicing in an open field and splinching while attempting to apparate while under a powerful anti-apparation ward were two totally different things. As horrible as it was to think, Harry hoped the man the dead and that it wasn't shock that sustained his wretched silence.

Tittering laughter ran through the crowd of fae on the ground, scattered amongst the perpetually and often cruelly amused

goodfellows and puck. Harry leveled a glare at one, and it let out a little eep and hid behind a satyr. The elves which had been sitting stoically on their mounts, suddenly stirred, turning their attention to a certain point in their crowd. Reluctantly, he followed their line of sight.

The Enchantress moved forward, stepping out of the mist that lingered at the party's edge, and everyone before her moved respectfully out of her way. He noticed for the first time that she wore a quiver of arrows and a short bow over her shoulder, and that she was not in fact an elf. Her pale skin held the faintest pattern of scales to it, that could only be seen when the light caught it just right, and there was no pointed tip to her ears.

She was a naga.

"Welcome, wayward adventurers," she greeted warmly, her voice musical and soft, like a gently pluck harp. "To this Twilight Court, you have proven your noble character in the eyes of my people, and I invite you to dine at my Master's table with a banquet in your honor. Please lower your wands, and you will have nothing more to fear from us."

No one said anything. She looked around expectantly.

"Have you no reply?"

Again, no one spoke. What could they say? She had just tried to kill them and was now inviting them to dinner. She was either crazy or this was a trick. Maybe both.

After another silent moment, she seemed to think of something.

"Who among you is the leader?"

Harry reflexively turn to Kinglsey, only to find the man looking at him... as well as the werewolves and the rest of the squadron. Well, that was just fantastic. He took a deep breath and let it out, then turned towards her. He took a few steps forward, placing himself between her and his people.

"I suppose I am... since you seem to have killed the last two."

"One."

Harry just looked at her.

"We only killed the one, and technically speaking he killed himself when he tried to escape. He would have been perfectly fine if he hadn't attempted to abandon you while you were surrounded."

He was seriously tempted to point out that Titanhorn had tried to save Aresphere, not himself, and that he had no reason to think they couldn't escape just as easily as he could... or thought he could. However, something else she said was more important to him than defending the honor of dead man he barely knew.

"Stratus is alive?"

"The man who cast the fire spell? I do believe so. My Master was most impressed with him, and went out to meet him in person. I suspect he will survive this night and join us at the banquet table. Will you not put up your weapons? You have been tested to the extent that is necessary, and anything more would only be cruelty on our part."

She was definitely crazy. The question now remained if this was or wasn't a trick. There was a good chance she was being perfectly honest, and if that were the case this might be the only opportunity they had to walk out there alive. Whether alive or dead was the better option was another question altogether.

"And then you will bring us to your Master's table and we will eat your faerie food and drink your faerie wine, and we will never be able to leave your Twilight Court again."

She nodded in agreement.

"Indeed, that is the gentlest Introduction we can offer you. This trial must have seemed harsh to you, but we are not brutes who delight in

your misery. Your nobility does you credit, especially for one so young, and I would not see you suffer any more."

Harry felt something stir inside him when she said 'I' instead of 'we', and he crushed it ruthlessly. She was called an enchantress for a reason, and he forced himself to remain on his guard and truly think clearly about what she was saying. The offer into this 'Twilight Court' was genuine, it had to be, but if it were accepted there was no telling what the about the end result. Perhaps they would become faeries themselves, a rainbow selection of the ethereal and the monstrous, or perhaps they might only become slaves, immortal and bound to the service of her ladyship's master and his court, or kept as a tithe, a sacrifice to the Earth itself to secure their own immortality. There were endless possibilities, endless wonders they might experience and behold and equally endless horrors. The faerie realms, innumerable and vast, were not known for making the distinction.

Harry's soul had been forfeit to the Earth the moment he bartered it for his godfather's life and wore the blessings of at least two goddesses already, so for him the consequences were already limited to what they would or could do. Kingsley and the others, however, were not so bound. Their souls could be torn from them, twisted by magics, or sold to dark forces.

The Enchantress appeared kind and sympathetic, but already she demonstrated an inability to comprehend human suffering or reasoning, and what she might view as a kindness or a reasonable action could easily lead to an endless hell. So what could he do? His options were either to fight to the death now or gamble their very souls by playing along and hoping to be presented with an opportunity to escape later.

He considered his options for several minutes. She did not rush him, and the fae waited just as patiently. They had all the time in the world. He looked back at the others, who were not waiting patiently but bound anxiously in place as they waited for him to decide their fate. He should ask them what they wanted, he knew, it was only fair, but how could he expect them to answer a question they didn't fully understand the consequences of? None but Stratus and Lysander (who was in the same position as Harry) had seemed to demonstrate

any knowledge of the fae or of the Old Ways. What did they know in this moment aside from an overwhelming fear for their life and the vague and distant warnings of childhood faerie tales? His scarred hand began to burn with the anticipation of battle.

He turned back to the Enchantress, to tell her they would play along for now, while fully intending to find some means of escape en route. She was not so easily fooled, however.

"I can see in your eyes you have already made a decision," she said, her smile fading sadly from her face. "I wish it had not been so."

She lifted her silver wand.

Harry was faster.

"Coliginus obscuro!"

Inspired by her spell, he summoned a thick fog to surround not only himself but his people and their enemy, blinding them all, extending it outward until it reached the faeries' own enchanted mist.

"Scatter!" he shouted, "Run and scatter and fight like hell!"

And then the true battle began. Lightening flashes of magic burst through the fog, signaling curses and shields. The fae, which had been standing so calmly when they thought the battle already won, were now being thrown into chaos. Flying spells and fleeing prey were forcing them to move, but they could not see, not the little creatures at their feet or the large ones bearing down on them. They were as much a danger to each other as to their intended victims, and Harry hoped his comrades would take the fullest advantage of that, because he could do no more for them. Their alliance was at an end and they were responsible for their own survival now.

He bolted in the direction he judged there were the greatest number of mounts and least number of smaller fae on the ground, but almost immediately ran into resistance. A bogle came screaming out at him, swing his cudgel violently. He met it with a blasting hex that destroyed the cudgel and sent the creature flying into one of its

brothers. A moment later two more bogles and a phooka similarly armed with sticks and clubs, and gave them a quick and nasty Shocking Hex, before turning directions sharply into another part of the crowd. There were several puck and small hobgoblins here, but they fled with an angry hiss as much of a fight as they were willing to risk . He continued his blind rush, bumping unexpectedly into one of the mouthless horrors, but just kept running rather than stop. It clicked its multi-jointed fingers and gave chase, but was soon lost as everyone else in the confusion.

Twice he was nearly run over by a mounted rider, six times he was forced to defend himself with magic, twice he bumped into something and never learned what it was, three times a spell from a wizard's wand flew within inches of him, and once he ran into a tree but luckily no one was around to notice. All around him he could hear screaming and shouting and panicked animals, and he wondered at how he could have been the source of it all, but more than that was primal animal fear of being caught.

He almost didn't notice the steady rhythm of hoof steps charging up behind him time, and only just managed to duck to the side before being run down, and then ducked again when the horse-like creature's elven rider took a swing at him with his sword. The third strike was speared down at him where he lay prone on the ground. Harry caught it instinctively with his left hand, and felt the magic lingering there repel the cut of the blade*. The elf jerked it back and ended pulling Harry back up to his feet, his almond shaped eyes widening when he didn't take off a few fingers at the same time. The elf, male with a collection of gnarled twig-like growths for hair, kicked him in the chest. Harry took the blow with a pained grunt, but lunged again, catching the sword again his left hand while pointing his wand with this right.

"Stupefy," he snarled, and elf let go of his hold on the sword and his mount, and fell in a graceless heap on the ground. The horse panicked, reared, and Harry dropped the weapon into order to grab hold of its reigns. It whinnied and bucked in protest, but he managed to climb into the saddle. He picked a direction at random and kicked the mount into a quick trot. Fae appeared rapidly, diving out of the way or making desperate leaps at him, forcing him to cast a spell or a

well placed boot to dislodge them.

On and on it went, a seemingly endless journey through the thick ranks of creatures, clinging to the possibility of escape when at every turn there was another and another. He had cuts on his legs where claws and knives had glanced him and bruises on his arms and shoulder from running blindly into objects and people. His head ached and his hands burned. Adrenaline kept him alert, but exhaustion was quickly creeping in.

Finally, the ranks began to thin, imperceptibly at first, but then seeming all at once. The mist suddenly receded or rather Harry found himself passing some invisible barrier that it would not or could not cross. He felt relief at having regained his sense of sight an distance, but his sense of location was more disoriented than ever. He was not where he was supposed to be.

He was in a forest, that was certain, and it was both autumn and the lighter side of twilight, which seemed the proper hour, but that was where the consistency of where he was and where he had been ended. The forest he left, while small, was ancient and its trees and its stones and the very air itself was weighted with age, cluttered with the debris of centuries passed and swallowing the sky with skeletal grasping limbs. This forest was young, the trees foreign with small, silvery trunks and leaves shaped like golden hearts or exploding red fireworks. The sky was dark blue on one end and brilliant pink and orange clouds on the other. The air was crisp, but the ground was thick with summer grass and hardy white and yellow flowers defiant of the autumn frosts grew up between the disbursed shadows. There were birds singing, and it wasn't normally something he would notice except for its strangeness. Bird song was for spring and summer, and even if it was early autumn in this place it struck him as incongruent.

Where ever he was, it wasn't Ireland. At least not Ireland, as he knew it. The air, the plants, and even the smell was different. He did not know this place at all. Logic dictated that he go back in the direction he had come and hope when he emerged next it would be to something familiar. Looking back at the floating mass of undulating gray shadows however was like looking into a raging sea under a

silencing charm. Nothing but death awaited him there, or possibly something worse.

He was left unsure of what to do next. He was alone. There was no enemy, no friend, no battle to fight, no direction preferred so long as it was not back, no landmarks, no food, no shelter, no night, no day, no injury that needed his immediate attention, no energy to do so anyway, and no idea of what to do or if he even had the option of deciding. For many minutes, he simply sat trying to think of what he should be doing, unable to take action without a goal to obtain or a consequence to avoid, except to avoid capture or death and there was little enough he could do intelligently without knowing where he was or where the fae were.

Were they still looking for him, hunting him? Were they satisfied to have him in this place where they could pursue him at their leisure? Was this a faerie realm or somewhere in his own by which the Enchantress' mist had somehow transported him through? Had anyone else escaped or had he condemned them all with look in the naga's knowing gaze? Had he given himself away subconsciously? What resentment or what rebellion had she seen when she looked at him? If Kingsley had been elected, would things have played out this way?

"What should I do?" he asked aloud, submitting his inquiry to the universe. The universe was apparently busy however and ignored him. He repeated the question to his horse, who wasn't busy but wasn't interested enough to answer either. "Fine. What would Voldemort do?"

Probably go back into the mist and capture a fae and torture it until he was led to freedom. Or actually succeed in playing along with the Enchantress until he got back to their strong hold and then slaughter everyone. Or call upon some esoteric magic Harry had never heard of himself. Or...

He pulled out his watch, which had remained his constant and dutiful companion through every adventure he had ever had as a wizard (except for the one where he was naked at the werewolf spirit possession ceremony) and proved itself to be as tenaciously durable

as Harry himself. He flipped it open and carefully removed the gold ring from its inconspicuous hold along the interior rim of the top cover. It was perhaps the only true gift the Dark Lord had ever given him. 'To help keep you from misplacing yourself' he had said. Never was there a situation where Harry felt more displaced than now. He placed it over the watch face.

He didn't understand exactly how the location ring worked, but it was not like a locating charm, which only worked for locating a particular thing or place within a certain distance. The locating ring worked anywhere and regardless of distance or at least it had in his own realm. He would find out now just how far its magical ability extended.

"Traleefore."

The short hand swung about three times and paused between the 3 and 4 and settled. This was the north hand. Harry checked the sunset and confirmed that where ever he was it had a north that was in the same position as it was at home. The long hand, the locating hand, jiggled back and forth for several more seconds before finally settling firmly on the 5. Harry was both confused and relieved that it wasn't pointing at the fog but a few degrees from parallel to it.

"Kingsley," he said.

The second hand swung immediately in the direction of the fog. His protector was alive then, but in what condition? Injured? Captured? There was little Harry could do against the fae army, where both terrain and numbers favored them, but still he needed to do something, anything, no matter how trivial or futile.

"Expecto patronum!"

The patronus appeared in a burst of dazzling light from his wand, startling his mount so he had to struggle to remain seated. The ghostly stag lingered only long enough to glance at its summoner before bounding into the mist. The guilt eased a little as he watched the ethereal glow fade. At the very least, if Kingsley or the other Culties lived and remained free they could follow his patronus out of the mists and follow Harry's path to where ever it was he found

himself riding. It was a slim chance, but it was something. Harry could not wait around to see if worked. The fae were just as likely to follow the beacon of light to him as his comrades. More so even, and staying where he was wasn't a good idea anyway.

This was a logical stand point, but not one he felt emotionally. Something about the half lighted world invoked a mood and mindset of stillness, inviting him to simply stay exactly where he was and stare at the brilliantly painted sky and listen to the surrounding birdsong, to think or not think about anything and everything. He didn't know if this was a natural response to the fatigue and the illusion of safety the place provided or another form of enchantment to keep mortals who wandered in from attempting to run out again. He overcompensated the mental lull by kicking his mount into a run. The ground was unusually clear of hazards and with no trees suddenly lifting a root or gliding into their path or any sign of pursuit by the fae ,their speed was impressive. Harry was no expert on horses and this creature was completley foreign to him, but he knew that what he was riding was of excellent breeding by the smooth, powerful movements beneath him and the unlabored breathing as it ate up miles with its unflagging pace.

When the mount finally did slow it was not due to fatigue. They reached a small creek, or a large spring, and stopped. 'Heed my words though. If ya find yerself following the edge of a spring, turn back the way ye came,' the village elder had said. A moment of nerves reminded him he was due to take another dose of his anti-anxiety potion, but he he held off. If there was ever a place to feel nervous this was it. Should he go back the way he had come as the old man suggested, or had he been referring to some other spring as Harry couldn't imagine how he would have known of this one and even if it was the same spring he had been forewarned about were the circumstances dire enough to disregard the advice? He couldn't judge objectively at this point. His own hydrophobia was practically screaming at him to stay as far away from the water's edge as possible.

He checked his watch, which pointed mercilessly across the spring without wavering.

"It is what it is," he said to himself, and turned his mount upstream to look for a likely crossing point or even a bridge. It wasn't until a few minutes later that Harry became aware that the sun still hadn't set yet. In fact, after nearly an hour, it did not appear to have moved at all. Strange.

He did not have long to ponder on the phenomenon when he came to a likely crossing point. The spring widened, becoming shallower, and either side of its banks was lined with shallow slope of rocky sand that would make entering and exiting the water easy. About the only potential hazard he could see was the over abundance of cattails and reeds springing up on either side that they might get tangled in. He steered towards the crossing point, but the animal became reluctant as they came close to the water, and drew back.

"Ssshhh, hey now, what's this? You're a spoiled thing," he said soothingly, rubbing its long, flexible neck gently. "Don't tell me you're afraid to get your hooves wet?"

"You do not seem any more eager than she does to brave the water."

Harry reeled back sharply with one hand and brought out his wand with the other, spinning them both around to face the voice's source. Seated upon her own horse-like mount not twenty feet away, was the Enchantress. Despite the chaos he had caused before, she appeared completely unaffected by the event, staring at him with that same serene expression. Her bow and arrows were at her back, but she still held her wand in the open, held lightly in the hand she had folded elegantly over her the horn of her saddle. Standing against a backdrop of sunset, she looked even more beautiful than he remembered, and if he wasn't in very real fear of his life he thought he could stay there and just admire her for hours. Instead, he prepared himself to do battle.

"My friends?" he demanded with more confidence than he felt.

"They are in our custody. Your efforts were admirable, but in vain."

Guilt and dread sunk their claws into his psyche at her words, but he forced himself to remain focused on the here and now.

"Admirable?" he scoffed. "Did I not attempt to abandon my friends while they were surrounded? That seemed to be a crime worthy of death last time we spoke."

"You made the effort to save them as well as yourself. The opportunity and risk you took was equal to theirs, and when you saw that you had escaped and they had not, you sent back help. Your spirit familiar is beautiful, by the way."

His mouth felt suddenly dry. She looked at him steadily and read his thoughts like a book.

"He is untouched. He disappeared when there was nothing that could be done for your people."

He quickly turned his eyes away. He felt none of the strange pressure against his mind that signaled an illegitimate, but her uncanny ability to read him was unsettling.

"So what now?" he asked. "I won't simply let you take me. I can't."

"Yes, and I cannot let you go without one last entreaty," she said, all gentle compassion. "Please do not fight us. It breaks my heart to see you fear me."

And he felt his heart break for her, because he could tell that she meant it. She did not want to do this to him, but some duty bound her to this calling. He pitied her and hated himself for the weakness.

"Do not draw on me, my lady," he said, the old fashioned endearment strange and yet apt somehow, "And I will not fear you or attempt to harm you."

"But you will run?"

"I must. There are people I care about waiting for me."

"A lover?" she asked, and still managed to sound innocent while doing so.

"I am a little young for that," he said, and found himself smiling, before he caught himself doing it and twisted it back into a scowl. "You are delaying me intentionally. I am leaving."

"I will not draw upon you," she said, as he began to back his horse away from her. "If you give me a kiss."

He froze. What trickery was this? He looked around quickly to see if someone was pointing a bow at him. There was no one he could see, but that meant very little in this place.

"What? Why would you want that?"

"My name is Selufiare, and as you may have deduced I am an enchantress of the realm of Hausteheim*. A kiss is a very powerful thing to my kind. I can divine your past and your future with only a kiss or learn your deepest desire."

"Or become my deepest desire? How am I to know what sort of spell I will fall under?" he asked, carefully withdrawing closer to the water's edge. He didn't know how he would cross it without turning his back to her, but the longer he stayed in her presence the more dangerous things seemed to become.

"My kiss would also allow you safe passage through Hausteheim."

He just stared at her.

"You are trying to trick me."

"I do not lie."

"You can trick someone without lying to them. I am going. For both our sakes, don't draw your wand."

The look she gave him was heartbreaking, and she looked away and wiped a tear away. Harry, despite saying he would go, stopped to watch her, mesmerized.

"I will not fight you. That is not my my purpose. Please remember I tried to spare you this."

She turned her mount and as she did, whatever enchantment she had held over him fell away and he could see they had not been alone. A short distance behind her was an elf... or something. He held the same build and facial structure of the elves he had seen previously, but lacked any unusual physiology. His hair was black and tied back from pale face and eyes an intense electric blue. The more Harry looked, the more similar the elf resembled Selufiare, and though they were a different species he suspected there was some form of kinship between them.

Whatever relation they were to each other, their similarities ended at their physical appearance. There was nothing resembling compassion in his eyes, only a cruel amusement that he had seen on the face of another a thousand times before. Harry kicked his mount and turned it towards the spring, only to have it rear up beneath him. Caught off guard, he was thrown and landed heavily on his back and side. The horse nearly trampled him a moment later as it ran past him and back into the forest. Winded and disoriented, he rolled onto all fours, and immediately started looking for his wand.

His hand closed on something long, thin, and radiating magic but it wasn't his wand. It was a hand or some equivalent of one, composed of what looked to be reeds, and it was attached to a an equally thin and brittle arm and that arm was attached to the body of a very naked, pale green tinted woman. Her enormous black eyes blinked guilelessly at him for a moment, her pretty pointed face seemingly perplexed. Then she smiled wide with her razor sharp teeth, and grabbed his hand. A shellycoat*, one of the innumerable breeds of water faeries that made drowning humans their habit. He jerked back, but her hold was unbreakable and she dragged him towards the thick cluster of reeds that must have been her hiding spot.

As he thrashed and struggled to pull back, he felt the magic of Gryffidnor's sword surge into his palm, and brought it around to swipe at her like an angry cat. The shellycoat screamed in pain, a croaky, inhuman sound, and released him or rather withdrew from him as her severed hand was still gripping firmly to his. He shook it free violently

and then made another swipe at her with his hand, but she was already disappearing into the water and was swimming further down stream. Seeing she was gone, he tried searching for his wand again, and found the distraction had allowed the mysterious elf from before to close in. He was now standing only a few feet away, and holding Harry's wand.

"That was... interesting..." the elf said, his voice vaguely mocking. His elven features were somewhat more muted up close, making him look more exotic than alien to his human eyes, but there was something... off about him. The young wizard was reminded inexplicably of the Dark Lord yet again, and that wasn't in anyway comforting. "I have not seen a magical ability such as that before. I should like to test it."

From a sheath at his back, the elf drew his blade and swung it down. Harry blocked it with his 'sword hand' instinctively, but his position was bad, and he was knocked off balance. He rolled to avoid the second strike, and threw a handful of pebbles at his attacker's face to buy the two seconds he needed to get to his feet. The third strike missed, and it caught him across the left arm. The stumbled backwards, and the elf let him, watching him with that same amused expression as the pain eventually registered. It had all happened so quickly, but even so the elf seemed to be holding back. To be testing him or just mocking him.

"Ugh..." Harry moaned, then grit his teeth as pain flared in his arm. His eyes suddenly widened, recalling Kern's unenviable fate. "Have you poisoned me?"

The elf gave him an annoyed look.

"Poisoning is a woman's sport."

Faeries were weird, the Gryffindor decided.

"And who are you, if you don't mind my asking?" he said, trying to hide his agony with a light tone but only managed to sound sarcastic instead. This didn't bother the elf in the slightest.

"Oh, travelers these days, they really should know a little more about the places they are going to. I am Gulantri Le' Espirriur, the Twilight King, master of Hausteheim, and father to the fair lady you have become so enamored of," he introduced, making a courtly gesture towards his daughter, who was carefully looking away from them both. "And you are the irascible little devil who has been causing my people a great deal of strife. I shall enjoy breaking you."

Finally on his feet, Harry managed to dodge the next swing by ducking behind a tree and attempted a strike of his own, but Gulantri proved faster and was on him again in a two step move, nicking him on the cheek this time. Harry made a run towards the river, but only made it the edge before another blow caught him across the back. He fell forward into a collection of reeds and wrist deep water. The shock of it left him half collapsed and staring down at his own blood staining the water red.

"If you are done then," the elf said, sounding disappointed. "Then simply hold still. I will end this quickly."

Cold steel pressed against Harry's neck, the new shock bringing him back to reality. His sword hand closed around an unbroken cattail, and he swung around. Magic surged through his hand and into the frail plant, stiffening and strengthening it instantly. He caught the elf across the chest, causing the seed head to explode into a mass of billowing cotton splashed with red. A thin line of blue fire marked the wound from bottom rib to sternum.

Gulantri took a surprised stepped backwards, then looked down at the wound curiously. He swiped his hand over it as if wiping off a bit of dirt, and to Harry's amazement not only did the magical blue flames disappear, so did the wound itself so that only a bit of pale flesh appeared through the torn clothing. The elf looked at him and grinned.

"My daughter inherited her gifts from my side of the family."

And then he speared his blade into Harry's body and the boy knew no more.

~ Page Break~

Tom had suffered a fair number of humiliations in his life at the hands of others, particularly during his youth when his indeterminate lineage justified enough cause for scorn and jealousies ran unchecked and ill hidden, but none had been as public as the one he suffered now. Stripped of his wand, his weapons, his cloak, and his shoes, he was secured in what looked like a modified oxbow, his hands secured parallel to his head. Further, he was chained to four of his fellow prisoners in a line, as they all struggled to keep up and their pace with the heavy wooden yokes throwing off their balance and preventing them from catching themselves if they started to tilt. The situation was made worse by the number of hideous little creatures that amused themselves by poking and prodding at them as they passed, and climbed under their feet and between their legs, while their larger cousins shoved them forward at a relentless pace. Several times the entire line of prisoners was thrown off balance by a careless shove, causing them all to fall, and several minutes had to be spent pulling them all upright again before forcing them back to marching. The mounted elves regarded this with a superior disdain but did nothing to help or hinder it.

The dead had been slung over the mounts of the riding elves like killed game, while the injured had been tossed into a little wooden cart and hauled along by several goat-headed fae. He had taken count of all of the prisoners when they had been dragged into the temporary camp he had been held at, but none of them had been Harry or the werewolves. He hoped that meant the boy had somehow managed to escape with their help, but attempting to ask the fae had only resulted in painful blow across his face. Attempting to speak to Kingsley or anyone else had a similar outcome. He marked that elf in particular and fantasized for several minutes about forcing him to eat his own entrails.

After a brief time, they were bound up and made to march, and he was forced to keep his focus on the trail ahead of him and planning his escape. Soon after the concealing fog began to dissipate and the faerie realm they had been brought to began to reveal itself, a realm of infinite autumn and twilight, always burning in color and swallowed in shadows. The ground was cold beneath their bare feet, but the

exertion of their forced trek left them sweaty and hot in the chill air. The native fae revealed themselves as well, an amalgamation of the ethereally beautiful and the hideously disfigured, prideful elegance and animal brutishness. He only recognized about half of them from his studies, and even those he held some uncertainty about. All he did know was that he hated them, and would not tolerate being their captive indefinitely.

Tom plotted his vengeance with every step he took.

There was a brief moment he thought he caught a glimpse of a white deer out of the corner of his eyes and feared his young friend had foolishly returned to rescue them, but when he turned his head to look he lost his balance and dragged everyone else into his fall. By the time they had been straightened out again, the deer, if it had ever been there, was gone.

After what seemed an entire day, although there was no way to judge it without a moving sun or a watch, and many miles of walking without rest, they came to a fortress. At least, Tom thought it was a fortress. All he could see of it was a massive stone battlement with archers standing upon the wall and glaring down at them distrustfully. There was no moat, but a portcullis was raised to allow them entry, and if Tom had thought they were in a large crowd before it was nothing compared to what they faced when stepping into the stronghold. There were thousands more inside, a larger portion of them the highly developed elves and a number of dwarves and gnomes of more modest garb, were moving about the various stalls and shops that were pressed against the battlement walls, representing the thriving economy of the community. At the sight of the returning hunting party a cheer rose up among the crowd, and they closed in to greet the hunters and catch a glimpse of their quarry. They were speaking in their native tongue now, and he didn't understand much of what was said, but he thought many of them were attempting to throw in bids to purchase either the living or the dead amongst the prisoners which were steadfastly ignored or turned aside. A particularly bold young elf slipped through the gathered throng to touch the exposed wound Gulandri had left in his side from the remainder of their fight, and Tom repaid the sudden flare of agony with a kick to the child's face.

That earned a few nasty strikes with a riding crop from a mounted elf, but it was worth it to hear the brat scream. Let it be a portent of things to come, he thought to himself.

Further in the settlement did not build upwards, but down into a enormous circular pit nearly three hundred feet deep and lined with homes and business and entrances to tunnels that lead even further underground. The interiors were stone, but the exterior of these places was covered in adornments of wood carvings and metalwork, painted and polished in a kaleidoscope of cheerful colors and shapes, illuminated by hundreds of colored glass lanterns strung crisscross from top to bottom of the pit. At the bottom of the pit was a large pool of water that had been converted into a sort of public garden, with small islands of potted plants and wooden bridges floating around it. Water fae of varying breeds swam or perched themselves along the stone platforms along its edge, displaying their naked forms shamelessly as they stared up with hungry eyes at the mortal men and women descending towards their domain. A narrow road spiraled downwards at a steady incline, which brought them about halfway from the bottom, before their handlers turned them into the entrance of a large tunnel.

The tunnels lost the colorful facade and fell to using colorless stone murals and statues as the main form of decoration, depicting histories and battles and stories of the culture Tom could not interpret. The tunnel they followed was tall enough to accommodate even a troll, but a majority of the tunnels that branched off were much smaller, suggesting the place had not only been originally built by dwarves but also built with their needs in mind and not that of elves or larger races. It was likely the strong hold had not originally belonged the elves that now ran it.

At last they stopped at a collection of cells. They were manacled by their ankles in groups of three inside each, before being freed from their yokes. They were given water which they all drank greedily, and then left alone in their cells. Kingsley was not among his cellmates as he would have preferred, but he turned to a female comrade to ask how their battle had gone down. For a while she would not speak, exhaustion having made her apathetic, but a slap to the face brought her out of it quickly enough. She spoke haltingly at first, explaining

the events immediately after he had been separated from them, and their desperate attempt to save not only themselves but the injured as well and how it had all fallen apart.

"I know he tried," she said, sniffing a bit, "Potter, I mean. I know he tried to give us a chance, but it only made things worse. They'd have taken us civil-like if he hadn't have given them an excuse. Then that trick he pulled with the Fog Charm... well that put them in a real temper afterward. In the end, he's the only one that got away, and we were left dealing with a bunch of pissed of faeries."

He ignored her after that, feeling little more than contempt for her or the rest of his fellow prisoners after she had finished. Potter had not messed up anything. He had given them the opportunity to get away and they blew it. How he had managed to escape was something Tom hoped he would be able to ask him about one day. It seemed quite a miraculous feat all its own. He quickly banished the thoughts, to consider his next move. If Harry had managed to escape and tell Malfoy of what happened, there was no telling how long before help came for them or if it would come at all. No one there was particularly essential, and risking a raid against the fae could ignite another war Britain could not afford. Tom had to prepare himself to abandon his current body yet again, but did not wish to do so unless absolutely necessary. If he could, in fact, escape with his own wits then surely he would be commended and some advancement in position would be offered even as Lord Malfoy sunk lower in the Dark Lord's esteem for defying his orders and nearly killing Potter as a result.

He pondered his options for the next few hours he had to himself. He was proficient enough in wandless magic that he could have escaped his chains, enchanted though they were, and the prison cell easily enough, but beyond that he wasn't so sure. The structure of the fairy den was hive-like and crowded, and while concealment charms were likely to work on many of the denizens it was just as likely to attract the attention of others. Even if he were to abandon his mortal body, his spirit would then be vulnerable to the number of spirit predators that haunted such places, snatching up wandering souls of mortals killed by faeries.

Then there was the matter of Gulandri.

Tom did not fear much, but one of the few things he did was that cunning elf. They had met before, long ago when Tom still had a majority of his soul intact and was still under the apprenticeship of Carrigan. He had not been a king then, only the king's attendant, but one already feared by wizard and fae alike. Only Carrigan had not been afraid of him, just as he had not been afraid of Tom himself, even knowing his true nature. Every so often when Venus was bright enough to see even before the sun had fully set, Gulandri would appear at Carrigan's door with some dumb creature he had slain in a hunt and have the druid prepare a meal for him. The few times Tom had been present for these appearances, he had not said a word and merely watched or did some chore at his teacher's request.

One day the elf had turned to him suddenly and said.

"Speak your mind, you wicked child."

He was caught off guard, but when those dark eyes refused to turn away from him until he said something he finally asked, "You are a very dangerous man. I have heard whispers of your name in these parts, that none who see you walk away alive, but you come here frequently and eat with my master and then leave without harming either of us. Why?"

The elf smiled.

"Because I was invited in."

He said nothing else and it wasn't until he had gone that Tom went and told Carrigan what was said.

"He speaks only half a truth. Faeries are bound by rules of hospitality. Inviting him into my home means he can do me no harm while inside it, but he could very easily have harmed you or else waited for me to leave my home. His pacifism serves a different purpose. Mortal hospitality has its own benefits to him. I prepare all my meals with the help of magic, which means when he eats what I cook him he is consuming some of it himself. This is the true reason behind his visitations. He leaves me unharmed because it increases his power."

"And that does not bother you? He may be using that power against wizards."

"Should it bother me how you yourself use what I teach you, my apprentice? Do you not use some of what you learn against wizards, as well?"

Tom had said nothing, caught off guard for the second time that evening. It always threw him that he could hide nothing from Carrigan, but unlike Dumbledore the druid neither feared it nor attempted to change him, despite him being even more soft-hearted than that senile old fool in many ways.

"What is he doing with all that power?" he had asked instead.

"I don't know."

"You don't care?"

"I do, but not in a personal way. I care the same way I care about floods and blizzards and all other sorts of natural forces. It is not my place to attempt to influence these things. They happen for a reason and in their due course. Gulantri has power because it is in his nature to gather it and because nature intended him to have it."

"And what is my nature?"

Carrigan had smiled, and chuckled softly.

"Your nature is ephemeral. It is changeable and changing. That is the difference between humans and faeries. They can't change what they are. Humans can. For better or worse."

Carrigan's words rang true now. Gulantri was unchanged, still the charming brute, half mad and half genius, and completely unpredictable. Kingship had not changed him nor what ever circumstances that had resulted in him attaining that position as it had the Dark Lord, although they were in many ways cut from the same

cloth. Yes, in his own realm, Tom considered Gulandri a Dark Lord of the fairies.

The only noticeable difference was the dark elf's ability to use magic, which he had not thought him capable of. It could have been a more recent development, perhaps having consumed enough magic of wizards, he had attained some magical ability of his own or perhaps he had always the ability and never bothered to demonstrate it in front of him before. Regardless, he was confident he could defeat him with proper preparation and planning, but he didn't have proper anything at the moment and he could not afford to confront him a second time.

He would need to be cautious, which had never come easily to him.

His cellmates had both fallen into a exhausted sleep, and where not stirred when their cell door opened. A pair of burly dwarves entered, and in short order had Tom's hands tied behind his back and a noose looped around his neck. The indignity of the situation was amplified by the fact that he was alone and worsened when he was forced to crouch and hobble through a series low tunnels, pinched and poked by every mischievous passerby they encountered. He fully expected things to only get worse, for him to be brought before a gaping crowd as some sport for their base amusement.

He was surprised when he wasn't brought to some public spectacle, but a small, lavishly decorated house and lead straight to a private bedroom where he was promptly cut free and left. In a lady's bedroom no less, although 'den' might have been more accurate. It was all oversized pillows and gold embroidered silks, glittering in the light of dozens of colored glass lanterns shaped like moons and stars and other celestial bodies. There was no mirror or wardrobe or writing desk in sight. It was a room dedicated solely to sleep and thoughtful repose.

Of the four occupants in the room, only two were using it for its intended purpose, and only one of those of his own free will. Tom felt his heart plummet as his eyes fell on Harry's pale, fevered form laid out across the nearby bed. He had been stripped down and wrapped in a blanket for modesty's sake, but was slowly squirming out of it in

the throes of nightmare that wouldn't release him. Nursing the boy's fading blotches of black and red bruises was the Enchantress, who upon closer inspection bore an uncanny resemblance to Gulandri. The room smelled of incense, but beneath that he detected Essence of Dittany and other herbs he was unfamiliar with. It made Tom suspect Harry's condition was either considerably worse than he thought or had been before he had arrived.

Almost against his will, he found himself leveling an accusatory glare at the fourth occupant of the room. Gulandri returned the look with one of his own, bemusement and arrogance in equal measure, as he reclined elegantly over his chair. In his hand was the frrykshimini, but he was not using it at the moment. He had seen all he needed to already.

"Wicked child," he greeted, "What games you have been playing. I do not think your master would have approved."

Tom sneered, matching his arrogance with a touch of his own. He might not have been equal to the dark elf in his own lair, but that did not mean he'd play the role of inferior either.

"I think he might have surprised you."

"He did manage from time to time," he offered beneficently. "It is unfortunate he had slipped his mortal coil before I had the opportunity to bring him here. I haven't had a decently prepared velorisp* since. Perhaps he can re-learn the gift."

"Oh, yes, his greatest achievement," Tom sneered, missing the last sentence in his eagerness to change the subject. "Why have you attacked us? You have always kept yourself apprised of the wizarding world, so you know of Lord Voldemort and you know attacking us could start a war."

Gulandri tilted his head, as if the spirit had performed an amusing little trick.

"For you? I hardly think so. For him?" Indicating the bedridden boy. "I am counting on it."

Surprise and dread welled up in Tom, as he stared at the elf. What was he intending by all of this? He had assumed Harry had been targeted as both an active pagan and for his heroic exploits at Dunnan Hill, not as a pawn in some larger plot. His eyes quickly scanned the rooms for potential weapons.

"Why? He'll destroy you. He'll destroy your entire court."

The elf smiled and pushed himself out of his chair with a languid grace.

"You truly are an arrogant creature. Do I or my court appear so fragile, so terrified of your 'Dark Magic'? We are not the idle Tuatha de Danann or the broken Mag Morians. We are Milesians. We were made for war. Our numbers have never been greater nor our strength. We will not be undone by the Dark Lord or his puny army. We will be made stronger by them."

"You're mad."

The elf approached leisurely, eying him curiously from head to toe.

"What is that saying? It is a muggle one. Something about a pot and a kettle?"

He reached up and poked Tom lightly on the cheek, as if seeing if he were actually real. The action was casual, but Tom's reaction was far from it. He felt his soul's grip on Stratus' body slip, and he was nearly thrown out of it completely. The eyes rolled to the back of head and it fell, twitching on the ground until the spirit could claw its way back and regain control of itself. Even so, he found himself laying on the ground and trembling uncontrollably for several minutes. Gulandri stared down at him with the closest thing to pity he could muster.

"You poor wicked child. You've shattered yourself on your own ambition, and to what ends? What future did you see for yourself?"

"The ssame future I sssee now... only with you dead at my feet," he cursed in parseltongue.

"Wicked child indeed," the naga hissed softly, and he turned sharply to her. He had forgotten her, and forgotten that nagas were serpents with human-ish forms. His surprise was compounded when Harry stopped squirming for a moment and spoke softly in the same hissing tones.

"My lord? Is that you?"

Tom felt an immediate sense of unreality. Three parselmouths in one room and none of them a fellow horcrux? It sent involuntary shiver of delight down his spine.

"What is this?" Gulandri asked, curious. "Another parselmouth? I did not believe he had that ability the last time we met. Your doing or your counterpart's?"

Reluctantly, Tom drew his attention back to the dark elf. Cautiously, he climbed back to his feet. His soul felt strangely loose, as if a sharp wind was all that it would take to knock him free. He leveled a defiant glare at Gulandri.

"You're senile. He was born with the gift. He's always had it."

The elf stared at him blankly for a moment. Hairs standing up on the back of his neck told him the naga was also staring at him now. It lasted for several uncomfortable seconds, then Gulandri broke out into laughter. Strong, ringing laughter, and if Tom were not the subject of the joke he might have mistaken it for a wholesome, pleasant sound. He would have to figure out what was so amusing to the elf about what he had said later, though. There were more immediate dangers.

"Oh, that is too precious," he laughed. "You all are going to be so much fun."

"What are you going to do to us?"

The laughter died away, although the amusement remained.

"What do you think? I will make use of you,. You... you I will find a form well suited to your wretched state, and then I will send you back to the mortal realm to collect the humans and muggles I need to maintain the tentative hold my kind has there. I believe you shall find the occupation... fulfilling."

Tom shuddered. Whatever form Gulandri had selected for him, it would not be humanish. The spirit did not think of himself as particularly vain, although he had enjoyed the benefits of being handsome in his mortal years, but to be some... creature... no matter how powerful. He could not imagine it. To be Gulandri's retrieving mongrel was inconceivable.

Then the elf moved around him, to stand behind the enchantress, placing his hands on her shoulders in an expression of familiarity. They both stared at the boy before them, the naga with concern, the elf with a touch of curiosity.

"This one has proven himself to be brave and honorable, even if he's an embarrassment with a sword, and I respect that. My daughter has expressed a fondness for him, and as he is capable of speaking her native tongue, I think I will let him remain her companion. Choose his form wisely, my flower."

He kissed her gently on the head, and she graced him with a grateful smile. Tom fought the urge to vomit. Gulandri straightened, and turned back to him.

"We are getting away from ourselves. I did not bring you here to reminisce or to gloat. I brought you here to ask you a question."

"Why should I tell you anything?"

"Use your imagination," he replied, unperturbed by his defiance. "Where is the one you called Voldemort now?"

"...Why?"

The elf sighed.

"How is he to rescue his... apprentice... or what ever the boy is... if I don't tell him where to find him?"

Tom just looked at him, the words 'You're mad' on the tip of his tongue, but after the last demonstration of the power the elf held over him, he holds it back.

"You... you truly wish to provoke him?"

"That is the whole point of this venture. Surely, you did not think it was for the young one? For you? You are middling fare in the scheme of things."

Tom considered. This dark elf wished to draw his elder counterpart into a battle, possibly, hopefully, to the death. He felt torn at the prospect. Having his two enemies face each other was something to be encouraged, as no matter who lost and if he were lucky it would be both, he would still be short one enemy. However, the prospect of Voldemort losing his life to anyone other than himself invoked a strange jealousy in him. Helping the arrogant fae king to lure his rival here felt strangely like a betrayal, if only of principle. What did you call someone who sold his fellow wizard to a fae? Who betrayed his own species for another?

A sigh drew his attention to the bed. Harry was settling into a deeper sleep under the Enchantress' hand on his bare chest, and as his face relaxed he looked truly small and frail and young. He was only sixteen but already covered in a network of magical scars and brands, his body strangely thin from years of abuse and injury. He was helpless now, completely and utterly. He needed Tom to save him, and Tom didn't know how he could rescue them both. Not alone.

He needed Voldemort.

Even if it was only to buy time.

"Saarland, the west side of Bostalsee Lake last I heard, but he may have moved on."

Gulandri nodded.

"Thank you," he said, with all the gravity of having been passed a roll at the dinner table. "Gugis fen!"

The gnomes from before entered the room yet again, carrying a new length of rope with them. Gulandri gave them further instructions in Milesian, and they fell upon Tom with the same rough efficiency as they had before. In less than a minute he was secured and lead out of the room with the same lack of ceremony he had upon entering it.

~ Page Break~

Once the prisoner had been led away, Gulandri's previous mirth returned and he found himself laughing again, longer and harder than he had previously allowed himself. He laughed and laughed, and it wasn't until Selufiare coughed politely to draw his attention that he reigned himself in. She didn't understand the joke, but then she had not known Carrigan.

"I apologize. It is simply that he does not recognize the boy, and if he does not, it is unlikely that Voldemort does either."

"I don't understand. Do you mean his previous incarnation? Or his present one?"

"Both. I thought it a cruel irony that the only person they seemed capable of caring for, is the very one most likely to undo them. The fact that they do not realize he is either of these things is... farcical. Really, I am doing them a favor."

She glanced down at the boy in her bed. He was handsome, or rather had the potential of being so. Time would strengthen his jaw line and wean the awkward tilting in his mouth into something more masculine and assertive, catching up to the fierce resolve of his eyes and body that she had seen briefly beside the spring. His magic surged and rolled like a hurricane, his spirit equally conflicted and impassioned. Behind all of that was the faint spiritual impressions of his past lives, like stained glass windows lain one on top of the other, the images gradually lost or distorted. Gulandri could see each of these lives more clearly than she with the help of frrykshimini, but she saw

enough if she concentrated to know his previous incarnation had been a considerably more peaceful and peaceable soul. She wondered at the circumstances that had made him what he was today, and if it had anything to do with the one called 'wicked child'.

"So this boy was once the one called Carrigan, his master? And now he calls the other 'my lord?'"

"For going around in circles, they've made considerable progress, don't you think? Maybe when the prophecy plays out, the child will kill his master and raise him like a son in his next incarnation. Maybe they've been doing this forever."

Again she was lost, and getting a touch annoyed with her father. As far as fathers went, she was more fortunate than most, but his tendency to assume she knew every secret and mystery he had gathered and cultivated in the course of his thousand years could be a bit aggravating. There was a prophecy now, however, and those were always concerning.

"And what is the prophecy?"

"Oh, the usual. They are destined to kill or be killed by each other. Or something along those lines."

"Won't that interfere in your plans?"

"Not if we kill the boy first."

She looked down at their captive. He was still so sickly from his injuries, that to kill him now would mean his resurrection would result in a weaker form and that would be a waste. Her father seemed to know her concerns, however and waylaid them.

"We needn't do so yet. It will be many hours, maybe days, before the true prey is set to arrive. You have sufficient skill to restore him before then."

There was a command hidden within the compliment which she acknowledged with a reserved nod and a 'it shall be so'. Satisfied, he left to summon a messenger.

He had a dark lord to taunt after all.

~ Page Break~

"What do you mean 'he's been taken'?" Lucius said, calmly. Very, very calmly. He was the picture of calm. He was not going to go to go to cast an evisceration curse on the werewolf standing in his office, delivering his death sentence without so much as a blink. He was that calm.

The mangy rogue had been brought direct from Ireland from the village of Traleefore, where he had scared the locals near to death before reporting that there had been an attack on Potter's party. The locals had dutifully brought the creature to London via floo, apparation, and a Knightbus in about forty-five minutes. The bureaucrats had taken nearly two hours sending him up the chain of command, from one department to another, filling out paperwork, and asking questions about a mission they couldn't find the right file on, and basically signing their own death warrants when he found out which of the nitwits had bungled things so badly.

"I mean," Lysander said, also very calmly. "exactly what I said. Ambassador Potter and his protectors have been taken... by fae, the Milesian tribe to be precise. I do not know if they are alive or dead, human or... something else by now."

"I see... thank you for telling me."

And with that he walked out of his office, leaving the werewolf unattended and perplexed, and went straight to the aviary. The raven was perched on the back of chair, staring at the door as if he had anticipated his reappearance. Lucius felt a surge of overwhelming resentment for the creature, which had so expertly taken advantage of his momentary weakness. His wand hand twitched, anxious to cast something painful and debilitating, but he merely clenched his hands to his sides. It was his own fault, he acknowledges, to have been so

reckless and trusting. Such Gryffindor traits had no place in his line of work.

"You tricked me!"

The raven tilted its head, but without lips or eyes the wizard can't tell if its from curiosity or amusement.

"Did I now?" he says, his tone too bland to read. "How so?"

"You're a fae of some sort! You tricked me into letting Potter go to Ireland, knowing he would be attacked!"

Nothing was said for a moment, and if Lucius didn't know any better he thought he might have surprised the creature.

"The boy was taken? By fairies? Huh..." another moment of thoughtful consideration. "When? By whom?"

Lucius hesitated. Was this yet another game? He used to be able to tell so easily, but now he wasn't certain. His mind was clearer that it had been in a long time, and looking back over the last several weeks he balked at the realization that he has been running the military as a drunken lunatic and no one had noticed. Even his personal aide, who he thought a rather sensitive fellow, hadn't seemed the least bit concerned with either his drinking or his ranting. Or else he had been very good at hiding any concern. Looking back on his decision from earlier, he was starting to question whether his judgment was still compromised.

He had never been one to doubt himself, and that was part of the reason he suspected things had gotten so far out of hand without his notice. Now he had nothing but doubts. But something had to be done. If he did not fix this and quickly, the Dark Lord would not be so subtle about destroying him. So he might have to at pretend he believed the raven sincere, but he would not trust him a second time.

"About three hours ago, and I am told they were Milesians."

Another silent consideration.

"...Milesians... they're dangerous. They're not scared of wizards. Not since Gulandri Le' Espirriur took the thrown, and the realm descended into a constant twilight. They fear neither the light nor the dark any longer."

"Save your riddles, you transfigured vulture. Is the boy still alive?"

"Hmph... I can't know for certain, but... I suspect he is. If he survived their first trial, then they will hold him prisoner for a time. They are cautious about their 'introductions' as they call it. They won't turn him into a fae until they've picked something suitable. Time and Astronomy moves differently in fairy realms however. A few hours here may mean a few days there or a few minutes, depending upon the season and the position of the stars. If he is to be saved... and you by extension, it must be done immediately."

It was all so perfectly in tune to what Lucius himself desired, it all but confirmed the pureblood's suspicions that this had all been planned in advanced. The question was if he could twist those plans to make them work in his favor or at the very least insured that the fiend suffered for his arrogant manipulation.

"My thoughts exactly," he tried for agreeable, to play along, but the resentment and suspicion seeped through, and he had already compromised his position by his previous accusation. Bobby has choose to ignore it, or else honestly forgotten it in his distraction.

"I can find him. I know where he would have been taken. I have been there before. Release me, and I shall bring him back."

Of course, you do, Lucius thinks, you traitorous thief.

"Then we shall depart as soon as I have gathered the necessary soldiers."

The raven shakes his head immediately.

"No, I must go alone. This must be done covertly. If you draw attention to the fact that you sent Potter to Ireland intentionally, you

are dead regardless of the outcome. Besides, to march on Hausteheim is to declare a war, and will only provoke them to kill their prisoners more quickly."

Lucius considered. The raven sounded sincere, and he was not incorrect. Whether the creature were himself a Milesian spy would not change that, and more importantly if he were a spy then Lucius might be leading his people (and himself) into a trap. A trap the raven needn't have warned him about. Unless he wished to gain his trust again. He gave himself a mental shake. He could not afford to keep second guessing himself. Time was essential now. He would need to find some way of insuring the raven did as it said it would.

"Hhmm... give me your leg."

The raven tilted his head curiously.

"Sir?"

"If you wish me to release you, give me your leg."

"...I'm sorry, sir, but I am rather attached to it."

Lucius gave him a look that seemed capable of melting iron on the spot. Reluctantly, the raven held out its leg. The pureblood slipped his ring, emerald and white gold emblazoned with his family crest, off his finger and cast a spell wordlessly. The ring grew enough to slip over the raven's foot and then immediately shrunk again until it became snug about the ankle and could not be moved up or down.

Bobby instinctively tried to kick the cold, metal band from his foot but it wouldn't be moved by physics or magic.

"What is it?"

"It's a contract," the Malfoy heir explained. "One to guarantee you will not betray me a second time."

"I never betrayed you a first time," he insisted. "What does it do?"

"It kills you, painfully and slowly, if you do not bring Potter back to me by sunrise."

"What? But.. how am I... damn you! What if he's already dead or a fae himself?"

"Then I guess we're both out of luck aren't we?" he said with malicious glee.

The raven for once looks flustered and annoyed and everything Lucius wants him to be. It was yet another sign that he had been correct before, and that he was turning the tables in Bobby's little game. If he could keep his opponent on the defensive, perhaps he would walk away from this... if not better off, at least not beyond recovery. The raven had been right before. Very few people actually knew of Potter's mission to Ireland, and with the Dark Lord gone, he might have the time he needed to cover up the mistake.

He just needed to get the boy back.

"Fine! Fine!" the raven practically hissed. "Now let me out! Enough time has been wasted!"

It would have been amusing to stall, to further aggravate the trickster, but that would be counterproductive. All of their lives now depend upon his success. So he opened the aviary door and lowered the wards. The raven waited no longer, swooping past him and down the hall, knowing by some sort of native magic how to leave the heavily protected compound unnoticed. Lucius stood anxiously for a moment, expecting to hear the shrill call of sirens but after several minutes it became apparent nothing of the sort was going to occur, and he returned to his office.

The werewolf was gone. He didn't know where and he didn't rightly care for the time being.

Already, he started to question his decision to release the raven. The dark lord had kept it confined for a reason, and he had no way of knowing its true nature and if he hadn't just unleashed some unspeakable danger upon his homeland. Likewise, he had no way of

knowing if the raven might not some how make things worse for him. If such a thing were possible.

His mind felt full and ravenous for more, spinning and unable to move. Fears and questions and theories and anger cluttered his mind, tripping his logical thoughts and replacing them with horror. Closing his eyes, he took a deep breath. He needed to be calm, rational, and objective. At the moment, he was incapable of any of these things.

That meant he had to go to someone he trusted to be calm, rational, and objective for him.

~ Page Break~

Voldemort lay in his bed, wide awake and counting the breaths Lestrage sighed softly into his bare chest. He did not sleep often, although in recent years he had noticed he dreamed now when he did, and now was no exception although the day had fatigued him. A cold front had moved into the area, and being at a higher elevation it had brought a heavy snow with it. The scheduled hunt for resistance fighters had been canceled in favor of staying warm.

Snowfall in the alps could be dangerous even for wizards, and with the mist rising off Bostalsee Lake it only made the chances of being lost or having an accident that much more likely. Voldemort had taken the opportunity to spend a little more time with his Romanian associates. They already respected him as a powerful leader, he had earned it with his willingness to go out in the field and by proving his competence in leading them to one success after another, and was now working to gain their loyalty.

They had drunk a great deal of wine, and he had impressed them with his knowledge of several Romanian drinking songs, aided by his legilimens ability, and their present woes over their current standing in international Quidditch. They had told him about their girlfriends and wives and little ones waiting for them back home. He told them about Harry and his penchant for getting in over his head, and gave Lestrage a few suggestive looks over his shoulder when he knew they were watching.

He backed up these looks later that evening by taking her to his tent. The men would approve of this, he knew, as Lestrangle was a beautiful woman in her own right and in their primitive minds they felt a leader should always aim for the best female available. Bedding his loyal minion was no hardship, in any event. She was as sultry and devilish as he remembered, magic and activity having kept her body firm and supple to his touch. Her adoration for him was evident in every gaspy breath and heaving endearment, and even as she goaded him into near savagery it only seemed to please her more. As he ravaged her, he couldn't help but wonder with a perverse satisfaction if she would have been so vocal if she knew he had foregone the silencing charm and that most of the camp had been made intimately aware of their nocturnal activities.

She was doing wonders for dispelling rumors of his impotence, and he hoped she would take some pride in that one day.

But that had all been hours ago, and now his thoughts had turned to other things less trivial. He thought of the war in Germany almost done with, and how he would maintain power there once the fighting was done, whether he should allow the British refugees from the previous war to return to Britain or not, what spoils of war he should take and what he should leave behind as a sign of magnanimity, and who should be publicly executed and who silenced in secret. He thought about Dumbledore, Ophelia, and Lucius. He thought about Harry and whether he might want to spend the summer in Germany with him, helping to organize the peace. He thought about the Earth and whether She would be pleased with his efforts, or think them a mere distraction.

Voldemort.

He looked down at Lestrangle, thinking she had whispered his name but she showed no signs of stirring. And when did she ever call him anything other than 'my Lord'? Even in passion she never lost that one quirk of decorum.

Dark Lord.

Soft, a whisper but not a whisper, and something not entirely natural about the vibration. It had come from outside. He lifted his head, listening more closely.

Tom.

Slowly, so as not to disturb his companion, he pulled loose from her hold and climbed from the bed.

Marvolo.

The warming charms had faded some time in the night, leaving the magically expanded tent bitterly cold. His breath misted as he breathed, like a miniature ghost in the darkness.

Riddle.

He stood a moment to listen, unbothered by the cold, but there was nothing else. He dressed quickly using spells, then grabbed his sword and exited the tent.

A heavy mist had descended on the camp, and he was immediately damp with it. He could have banished the cloud with a wave of his hand, but hesitated. The air was thick with an anxious energy that had not been there only moments before, and something told him it would be unwise to attempt to expose the mystery. He stood a moment, and waited.

Here.

He immediately turned and walked out of the camp, following the voice towards the lake. He made no sound, and even if he had he met no one along the way to give his presence away to. The surrounding forest became a army of shadowy sentinels, unmoving but tracking his progress with their invisible eyes. It would have frightened a lesser man, but Voldemort knew this feeling and understanding negated the fear.

When he reached the lake, he was not surprised to see there was a boat waiting for him at the shore. It was beautiful craft, long and

almost too slender not to tip over, and painted in dark red and black lacquer. It reminded Voldemort of a Venetian gondola, and in its elegant couch the gondolier leaned at the bow and leered at him.

"Harry?" he asks, although he knew better even before the name had left his mouth. The face was a collection of familiar features in an unfamiliar combination. Harry's glowing eyes gleamed in malevolent amusement, his mouth twisted unnaturally in to an awkward grin. Even his slender form seems ill-suited to the slinky, hulking movements he made towards the man. Voldemort lifts his wand, prepared to blast the apparition into pieces for the offense he feels at the sight of it.

"Eh-yo," it says, his voice like a rusty pipe. "Eyes wundrin when yid be gettering on. 'Avent got the night, yeah? Huck, huck, I menz you ain't be haven the night. Todd-a-Lone 'as nights to spar an' waste an' gamble, don't e? Nah tha' you woods notice, I suppose..."

Voldemort took a moment to try to figure out whether he was speaking a foreign language or pure gibberish. It took him a while to discern it was some butchered cockney dialect.

"What are you? What do you want?" he said, shortly.

"Eh? Wos the matter? Ain't yu got a 'ug fer yer dear friend, 'Arry?" the creature laughed, throwing open his arms as if to welcome an embrace. Voldemort cast a hex at the ground, causing a small explosion at the stranger's feet and showering him with pebbles. The creature shrieked in surprise and quickly backed away. "I was just kid'n, yeah? Wers yer funny side?"

Voldemort cast another hex, showering him with pebbles and peppering the boat besides.

"Oi, oi! Not de boat! You sink'r en 'ows we to get back, yeah?"

"What. Do. You. Want?" he repeated, emphasizing in his tone his lost patience.

The creature shuffled sulkily at his ill-humored audience.

"Eye come on Masteer's biznurse, yeah? Eyes got a message fer yers. Yeah? Yeah? Now stop blast'n at us!"

"State your message then, and be gone, wretch."

"Eyes getting on it! Just a mo, will ya? Yeah?"

The shapeshifter made another show of straightening up and brushing off its clothes. He coughed into its hand to clear his throat, and when he spoke it wasn't in his voice. It wasn't in Harry's voice either, but it was one he recognized from his youth.

"Greetings, wicked child now a wicked man. Gulantri Le' Espirriurm, King of Haustenheim and Lord of the Twilight Court extends this invitation to you. A banquet is to be held in the honor of a mutual friend, whose guise this creature currently presents. It would be a pleasure and privilege to mark you in attendance of the ceremony. No doubt our mutual friend would be most appreciative. If you are agreeable, the messenger here presented shall ferry you to my home, where you are extended all rights and courtesies of hospitality. Until next we meet, farewell and safe travels."

The creature gave another cough, and fell back into his hunched, leering state. A state that Voldemort quickly knocked to the ground with a savage backhand and a foot to its chest. It shrieked and kicked frantically but against the wizard it was little more than a angry child throwing a tantrum. He pointed his wand at it.

"You lying wretch, you filthy vermin, you think your tricks will work on me. That I will rush blindly into the abyss at the mere mention of that boy?"

The creature started to wail pathetically, only aggravating the dark lord further, but he waited to listen as it started to babble more freely in its terrified state than it otherwise would have dared.

"Todd-a-Lone don't know nofin! Nofing! Nofing! Masteer give'me a message and eyes gives it to yoos caus'n 'e told me too! Jus a message an' a stick!"

Voldemort holds back the curse at the tip of his tongue.

"A stick?"

"Yeah, yeah, a stick. Yeah!"

With the momentary pause in his beating, the shifter reached into his robe and pulled out a wand.

Voldemort stared at it fixedly. He recognizes it immediately.

Oh, no.

"What have you done to the boy?" he demanded, kicking it sharply in the side. It yelped at the blow, but was quick to flash him the same leer it'd been wearing when he first arrived. His expression suddenly changed, slack, white and terrified as he reached down with his wand hand to touch his side. When he pulled it away it is covered with blood. Wide, green eyes stared up at him in blank terror, until the imp could not hold the expression any longer and broke out into a maddening grin.

Voldemort remained motionless throughout the theatrics. The eerie silence was all consuming around them, and somewhere in the back of his mind he knew that they should have been heard by now. That Lestrage and the other wizards should have come charging out to investigate the disturbance, but there was nothing. Just the sound of his own breath heaving in and out as his blood boils beneath his skin and that of the creature's wretched laughter. It caught his look and frowned.

"Oi, now," it says, "Don be gett'n no ideas. If ye kill me ows ya gonna get there, yeah?"

"True," the dark lord says icily, "but what's to stop me from killing you once we arrive?"

"Er..."

"Take off that face, before I remove it myself," he snapped.

The wretch scurried out from under his foot and shook itself like a dog, shedding his illusion like water. He was a hobgoblin, a goodfellow, with slanty eyes and a crocodile mouth. He shook again, throwing of Harry's clothes from his small, withered bodied, before he climbed back onto the boat. Voldemort snatched up Harry's wand from the pile and climbed aboard, settling stiffly into his seat.

What he was doing was unwise. Even with Gulandri's extension of faerie hospitality, which would spare him from both attack and poisoning, it would not spare him from trickery. The dark elf, whose exploits he had followed distantly, until his own affairs drew his attention to matters closer to home, had tricked and murdered his way into his kingship. He was like himself in many ways, and like himself if he had leverage he would use it ruthlessly.

Why he would do so, Voldemort didn't know. They had never been enemies. In many ways, they were allies in a greater cause. His reign was designed to return wizarding kind into the Old Ways, practices that would strengthen relations with the faeries themselves over time and hold the doorways between their realms open. Perhaps this was itself just an expression of Gulandri's impatience, of which he had been infamously prone, and token reassurances from his quarter would solve the matter.

Maybe it was something more insidious.

Either way, he had to retrieve Harry, whether it was a trap or not. It was, at this point, he mused humorlessly, a matter of habit.

Finally! Finally, it's done! This chapter just didn't want to cooperate, no matter how much I wanted to write it! I think this is actually my longest chapter yet. And then my basement flooded! And I live in the basement! Argh!

Author's notes:

Okay, so I've been a bit inspired by Norse mythology since the Thor movie came out, even though I haven't seen it yet, and it just

occurred to me as I was researching it... gee, this would make a sort of sense if the Aesir were just a sort of faerie race. So yeah, in my universe that's what they are. In Norse Mythology, the god Balder is made nearly indestructible through sorcery in order to save him from his prophesied death, but he still kicks the bucket when Loki (who would be a sort of conjurer in this case), tricks Balder's blind brother into shooting him with a arrow made of holly and killing him. This inspired the idea of holly arrows having the capability of penetrating shield charms, since that is essentially what it did in Balder's case. So ha! That idea was not pulled out of a plot hole!

Remember, when the Sword of Gryffindor shattered in Harry's hand, it's magic was transferred to Harry. His hand is very much like the sword, and to a certain extent he has mithral running in his blood.

Literally means 'Autumn Realm' in Norse. I wanted to Twilight or Sunset realm, but I couldn't find the translation.

This is an actual type of fairie known for living in Scottish marshes. I took some liberty with her appearance.

A velorisp is a type of bird similar to a cassowary, and twice as mean. Typically only found in fairy realms, or forests where fairies are in high numbers.

Milesians were the tribe who supposedly drove the Tuatha de Denann, a powerful court of fairies, out of their homes and into distant lands. The Tuatha de Denann are the original inhabitants of Ireland and the surrounding isles. In my version, they are are also themselves fae. I gathered from research that there are lot of different fairy tribes and they are often at war with one another.

Book VI

Chapter 16: Tales and Wings

"Fikysher sisk."

Enerviate had nothing on the spell that coursed through Harry, pulling him from the disjointed dreams he had presumed was his afterlife with all the magical gravity of necromancy. Panic and the memory of pain had him flinging out his arms and his magic wildly to defend against the assailant hovering above him. Gulandri drew back quickly, surprised by his sudden quickening. He was no sooner distanced, than Harry began feeling for his wand or some other weapon, searching the folds of the bedding and the nightstand nearby but coming up empty. The fight undermined, he tried for flight. Throwing aside the sheets covering him, he clamored free only to have his legs immediately fail him and send him tumbling to the floor.

"Careful. You have been sleeping a long time."

Selufiare was suddenly beside him, and he flinched away as she reached for him, only to calm again as her warm hand touched his. His panic eased, his thoughts began to organize themselves, and after a moment he realized she was using a spell and hastily withdrew his hand. Less disoriented, he looked around cautiously but only recognized the two fae and was not particularly happy about the discovery. He tried to stand again, more carefully, and found he could keep his feet even if his head swam with the effort.

"Where am I?" he asked, his voice hoarse from disuse. "How long...?"

Selufiare made to speak, but Gulandri beat her to it.

"You are in my home... as a guest."

"As your prisoner?" Harry bit out, fear and anger warring in the presence of the elf that had so quickly and soundly defeated him.

"It is all the same to me."

Harry just stared at him for a moment trying to determine his intent in bring hing him here after nearly killing him. It was impossible, however. Gulandri's mind was too alien for him to interpret with so little information. He would need a little more.

"I'm still human," he noted.

Gulandri tilted his head, a touch of amusement in his voice when he spoke.

"Are you sure? We could have done anything to you as you laid there."

"Father..." his daughter scolded.

"I can barely see you. If you have turned me, by eyesight would have gotten better..."

The elf snorted.

"I see you are more of a fighter than a thinker, but in this case you are correct. Now get up. There is something I want to show you."

"My Lord, he is still weak."

"That is fortuitous, else I would have had to bleed him to make him so. I have no intention of granting this defiant creature his strength."

Harry felt a shiver run down his spine. He believed him, despite his almost playful tone. More pressing then his own weakness was how Gulandri intended to take advantage of it. Where was he taking him? What did he intend to do and why not do it while he lay helpless? Why had he been saved or rather spared, not only from death but from an Introduction? And how long could he rely on that mercy? What had become of the others? Had they too been spared for some later event or was all hope lost for them?

Too many questions and while he felt a desperate need to know, he could not bring himself to ask. If he had been alone with Selufiare, he would have asked freely, but trapped in a room with the fearsome elven lord left him strangely shy. The scar on his abdomen throbbed in a painful reminder that he was not someone he wanted to provoke.

Gulandri said something sharply in elvish, and a wooden door at the far end of the chamber opened to reveal what Harry thought was a pair of brownies carrying bundles. Brownies were the ancestors of house elves, and were approximately the same shape and size, but to call them similar was to suggest a basset hound was like a wolf. They were sharper in feature, particularly their almond-shaped eyes that looked everywhere with an intense curiosity rather than the perpetually wounded look of their artificial kin. The pair that entered wore the livery of servants, dressed in red and yellow, but there was nothing servile about the way they shoved their bundles into his arms and quickly marched out.

The bundles turned out to be his boots, his cloak, and gray woolen shirt he had never seen before. Looking down at himself, he realized he was not dressed in his own clothes, but simple pair of woolen pants and an undershirt. Having no reason to disobey, and not wishing to provoke his 'host', he put on the rest of the clothes. It soon occurred to him that he was being prepared to go outside, and Gulandri had not wanted him to be strong for the outing, which meant there might be opportunities to escape if he could keep his wits about it him.

Which was not going to be an easy task, he realized as he spotted the odd fingerless glove on his left hand. It was black leather and there were tiny little white beads sown on in patterns he did not recognize. He suspected it was some sort of ward to bind the sword magic that had accumulated there. They had thoroughly disarmed him.

"What happened to my other clothes?" he asked idly, as he slipped on his boots, surreptitiously searching for any weapons or potions he had hidden there previously. He found none.

"They were soaked in blood, so I had them auctioned. Wizard's blood is a valuable commodity here."

Harry's mind blanked at the thought. Whether Gulandri's statement was amusingly ironic or intrinsically horrifying, he could not rightly say, but either way there was a hidden threat in it. Now wasn't the time to understand it. He finished dressing, using the silence afforded him to try and think how he wanted to handle the current situation. It was difficult. His body felt stiff and unwieldy and his mind doubly so. He was overwhelmed and his brain sluggish and unprepared.

"How long was I..." 'Asleep' was too soft. 'Unconscious' too accusatory. "...Out of it?"

The elf made a dismissive gesture and headed for the door.

"Even if I told you, it would be meaningless to you. Follow me."

"Where are we going?" he asked, making to follow. He noticed that Selufiare did not join them, but watched anxiously from her position beside the bed.

"Are you nothing but questions?"

"How else would I learn?"

Gulandri turned sharply, and Harry drew back swiftly, expecting a blow.

"You will find 'silent observation' to be a superior learning method in Hausteheim."

Here too was a threat, and even more so the look in the elven lord's eyes. The Gryffindor in him longed to rise to the challenge, to say something scathing and provocative. This was not Voldemort, however, and even there he knew to use his insolence sparingly. He bit his tongue and looked away, though his pride refused to let him look down. Gulandri glared at him for a moment, perhaps waiting for some additional sign of defiance, perhaps even hoping for it, but

when nothing came he turned and gestured once again for Harry to follow him. He did so, but was stopped by Selufiare touching his arm.

"Do not provoke him," she said beseechingly. "If you must defy him, do so with stoicism. Anger... hatred... fear... they only encourage him. Give him nothing and he will have nothing to use against you."

He looked up at her (she was several inches taller than him much to his chagrin) and her electric blue eyes, and felt the familiar stirrings of attraction. He was terribly familiar with this feeling. He knew so many extraordinary girls and women that seemed to demand nothing less than that from him, but here he knew he could not trust it. 'Enchantress' held connotations he would be a fool to ignore, particularly in this place. Nevertheless, he nodded in acknowledgment and tucked her advice away before turning to follow after her father.

Outside of the chamber, Harry found himself in a long, narrow corridor that stretched out in either direction. Faerie lights hovered about the ceiling in unequal distances, as if floating untethered in an invisible stream of air. The corridor was neatly carved with stone murals and statues as fine as any wizarding castle, but something about the confining space and the smell of damp gave him the impression that he was underground. In a faerie hill, perhaps?

Gulandri moved ahead of him, not looking back, but he needed no reassurance that Harry would follow him. There were a number of faeries moving about the hall, primarily servant but also a few guards, watching him with a hungry suspicion as he passed. It was extremely uncomfortable, and despite himself, he forced his weakened legs to keep only a few paces behind the elven lord's long strides. They moved into another corridor, this one somewhat larger, but now also more crowded with elves and higher bred fae, possibly having left the boundaries of Gulandri's private quarters into more public areas. Curious eyes followed him and more than once he found himself shying away from hands reaching to touch him. They moved on still further and the number of fae increased, until the hall grew crowded, and suddenly Harry could barely move let alone avoid the crush of alien forms around him. The temperature increased, and with it the smell of strange spices and earth and wet, rotting leaves. Breathing

became difficult, his heart rate quickened, and he stopped and closed his eyes tightly for a moment to fight off the waves of dizziness and panic.

Not here, he prayed, not here. I can't do this here. Go away. Go away. Go away.

The crush of warm bodies suddenly retreated, and when he took his next breath it was deliciously cool and clean. He opened his eyes and found himself leaning against a wall, and several startled-looking fae staring at him. A good several feet away.

A hand grabbed his arm, and he jumped.

"Not as weak as assumed," Gulandri said, suspiciously. Harry didn't know what he meant. Had he done something? They eyed each other for a moment, but whatever it was the elf was looking for he must not have found. He turned away. "Follow."

Harry did so, and after a few minutes he stepped out into a street and could look up and see the sky once again bathed in the brilliant pinks and oranges of twilight. The city... castle... whatever it was was sunk into the earth in a neat little tube with a road spiraling upwards and downwards. He had never even imagined a place like it could exist, and he found himself gaping foolishly at his surroundings, looking this way and that.

Wait till I tell Hermione about this...

Thinking of his friend, he immediately came back to his senses. He needed to think of a way out of this, but unless he suddenly perfected his animagus form in the next few minutes and flew away, he didn't see any obvious opportunities. They were still moving. Upwards. Up and out? Out where? He wanted to ask, but he didn't dare. If the elf disliked defiance in private it was doubtful he would tolerate it in public. So he followed quietly behind, struggling to keep up as their path tilted upwards and he began to feel the beginnings of fatigue and hunger. When was the last time he ate? How long had he been asleep?

At last they did make it to the top, and there found two mounts waiting for them. The first was one of the horse-like creatures, now unarmored, and Gulandri immediately claimed it for himself. The second was a mule, clearly bred more for carrying than for riding and its reigns were already tied to the other mount's saddle. There would be no feasible way to escape on such a creature. He struggled over its back, and then sighed in relief. His legs were near giving out on him already. He needed the rest.

Gulandri lead them out of the city walls and into the forest, which was the first familiar thing Harry had seen. They were then completely alone. What did the elf intend? Not even now did he dare to ask. He kept his curiosity to himself, and rested, waiting for the first tangible opportunity to escape. The opportunity did not present itself for several hours.

Despite the increasing distance from the faerie settlement, Harry was unable to construct a plan to get passed Gulandri. He had no weapons, he was physically weak and half starved, but even if he hadn't been he was still no match for his captor in hand to hand combat. Running away wasn't much of an option either, although he wasn't too prideful to attempt to do so. Even just riding he felt himself tiring, and occasionally he even found himself nodding off and nearly fell from his saddle twice. And eventually, he did nod off. He must have because when he opened his eyes he found the forest had changed.

The sky above was now a clear, starlit sky and the air cold enough to turn his breath to mist. The young, foreign trees had given way to familiar oaks and elms and the inherent magic was more muted and of a different flavor. He blinked, rubbed his eyes, and looked around. He couldn't see far without his glasses and with it being so dark, but he was almost certain he was back in Ireland. Was he being taken home?

"You may ask a question now," Gulandri said, causing Harry to jump. They had not spoken since they left the faerie city.

"Where...

"You may ask one question. Make it count."

"... Why are we here?"

"There is something I wish to explain to you, and I believe you will be better able to understand it if I brought you here. Get down, we must walk the rest of the way."

Sleeping while sitting up was not exactly restful, but Harry did feel a little less stiff and more clear headed. Carefully, he dismounted and followed the elf into a grove of willow trees, their bare branches creating a natural curtain against what lay within. He hesitated a moment, looking back. If he were quick enough, he could run back and take Gulandri's mount and ride it away. They were in Ireland, not a faerie realm now. Eventually, he would come across some form of civilization, be it muggle or wizarding, and then he would be safe.

"Don't even think it or I'll kill you."

Harry flinched at Gulandri's voice. He believed him. There was no way he could outrun the elf. Slipping through the curtain of weedy branches, he found Gulandri creating orbs of faerie lights in his hand and letting them float around the grove's enclosure. It turned out to be not as naturally occurring as Harry had assumed. There was a series of stones, ranging from the size of Harry's fist to as tall as his shoulders, arranged in a rough circle, each engraved with a rune. The willow trees themselves were planted in a circle around that. At one end, a low altar of naturally flat stones stood. At one time it must have been a place of worship, but it had been abandoned for some time. Moss and weeds and the accumulative detritus had half buried it and in another hundred years it would likely disappear altogether.

"Do you recognize this place? Does it feel familiar?" Gulandri asked.

Should it? And that's two questions you hypocrite. Harry looked around for a moment. It struck him as vaguely familiar, but only in a secondary way. It reminded him of some of the protections circles he had built with Voldemort and by himself, but he was certain he had never been there before.

"No. I-"

His eyes spotted something and the words immediately died. Inside the circle of gray and blackish stones was yet another stone, but this one was completely different from the others. It was pink for one. Pink, glittering, and striated with lines of white. It had no business being there. He doubted there was a single stone native to Ireland that resembled it, and seeing it drew a memory into his mind he had half forgotten.

You'll find a stone that has no business being there.

"The Numanti Ring," he said, somehow absolutely certain of it.

"So you do recognize it?" the elf asked, looking pleased.

"No... I mean. I've never been here, but someone told me about it once. Probably Voldemort."

"Or Carrigan?"

Harry stiffened.

"Carrigan is dead. He died before I was ever born."

Gulandri made a humming sound, seemingly unconvinced but he did not contradict him. Harry turned away and moved to the pink stone, pushing it aside. It was perhaps a bad idea to do this while the elf was present. He might stop him or take away whatever he found, but now that the young wizard was there he couldn't pass up the opportunity to confirm whether the Carrigan he had seen in his limbo was a figment of his imagination or truly a spirit.

He dug his fingers into the earth and began clawing it aside. After only a few inches, his fingers touched something metal. Quickly, he dug deeper, hearing his fingernails scraping against something hollow. It was a tin box, undecorated and partially rusted. He attempted to open it, but as mundane as it appeared there was enough magic running through it to keep it sealed.

"My, my..."

He looked up to see Gulandri looking down at the box through a strange stone with a circle through it. Ffrykshimini. He had read of it in various places, including for a Charms assignment. A surge of resentment welled up in him, knowing the elf was seeing what was inside before Harry himself, its rightful owner per its master's decree. He held it protectively to his chest.

"I doubt a treasure hunt is the reason you brought me here," he said, hoping to distract him from his scrutiny. Perhaps the elf would let him keep it. It couldn't open it after all, so there was no way he could use it against him. Except perhaps to bludgeon him over the head with it. There was a thought.

Gulandri tucked the stone away.

"No. Do you still claim to have no memory of this place?"

"I have never been here. I was told about the stone."

"And about what is inside the box?"

Harry said nothing. He fought the urge to shake the box and see if he could guess.

"Since we seem to be ignoring the 'no questions' rule, I would ask you the same thing. How do you know of this place?"

Gulandri shrugged.

"It is no secret. Carrigan's home was but half a mile from here, and I was his guest more than once."

"You knew him?" he asked, taken completely by surprise. It had never occurred to him that any human could be safe in the other's company.

"I continue to know him. In fact, I am looking right at him."

Harry automatically looked around, looking for a gravestone perhaps, but once what was said sunk in he froze. Gulandri was not looking around. He was looking directly at him.

"No."

"Yes. You are his reincarnation. Do not tell me you did not suspect?"

Harry felt suddenly hollow. No, he had never suspected. Whenever he had heard the name Carrigan, he had only thought of his association with Voldemort, Bobby, and to a lesser extent Dumbledore. In his mind, the druid priest was someone he had wished to have known only because he had been important to others he did know and respect. That he had seen him in his soul space had been an honor, but it had never occurred to him that rather than being haunted he was merely looking into a mirror.

He was such a fool.

"Does Lord Voldemort know?"

Was that why he had attached himself to Harry? Was that the source of their strange affection? Some preexisting affection for the man he had once been?

"No. He is as ignorant of it as you apparently were. Which is fortunate for you."

"What do you mean?"

Gulandri's expression turned thoughtful, although Harry detected something mocking in it.

"Well, if he had known he might have simply killed you yet again."

Harry blinked.

"Voldemort did not kill Carrigan. One of his followers did so accidentally. He loved him... probably like a father."

"Considering he killed his father, that really doesn't say much in his favor. However, I know what you are trying to say. Regardless of his feelings for Carrigan, he did in fact kill him. He had little choice in matter. If he didn't kill the man than he would have been killed himself. It was a matter of self-preservation. I am sure he felt just terrible about it at the time."

Harry was starting to feel dizzy. Voldemort... had killed his own father? He had killed Carrigan? Had killed Harry himself in a past life? How was he supposed to feel about that? Should he feel anything at all? How could he be certain Gulandri was telling him the truth?"

"Why are you telling me this?"

"Again with the questions. If you would be silent, I would have told you."

"I am listening now," he said shortly, too emotionally compromised to tread cautiously. Gulandri's eyes flashed with anger, and his hand slid to his sword. Harry glared back at him. Let him draw his sword, he thought recklessly, he baited me in the first place. Mentally, he recoiled. Maybe that was all this was about, simply the elf attempting to bait Harry into a fight or to trick him. Hadn't Selufiare warned him? If he reacted with emotion, he would only be giving the elf an excuse to hurt him or a means to manipulate him. He had to be emotionless or at least appear to be. He couldn't let himself be provoked.

He closed his eyes and took a deep breath.

"Please," he said, fighting to hide the anger and distrust in his voice and face. "Explain what it is you want from me."

Gulandri regarded him coolly for a moment, his fingers flexing around the pommel of his sword as he calculated whether he should draw it or not. Eventually, he removed his hand and settled it at his side.

"I want you to kill Lord Voldemort."

Harry felt himself tense, but then relax once again. Of course. It was just a trick. More clever than Dumbledore's had been, which had at

least seemed somewhat honest of intention, but essentially along the same line. Convince Harry that the Dark Lord would turn on him and turn away from him before that happened. Well, it hadn't worked on him when he was fourteen and it certainly wasn't going to work on him now.

"You took that more calmly than I expected."

"I am just waiting silently for you to elaborate."

"How that man can tolerate your cheek..." Gulandri took a breath, and then continued. "It is in your best interest to help me kill the Dark Lord. You will never have an opportunity more to your favor than when he comes here to retrieve you."

"You assume that I want to kill the Dark Lord because he killed me in a past life." According to you. "That's poor motivation. He's been good to me in my present one." Sort of.

"He will kill you in this present life just as he did in your previous one and for exactly the same reason. What do you know of prophecies?"

Harry's experience with prophecies was limited to Fleur's odd Christmas present* and some some uncomfortable assertions by Madam Longbottom during his brief visit to Dunnan Hill. Such things had never seemed particularly important to him.

"A little."

"Do you know the Trelawny Prophecy?"

"No."

"Then listen very, very carefully. The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches... born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies... and the Dark Lord will know him in war and mark him as his equal... and one must kill the other... and rule for a thousand years.* Now then, does that seem to hit a little too close to home?"

Harry looked away quickly.

He had to or else he was going to laugh in the elf's face and that wouldn't help his situation at all. He had to play this right, play along, pretend he believed it. If he could convince Gulandri that they were in fact allies, that he trusted him and was therefore trustworthy, then he could find a way out of this mess. He could save himself, and perhaps the others if they were still alive.

"So you're saying... we're destined to kill each other? That all this time, destiny's been moving us into position to... murder?"

"Over and over and over again it would seem. Reincarnation does have its downside."

"Then why hasn't he killed me yet?"

"Because he hasn't realized it's about you. It's the date, you see. The prophesied child is set to be born on July 31st. You were born on Aug. 1st... supposedly. There is really no one left to confirm that one way or 'll figure it out eventually, and when he does... whatever he may feel for you, he won't die for you."

"I don't see how that should matter to you one way or another. You seem willing enough to kill me yourself."

"Absolutely. You are are utterly irrelevant to me... except in your ability to kill the Dark Lord."

"Again, I don't see how that should matter to you either."

There was another moment of silence, and Harry wondered if he hadn't pushed too far and if something in his voice hadn't revealed his complete skepticism in the other.

"Because..." Gulandri said, his tone oddly reluctant. "I need him to die. I need him... to take my place."

Harry looked up. The wry humor and the quicksilver temper had both receded to something more... intent. Something that reminded him strangely of Voldemort during his more thoughtful periods.

"Faeries... and gods... we are all bound to cycles. Cycles of life and death and rebirth. These cycles manifest themselves in rather... interesting ways, however. In the case of the Milesians, it presents itself in seasonal cycles of rulership. A Dawn King to lead in Spring, a Noon King to bring Summer, a Twilight King for Autumn, and... a Midnight King for winter. Each ruler is overthrown by a usurper, leading to the next season. I overthrew the previous Noon King to become the Twilight King, and when the time comes I too must be overthrown by a Winter King."

"By Voldemort."

"Yes. He is the only one worthy of it."

Harry thought it over. If Gulandri was telling the truth, and there was no reason to believe he was after all the previous lies he had been spewing forth, he could see now why the Dark Lord would first need to be killed.

"He's not fae... so you have to kill him and resurrect him as one."

"Precisely. I have no intention of living indefinitely. When the winter season is due, he will set me free of this life and send me on to a new one. See how much you learn when you just stop and listen?"

Alright, the game was now set. "... Give me a reason to help you."

Gulandri just looked at him.

"I will cut you in half if you do not."

"And Voldemort will do a hundred times worse if I try and fail. Give me a reason to risk it."

That brought a vague smile to the other's face.

"Huh. Very well, I will let you go back to your own realm unharmed and unchanged. You may even take three of your people with you. They can be your alibis when the wizarding world starts asking questions. Do we have a deal, Lord Potter?"

"I don't see how I have much of a choice. We have a deal, Lord Gulandri."

The elf smiled without warmth.

"Then take my hand and let us shake on it like gentleman."

Harry stiffened. He looked into Gulandri's eyes and knew immediately he had failed. The elf no more believed Harry than Harry believed him. He jumped to his feet and made a run for it, knowing he was doomed already, but unwilling to face defeat standing still. The tin box still clutched in his hands, he made for the mounts.

"Tupiash je'te!" the elf called, casting his spell just as he reached the willows. Limp branches suddenly snapped forward, snaring Harry around the arms, neck, and chest and lifting him off the ground. He kicked and struggled and tried to call on his magic to tear free but he remained dangling helplessly as Gulandri followed after him leisurely.

"Going somewhere, Lord Potter?"

Harry spat out several unflattering things in parseltongue.

"Don't tell me you weren't enjoying our game? I thought you were really getting into it for a moment there."

"The hell you did! As if I would ever believe that heaping shit pile you tried to unload on me!"

"A lovely colloquialism, however, inaccurate. Almost everything I said to you was true, except that part where I want you to kill the Dark Lord. I am perfectly capable of managing that on my own."

"So what? This is your idea of a man's sport?"

The elf favored his sarcasm with a sharp backhand, leaving the young wizard seeing stars.

"More like a test. I wanted to see how much you knew about Carrigan and about the prophecy. I'll take your obvious disbelief as a sign of ignorance. A pity. I should have liked to know the depth of your devotion, but there is time yet to test it. The Dark Lord is on his way to Hausteheim now. What would you give me to spare his life?"

"What will you give me to spare yours? He's going to kill you and turn your city into a tomb!" he sneered. It earned him another backhand to the other cheek, and this time he spat blood.

"You are no fun at all. If you won't cooperate, we'll just have to play another game."

Gulandri reach out for him, taking hold of Harry's right wrist, just as he would have if they actually shaken hands. Harry cried out in shock and pain as foreign magic surged into his body, sinking deeply into the core of his magic and pulled at something.

"I saw through frrykshimini that you are a practitioner of the changeling arts," he said conversationally, as the mortal boy thrashed and screamed in agony beneath his grip. "That makes what I am about to do that much simpler... if not necessarily less painful."

Harry was beyond hearing him. His magic curled and twisted unnaturally in Gulandri's touch, his own innate defenses rising to compensate yet finding no outlet except to turn inward against his own body. He writhed and twisted helplessly as his innate form began to shift, reconfiguring into a new form he had barely begun to experiment with. Bones became hollow and light, joints suddenly bent the wrong way, fingernails curved into black talons, feathers replaced skin, green eyes turned gold.

When Gulandri was done, the human boy had disappeared completely and a peregrine falcon hung limply in his place.

~ Page Break~

It was nearly two in the morning and Snape was still awake, although he had climbed into bed beside his wife hours ago. Ira was curled peaceably at his side, her lips and nose lightly touching the edge of his shoulder, so that he could count her breaths by the rhythmic bursts of warmth against his bare skin. It was a supremely peaceful feeling, and he envied her the innocence that allowed her to sleep undisturbed. His own anxieties would not allow him the same.

Potter had not returned and he had received no word as to his prolonged absence. A part of him wanted to get out of bed, and head to Bristol to track down his ward. Another part of him knew the silence was more than likely a power play on Lucius' part to leave him dangling in ignorance, his own form of petty revenge for the perceived slight Snape had made against him in siding with his goddaughter's welfare rather than his old friend's machinations. If he did go to Bristol and tracked down Harry, he was likely to find him sound asleep in one of Lucius' townhouses or a local hotel suite, and his presence would only make for an extremely awkward and likely terse conversation.

It would be better simply to wait. If he did not return by tomorrow morning, he would send out Seidler to retrieve him. For now, things were too strained for them to be left alone in each other's company. Harry was likely still humiliated by his behavior the night before, and Snape wasn't feeling any better about his own reaction. His relationship with Harry was complicated. He had come to accept that a long time ago, when he had been unable to kill the boy in the tunnel under Berlin. Harry's own feelings towards him were also complicated, even if Harry himself was rather a simple person. They had trusted each other, however. Snape trusted in his odd affection and need for an adult mentor a little more restrained than the Dark Lord's. Harry trusted in Snape's experience and self-control.

And then Snape had to go and screw it up by panicking and nearly killing the boy with a blasting hex. He could recall clearly his stunned expression, the complete and utter disbelief. He had looked so betrayed, and Snape knew that his feeling was justified. He had never used a spell against his ward before. Oh, he had cast spells on him, but never in heat of anger or during an argument. Their fights

had always been verbal and physical. Even half-crazed, he should have known Harry would never have harmed him seriously. It wasn't until later that he remembered whatever Harry's condition it was not lycanthrosis and not communicable by bite.

So why had he panicked? Had he been that frightened of the boy?

The terrible truth of the matter was that, yes, he was afraid of him. Not just in the throes of his moon-madness but every day and in every moment he feared him. It was a fear that had haunted him since he first realized he could never willingly free himself of Harry. At the moment in the Berlin Underground, when he had his ward's life in his hands and had chosen not to take it. It had grown as Harry had grown and become stronger, and more dangerous to Snape himself and just as invincible to his enmity. How many nights had he lain awake, just like this night, and wondered if when the moment came, and surely the moment would come, if he would choose his own life or Harry's?

He had made a promise to himself that when it happened he would chose himself. He kept that promise, and as he had feared, he hated himself for it. How would he feel if next time he were forced to actually kill him?

A bell rung, echoing through his quarters, startling him and rousing Ira from sleep.

"Mmm... whose that?" she said sleepily.

"Probably Seitler informing me Potter's back. Go back to sleep. I'll take care of it," he said, a bit of relief seeping into his voice as he climbed out of bed. He kissed the top of her head, earning him a sleepy smile before she settled back into her pillow. He slipped on his sleeping robe and headed into the living room. He checked the wards out of habit before opening his door, and frowned when a familiar but still unexpected name appeared. He opened it.

"Lucius, what are you doing here?"

And where is Harry?

The aristocrat was in the company of one of Seitler's men, but quickly moved into his quarters and shut the door in the Sentinel's face. Lucius looked... awful. Worse than Snape had ever seen him outside of the battlefield or a hospital. He was gaunt, shadowed, and paler than usual. His normally negligent grace was stilted and sharp. He barely recognized his old friend.

"I need your help, Severus."

Snape was immediately filled with a terrible dread. Lucius never asked for his help. He had minions for that. Whatever had happened was too much for him to trust to just anyone. What have you done, Lucius? Where is Harry?

He looked towards his bedroom door where his wife had hopefully drifted off to sleep already, but cast a silencing charm towards it just in case. There was no way he was going to drag his wife into what was happening. He went into the kitchen, and returned a moment later with a vial of calming draught.

"Drink this, and then explain yourself."

Lucius took the vial and downed it, and Snape becoming even more alarmed. He hadn't even asked what it was he was drinking. It could have been veritaserum for all he knew.

"I am in trouble. I made a mistake. A miscalculation. I need your help to fix it. I can't do it alone. I don't trust myself enough to do it."

"What have you done? Where is Potter? Have you done something to him?"

Lucius let out a strained little laugh, looking at Snape with his overly wide eyes.

"I haven't killed him and stuffed into my office desk, if that is what you're concerned about."

As a matter of fact... Snape sneered mentally, but kept his expression calm and serious. After a moment, Lucius buried his face in his hands.

"I'm sorry, Severus," he said, startling the headmaster once again. Lucius apologized as frequently as he asked for help, which was almost never. "I know I haven't been fair to you over the last several months. I... I haven't been myself lately... If I had been thinking clearly, this never would have happened..."

"Lucius, you are not being clear now. What exactly has happened?"

It took a moment, as his old acquaintance seemed to be having trouble organizing his thoughts. He started by explaining about his intention to trick Potter into thinking he had ordered the attack on the werewolf colony, but how the boy had seen right through it. Then he jumped back, explaining that he believed he was suffering under the affects of a curse that was driving him mad (which Snape was all too willing to believe at this point), and had been tricked by a raven into believing that only Harry could save him so he needed his alliance. Somewhere in there was a convoluted explanation about why precisely he had allowed Harry to go to Ireland against the Dark Lord's orders and the boy had since disappeared only to be reported by a werewolf that he had been kidnapped by faeries.

By the end of it, Snape was feeling a touch of madness himself. One that demanded he wrap his hands around Lucius' neck and wring the life out of him. He held himself back, however. If what Lucius said was true, he was mad and could not be held accountable for his unending stupidity.

At least, not until the Dark Lord got a hold of him.

"Have you sent word to Voldemort about this yet?"

The aristocrat jumped to his feet, his alarm at the suggestion overriding the mental lull of the calming draught.

"NO! No, absolutely not! If he has to fix this, he will kill me for sure. If I can get Potter back-"

"If you can get Potter back... if you do not, he will do more than just kill you Lucius, he will... I don't know what he'll do to your family."

The Dark Lord might spare Draco and Hermione out of memory of Harry's affection for them, but Narcissa would have no such protection. Snape was becoming increasingly worried about his own wife and himself. He had been the one to send Harry to Lucius. Part of this was his fault.

Lucius fell silent for a long moment.

"I... I don't know, Severus. I can't trust myself to think this through rationally. My thoughts seemed sensible a while ago, but then whatever that raven did started to wear off. I need... I need you to tell me what to do."

Snape could see it killed Lucius to say that, and he felt a part of himself soften at the admission. As long as he had known the Malfoy patriarch, he had admired and despised his absolute confidence in himself; his seemingly effortless competence in all situations. It had brought the man through a war and landed him at Voldemort's right hand, and in a way it had also helped to pull Snape himself up through the ranks. Lucius had always had confidence in himself and that inspired confidence in others. He had also had confidence in Snape and the result had had a similar if more mild affect. Much of what the headmaster had planned for his own family was modeled after what he had observed of Malfoy's; the pride, prestige, and dignity they wore about themselves at all times, separating themselves from the mundane and baseness of society was something that he wanted for himself and his offspring. If not for the many instances of hypocrisy he had witnessed in his friend, he would have been driven mad with jealousy.

"Very well," Snape said, "I will see if I can't figure out something to save both you and Potter. We will need to send word to the Dark Lord."

"But-"

"If he finds out you hid this from him, there will be no saving you Lucius. If... if enough people know you only acted as a result of being under the influence of a curse, than the blame can be waylaid onto another. I can't promise you won't be punished Lucius, you've made too many mistakes already, but we may be able to save your life and your dignity."

Although not necessarily your influence.

"But if he's the source of the curse..."

"Highly unlikely, Lucius," he said sharply, "And even if he were you must never let on that you think so. Let him find a scapegoat, so long as it is not yourself."

After a moment, the aristocrat nodded.

"What about Potter?"

"We should make an attempt to find him, at least. There is no telling how long it will take for word to reach Lord Voldemort, and if we do nothing he would be even angrier. Do you have anyway of finding Potter?"

"Yes. Maybe. I sent the raven to rescue the boy... maybe he will succeed, but just in case I put a tracking spell on the ring I gave him. If he did go to the faerie realm, we will be able to follow him."

That was perhaps the first evidence of clear thinking Lucius had displayed, with the exception of coming to Snape of course.

"Good. Let me get some supplies and we'll go."

"What about the faeries? They took out an entire squad, including a Sentinel and Potter himself."

"Don't concern yourself, Lucius. I have my ways of dealing with fae."

He left his friend in the living room and went to the bedroom to get dressed, and think out his plan. Ira was asleep. As he garbed his

battle robes, he watched her and felt not for the first time how much loved her. He loved her so much, and yet he couldn't stay with her, crawl back into their bed and let Lucius and Harry find their way out of this themselves. Second to Ira, they were the closest things to friends he had ever had.

He wrote her a brief note explaining he had gone out to resolve an argument between Potter and Malfoy and would be back by Sunday afternoon and left it on his pillow, then made a brief stop to his private potions lab before leaving the castle with Lucius. As they traveled, Severus pried as much information out of Lucius as he could, unraveling a tale of conspiracy and self-destruction, but a part of his mind remained fixed on thoughts of Harry himself.

Was the boy alive? Was he still human? Would the prophecy, if it had any credence to begin with, hold true in the faerie realms? Would this careless, unforeseen act be the impetus that set the prophecy in motion? Or would this be yet another strange adventure in the life of Harry Potter, one he would walk out of a little stronger and a little stranger than when he had walked in? If he did so, what would be the outcome for Lucius and himself, untouched and unprotected by destiny's hand?

There was only one way to find out.

~ Page Break~

The world had shrunk into a sphere of black water, damp silvery air, a boat, a hobgoblin, and the Dark Lord himself. And mermaids. Most of Voldemort's attention appeared to be spared for the mermaids, their golden fins and flowing yellow hair undulating gracefully just beneath the water made for a calming sight even if their constant circling around the fragile craft hinted at a sinister intent. The mermaids were a fairer breed than those found in the lake below Hogwarts, whom nature had gifted with a sort of ugliness to avoid the attention of the wizarding folk they lived in proximity to. These mermaids, however, were ocean-faring sirens whose song and beauty lured unwary sailors to their death and then would disappear not to be seen for decades or even centuries in the same place.

Every so often one would dare lift her head to the surface and let out a few crooning notes, attempting to gain his attention, but drawing no nearer than a few feet from the edge of the boat. Part of this Voldemort knew was some magical protection placed on the craft, but a larger part was no doubt do to the wretched creature that was acted as his guide through gloom.

"Eehehe!" Todd-All-Alone crowed in delight when his long narrow pole tapped against a mermaid that had inadvertently drifted too near. She let out an agonized shriek and flailed violently, bringing up foaming white water streaked with red, before disappearing completely into the depths. "Eehehe! Thata one wasa wiggla!"

Several of the ichthyied females hissed angrily, furthering his cackling amusement. The Dark Lord did not speak or move. Not even his expression changed, though his crimson eyes turned their indifferent gaze from the empty water to Harry's wand laying in his hand. Another mermaid rose up from the depths, this one older than the others, although still lovely with black hair and black eyes focused intently on the Dark Lord's ungloved hand resting over the edge of the boat.

"Oi! Wotcher there! Go'ins to lose a couple of spare parts, yeah?" Todd warned. Voldemort's gaze glided from the wand to the black eyed mermaid, who was now mere inches from his hand. They regarded each other for a moment, and then Voldemort turned his attention back to his wand, not bothering to move.

Todd did not consider himself a very proud fellow, and most who knew him felt that was good because there was little for the noxious creature to be proud of. However, if there was one place he felt he deserved some modicum of respect it was on the water. Who knew these water ways better than he? Who knew its dangers like the back of their hand? Certainly not this child tyrant, so arrogant in his ignorance, so apathetic to his own approaching demise. He was just like any other mortal fool, following after yet another fool to his death, like little duckies all in a row. Quack, quack, quack.

"I am not going to die."

Todd gave a start, nearly dropping his pole. Had he said that aloud?

"Did Gulandri himself not promise me the full extent of his hospitality? Or has faerie decorum failed completely during his reign?" he said, without looking away from the sliver of polished wood in his hand.

The fae let out an angry hiss at the implied insult. A faerie's word was sacred, and to have a species so renown for their ability to lie boldfaced and shameless furthered his annoyance. This was the first human he had encountered up close and conscious, and he had believed it would be a novel amusement but it was quickly descending into a test of patience he didn't have.

"Whadda ya know 'bout it? Whadda ya know bout nothing? Ya ain't nothing but a ignerent, baby-faced rascal. Looky 'ere, climb'n into my boat, bold as ya please. Think you go'n to market? Yeah? Think ya I be yer servant? I'm yer ferryman, mortal. I'm ferrying ya ta the underworld. Whatcha thing of that?"

Voldemort's crimson eyes finally turned to him. Todd drew back slightly, caught off guard. He hadn't expected the mortal's gaze to be quite so unsettling. He's had banshees glare at him with more warmth.

"And were you my protege's 'ferryman'? Did you row him to his death?"

Todd puffed his chest, putting on a display of bravado that wasn't fooling anyone, not even the mermaids whose frustrated expressions had smoothed into one of vindictive enjoyment. They might not understand the words spoken, but they knew something was happening.

"What if I did? Whatcha gonna do 'bout it? Kill me? Then wot? Ya think'n you canz find yer way on yer own? Ha! Yer be going in circles til the magic fails and the pretty fishes come and eat ya! You ain't in your kingdom no more, yer Highness! This 'ere is Todd-All-Alone's castle. Ya do what I say or else! Yeah?"

Voldemort fell very quiet, looking away from Todd and back out at the water. The black-eyed mermaid had reached his hand, and staring

directly at him, kissed the very tips of his fingers. The silence dragged on, the Dark Lord still refusing to look at the other creature, and Todd felt a swell of pride at having bested the man and couldn't pass up the opportunity to gloat.

"Oi! Wot this? Ya gunna cry now? Pop a few salties? Go riighta head!" he laughed.

Voldemort's grip on Harry's wand suddenly tightened and he pointed it at the changeling.

"Levi corpus."

The changeling shrieked as he suddenly found himself pulled from his feet to dangle helplessly in the air by his ankle. He dropped his pole and it fell in the water and quickly drifted away. The mermaids, almost half a dozen all rose to the surface to point and laugh and clap their hands in childish glee.

"OI OI OI! Put me down!"

Voldemort's expression hadn't changed, and still remained aloof as he slowly moved Harry's wand so that Todd was suddenly hovering over the water rather than the boat. The mermaids swam beneath him, and reached up for him like children after a toy held just out of reach. All except the black-eyed female, who continued to nuzzle the Dark Lord's hand and watched him intently.

"Are you sure you want me to put you down?" Voldemort asked.
"They look hungry."

"Wait! No, don't put me down! No! Please, please!"

"You know, Harry's wand shares a similar core to my own, and that makes it a little easier for me to use, but is by no means natural. If find I am starting to tire keeping you like this. I don't believe it is worth the effort to do so."

He let him dip a little lower, just enough for a set of fingernails to graze his fuzzy head and tear several strands free. The changeling

wailed and screamed as if he were already being torn apart. Voldemort lifted him a few inches higher.

"Unless of course you have something to say to make it worth my effort."

"ANYTHING! ANYTHING!"

"Is Harry Potter still alive? Is he still human?"

"YA! YA! Definitely! Er... maybe."

He let him dip again.

"AH! 'E WAS WHEN I LAST SAW 'IM!"

Lift.

"So Gulandri does intend to wait for me before he Introduces him? What was his condition when you saw him?"

"Sleeping! 'E was sleeping... 'eeling I thunk. They kept 'im in the lady's room! I dunno why. All da others were in da Cellar."

"Others? What others?"

Todd told him, blubbering heavily, about the other witches and wizards that had been brought in from the hunt and placed in dungeons. This left Voldemort rather confused. He had assumed Harry had some how been lured out of Hogwarts, possibly a result of the strange happening Snape had hinted at in his last message, and taken from the Forbidden Forest. However, if what changeling was saying were true, Harry hadn't wandered off again but been under the escort of at least a dozen trained soldiers. He could not even begin to imagine how this had come to pass, but someone was going to suffer dearly for it. Certainly the soldiers themselves, those who survived anyway, would face the consequences of failing so spectacularly at protecting his protege.

"What does Gulandri intend to do once I arrive? What is his game? His trick?"

"Eyes dunno! 'Ow could I know? 'E is king and eyes just a ferryman!"

"But you were sent to escort me. Where? What was to happen once I arrived?"

Todd fell very quiet, and his eyes grew exceptionally wide. Voldemort could, theoretically, legilimens a fae, but in this instance it seemed wholly unnecessary. It was obvious there had been some sort of ambush or trap waiting for him, guised perhaps as a welcoming party or something equally harmless so as not to break the promise of hospitality, but with the intent of disarming and ensnaring him. He leaned back in his boat and considered his options.

He could not allow himself to be taken by surprise or allow himself to be called into the dance Gulandri was setting him up to perform. He would need to keep the elf and all his people unbalanced and off guard if he intended to thwart their plans. Easier said than done. Todd had been planted with the sole purpose of delivering him into some sort of trap, the first step to throwing off the Dark Elf's game was evading it. The changeling had been right though, he was the ferryman and the only one who knew where they were going and how to get there. He needed him. Threatening him with a painful demise might be enough to make him lead Voldemort to some safe harbor near where he needed to be, but it might not either. As cowardly a creature as it was, he was bound by magic to fealty towards his king and that wasn't something easily over-ridden.

A sharp nip to his thumb drew him from his thoughts to the strangely affectionate creature swimming beside him. Frustrated and short tempered, he nearly back-handed her for the minor infraction, but when he caught her dark gaze he stopped. They stared at each for a long moment. Then they smiled.

She stuck her thumb in her mouth and bit, and pulled the now bloodied digit out and pressed it to Voldemort's own, mixing their blood.

"A promise then," he said. She nodded. He turned to Todd. "And a rather unfortunate one for you, I am afraid."

"Wot? Whadda ya- AAAHHH!"

Voldemort let him drop, falling straight into the savage hands of the mermaids who quickly dragged him below the water and disappeared. The silence was a balm to his twisted soul. He breathed the cold, wet air deeply, let it burn inside his lungs, and released it. That was one small battle won. He looked back at his new ally. Unlike Todd, she was not of Gulandri's court and held no fealty to him. She held no real affection for Voldemort himself either, but she did owe him a boon for helping her avenge her wounded kin.

"What is your name?"

She just smiled and shook her head. He probably would have been unable to pronounce it anyway. The only reason they had been able to understand each other at all was that legilimency did not truly involve language. It involved understanding the other, because they understood themselves and their own meaning. A useful tool for diplomacy in delicate situations he had found.

Using Harry's wand, because there was something strangely enigmatic about using a wand so similar to his own and yet simultaneously resistant, he summoned a length of rope, securing one end to the bow of the boat and tossing the other end to the mermaid, who took it and began pulling the boat along behind her at a far more impressive speed than the ferryman's sedate pace.

Todd had been mistaken in his belief that he was the most knowledgeable of the faes to navigate the waters between the innumerable realms. Mermaids were more knowledgeable by far, and infinitely more cunning. She would find him a safe shore to deposit him, more quickly and secretively than the changeling could have done even if he had tried. He would use this to the greatest advantage possible.

Until then, however, he was stuck doing exactly what he had been doing before he had disposed of his previous guide. Trying to figure out what the hell had happened and what did it mean?

Although Todd had insisted that Harry was alive and human when he left, he hadn't seemed as certain that was still the case. Voldemort was not as concerned about Harry's survival (the gods must have had a future in mind for him given his continued survival thus far) as he was about his humanity, which was not as valued by the cosmic forces that organized the universe. What if he arrived too late to save Harry from being turned as Gulandri intended? Wasn't it possible that the Dark Elf intended to make him break their hospitality agreement by enraging Voldemort to the point of recklessness? It was a widely known fact, even to himself, that he was unhealthily possessive of his protege and would tear apart any enemy that threatened to take him away.

Somehow he doubted the fates would protect Harry from exchanging one pagan form to another, not even to satisfy the Dark Lord. What would he do then?

Kill Gulandri, of course, although he intended to do so regardless of the circumstances.

But what of Harry? What form would he take? Would he remember Voldemort at all? Did it even matter? He would take the boy with him, but then what? His mind presented a thousand different scenarios; ones where he continued to pass Harry off as human to continue the role Voldemort had intended for him, ones where he hid the boy away from the public eye in some private sanctuary for the rest of his seemingly endless days, others where he set the boy on Gulandri's throne, his own puppet king. He quickly had to dismiss them all completely. There was no telling what state he would find Harry in and there was no point in planning for the future until he could assess the boy's condition.

There was nothing to look at with the dense fog around them, and now even the mermaids had seemingly disappeared. He busied his thoughts by taking an inventory of his mental armory; spells and battle techniques he might need in the coming confrontation. When

he felt sufficiently prepared, he spared a thought to Bellatrix and the soldiers he had left without so much as a word along the shores of Bostalsee.

~ Page Break~

Bobby flew hard and he flew high, ignoring the burn on his wing muscles after such long periods of relative disuse. When he passed over fields and forests the sky glittered with stars. When he passed over cities, the streets created their own beautiful constellations. Magic flowed over and through him, his own and that of a world he had been too long parted from. He felt it tugging at him, luring him to travel to strange and distant places, realms that lay between and below and beyond the present one.

Freedom.

He had just given up hope and then BAM! There it was, and if he weren't so elated he would have felt resentful of the trick. But it was hard to hold a grudge at the moment. The only thing tempering his enthusiasm was the understanding that Harry had once again gotten himself into trouble and he himself had Lucius' ring weighted around his ankle. Both were driving him towards Hausteheim, a faeries realm he had crossed enough times to be knowledgeable of and not enough to be comfortable with.

Getting there had been simple enough. Flying between two halves of an elm split by lightening, crossing under a stone bridge three times, and a somewhat awkward shuffled through a badger's hole had brought him out into an ancient faerie graveyard, overgrown with red leaved vines and intangible spirits that hid in the long shadows left by the perpetually setting sun. Crows cawed at him jealously as he made his appearance and joined them for a moment in one of the nearby trees, gathering his sense of direction.

Hausteheim had three major settlements; Algor Sur, built from a dwarven Mithral quarry, Messetel, made of hundreds of tiny island set on a shallow lake, and Ruknocuranti, composed of special trees that grew into naturally occurring shelters. It was possible Harry had been taken to any of these places, but his gut told him he would be taken

to Algor Sur, the current capitol and home of the realm's young Autumn King. Aside from that, he couldn't be certain what he would find. Who had the boy? What state was he in?

"Excuse me," he said, addressing the crows glaring at him. "Have any of you heard of a young wizard brought here recently?"

He received no response. He had hoped perhaps there was a changeling among them willing to gossip, but it would seem he would have to look elsewhere. Taking to the air, he headed west towards Algor Sur. Hopefully, he would be able to gather a little more information before he arrived, but he would have to be cautious. He was not a true faerie himself, which made him just as valuable of a commodity as any wizard and just as likely to be taken against his will.

He did not meet any fae along the way, but when he finally reached the settlement he found information he needed without have to ask. Harry and his protectors had only been brought in a few days before and the peoples in the market place where still gossiping heavily about it. Bobby perched himself amongst a number of other ravens and pigeons along the edge of roofs and along the ropes and rigging that held up the tents and stalls, listening intently and piecing together what had happened and learned about what was being planned for his troublesome friend. The most helpful conversation he stumbled upon by far was one between two dwarven sisters and a goblin cloth merchant.

"I need blue cloth, not red. Red won't suit her at all!" a dwarven wench demanded, shaking her large fist at the cloth merchant, a goblin of some kind, who regarded her coolly over the edge of his large nose.

"I don't know how you can say so. There's no telling what she will look like... after. Red might suit her just fine,"he pointed out. Her sister rolled her eyes.

"You can't even know if you'll get any of them, let alone the one you want. You've never managed to get one before. You've always been outbid."

"Oh, hush! There were never as many before. The competition won't be nearly as fierce, just you watch. I'll get the dark haired lass, you mark me, and she make the prettiest dwarf in town once I put a little meat on her."

"As far as that goes," the goblin muttered, his view of dwarven aestheticism rather dim.

"How do you even know there's going to be an auction for them? The king seemed more interested in using them as bait for the God Eater than turning a profit."

"Pish-posh. He only needs the little one for that! A pretty face, even if he's little more than a walking skeleton," she giggled a bit, her fleshy cheek dimpling in amusement. "But I guess humans and elves like that sort of thing. I heard he already promised the boy to his daughter."

"She's a naga, not an elf," the goblin corrected.

"Half-elf," she snapped right back.

"Promised? As in he's going to marry them?" the second dwarf gasped.

"Of course not, you ninny! He gave him to her as a gift. My Murkwort said that his best friend's sister's fiance heard from one of the kitchen boys that he can speak the snake tongue."

"No? Really?" came yet another scandalized reply. "If I was that girl's parent I would think a little harder about leaving her alone with someone who can say anything to without you knowing. He's handsome enough by human standards, isn't he?"

"Get your mind out of the cesspit! Princes Selufiare is a lady! She don't deserve any of that sort of talk."

Bobby flew away, gliding further down into the city towards the royal quarters. If what the woman had said were true, then Harry was likely being held in either the dungeons or in one of the private quarters

near the princess. This was problematic. One, because that increased security, and two, because if he happened upon Gulandri, he would be recognized immediately and his chances of success would drop considerably. To make matters worse, Voldemort was theoretically on this way there, and when he arrived whatever trap had been set for him would be sprung. There would be fighting, and Harry would more than likely be caught somewhere in the crossfire, and history may repeat his brother's fate a second time.

He would have to diffuse the situation quickly and subtly.

On the bright side, if he was in Selufiare's care Bobby had a much better chance of doing just that. She did not know him, and although he knew little about her, he knew she favored her naga ancestry and they tended to be sensitive and less prone to suspicion. He thought for several moments on how he might be able to take advantage of that, with minimal risk to himself.

It occurred to him quickly that there was nothing he could do that wouldn't be risky for himself, and he flew towards the entrance of the royal quarters. He was spotted almost immediately.

"You! Halt right there!" a elven guard demanded, drawing the attention of the dozens of other creatures in the tunnel with them. Bobby obediently stopped and landed himself on the shoulder of a statue along the wall.

"Yes? Is something the matter?" he asked the elf innocently. The elf, white as snow except for the blue in his lips and eyes, marched towards him, forcing servants and visitors to leap out of his way.

"Who are you? What are you doing here?"

"Oh, excuse me. Allow me to introduce myself. I am Bobbitimus Carrigan the III, messenger and herald of the divine Raecellos. I come bearing a gift to her majesty, Princess Selufiare, congratulating the acquisition of her own convert," he said, ingratiatingly, waving his ringed foot to show off the supposed 'gift' he was bringing. "These things are milestones in a woman's life, you know."

This was very true. Acquiring a human inducted into the life of a fae was very much like adoption for faeries. For some, they would be the only children they would ever have for themselves. The elf guard frowned, uncertain.

"What would a god care for such a thing?"

"Oh, no! No, no, no! I didn't mean Raecellos had sent me. I am merely doing a favor for another of his followers who happens to be an admirer of her ladyship."

"Who?"

Here Bobby tried to look sheepish.

"Oh...ah... I am afraid I can't say. It is... a private matter between her ladyship and the prince... ah! I mean gentleman."

Now it was the elf's turn to look uncomfortable. It was not a guard's place to interfere with the clandestine affairs of their employers, particularly when those employers were royalty. Their romantic partners had the tendency to create serious problems, but even more so were the attempts of outsiders to disrupt them. Wars and suicides were unfortunately common among the various faerie clans for just this sort of thing. At the same time, it was their responsibility to make sure their masters were safe, and it was just as common for an enemy to take advantage of the relaxation of security measures to cause all sorts of mischief.

"How can I know your intentions?"

"Oh, let him through, Veneri! The princess can handle herself!" a brownie laughed as he ran by carrying a basket of laundry.

"Mind your own business, Caskel!" he hissed, but the creature had already disappeared. Bobby acted as if there hadn't been interrupted.

"Your diligence to your duty does you credit, sir. I swear on my magic and my life that I have not come to bring any harm to Princess Selufiare or her family."

"You are not a faerie, your oath does not bind you," the elf observed, and now that he had said it, he stared suddenly covetous. The raven had to think quickly or he was going to find himself a prisoner yet again.

"Very true. Very well, I swear upon Raecellos' favor that I have not come to bring any harm to Princess Selufiare or her family. There. If I break my word I shall be cursed by my patron god, insuring a fate worse than death!"

The guard nodded, finding such an oath sufficient. It never occurred to him that the raven might have been lying about Raecellos being his patron god. Claiming the favor of a god falsely was a terrible sin, and just as likely to result in a curse as Bobby's oath had been if broken.

"Very well. Wait here, and I will ask the princess if she will see you or no."

So Bobby waited, pretending to be confident and carefree, even as he felt many eyes upon him and was keenly aware that inside the tunneled city he had very little space to maneuver. Luckily, he did not have to wait long before Veneri returned.

"She will see you. Come with me," he said, extending his arm towards the raven. Bobby took advantage of the offered protection and hopped down onto it. He was led deeper into the tunnels, where the number of fae quickly diminished, and he was able to concentrate on the feeling of the place and the lay out of its tunnels. Most importantly, he became aware of the fresh air circulating even this deeply and how the candles flickered from a draft that did not originate from the direction they had come from. That meant there were ventilation shafts nearby. These probably wouldn't prove useful to Harry as a means of escape, but for Bobby they might prove invaluable.

He was brought to an ornately carved door, which the guard knocked upon and was bade to enter. Inside, he found a lavish chamber fit for a faerie princess and a faerie princess fit for such a lavish chamber. He was momentarily struck by her loveliness, particularly her electric

blue eyes which rested on him with gentle compassion. His attention, however, was soon drawn to the other denizen of the room. A young falcon, not quite grown into its full adult feathers, was tethered a stand and looking miserable and exhausted. It did not immediately look towards him when he was brought into the room, but once he spoke it turned and gazed at him intently. Bobby wondered if perhaps it was hungry.

"Your highness," Bobby said, making an elegant bow with his wings extended. "Thank you for agreeing to see me. I understand these are busy days for you and your family."

"It is kind of you to say so, but my days are for my own leisure. My father's amusements are of differing tastes than my own. Make yourself comfortable, stranger. Would you care for some refreshment?"

"A bowl of untouched water would be lovely. I have traveled far."

"Of course." She gestured for Veneri to go, and he bowed respectfully as he left to have some other servant fetch some water. "Now tell me, Sir Raven, what business brings you to my door at such risk to yourself? Surely not some other man's amorous attentions as you told the guard."

Bobby blinked in surprise. Her expression turned from compassionate to condescension with a mere tilt of her head.

"I know the word 'princess' conjures the image of a beautiful, kind, and naïve girl in the mortal realm, but please do me the courtesy of not assuming I am a complete fool. Raecellos is the patron of adventuring youth; not timid, lovesick princes, and your presence so close to the Introduction Ceremony means you traveled from either the mortal world or our neighboring kingdom, Vandeheim, which has no unwed princes to speak of. Now tell me, did Lord Voldemort send you?"

Bobby just stared at her in wide-eyed shock. Well, wasn't this a surprise? He should have known better than to underestimate a woman he had never even met, but he had not anticipated his ruse

being torn apart so easily and so quickly. He was a little lost about what to do now. He was trapped in the room with her, and while he had some innate magic, she was a fully trained enchantress with a wand.

The falcon on its perch let out a distressed cry, and flapped its wings weakly trying to pull himself free. Selufiare rose and went to him, murmuring softly in parseltongue. Bobby gave another start. That was Harry? Oh Goddess.

The naga spoke in comforting tones, stroking the falcon's breast gently until at last he seemed to calm.

"What have you done to him?" Bobby demanded, horrified.

She gave him a sad glance.

"A poor jest on my father's part. It is not permanent, and if the young man had more practice and more strength, he could doubtlessly return to his true form. It is, perhaps, better that he conserve his strength for his escape."

"Escape? I don't understand. You want him to escape?"

"Does that surprise you so much? It is the instinct of faeries to take mortals, particularly those who have lost their love of the Earth and all her many forms, but Harry is no lost soul and I am not bound by base instinct. Even I can understand what is being done to him is wrong."

A thrill of excitement ran through the raven's body. If this formidable lady was on their side, then they were nearly free already. If in fact she was on their side. This could be a trick.

"So you are going to help us because you pity him?" he let a touch of skepticism touch his voice. "Pity seems a poor reason to risk your father's wraith."

She nodded.

"Indeed, it would seem a very poor reason indeed. But my reasoning has both personal and practical aspects. Do you know the story of my mother, Lady Lorelai?"

"Only that she was originally a muggle, before the naga took her."

"Indeed, they took her and then gave her as a gift to my father. She was unique in that even though she had only been a non-magical human, she still remembered her life perfectly and she regretted its loss to her dying day. She made me promise when I was very small that I would never force my own desires for companionship on another the way my father and the naga did upon her."

Bobby tilted his head respectfully.

"She sounds like she was a remarkable woman, but you said you had a practical reason as well?"

"Yes. The other reason why I will help you both, is that I have no desire to share this realm with Lord Voldemort. My father seems convinced that he is the only suitable rival for his throne. I do not agree."

"You know of another who may prove a suitable challenge?"

"I can think of one who may surpass him when the proper season falls, yes."

He looked at her for a long moment, and it suddenly occurred to him what she was really saying.

"A Winter Queen perhaps, rather than another King?"

She gave him a dark look. "I would thank you not speculate that out loud in my father's house."

"Of course. I apologize. So if I take Harry away, then there will be nothing here to lure in the Dark Lord." Except for revenge. "I'll go with that. If you are offering your assistance, then I am more than grateful

to accept it. Perhaps you might start by taking this accursed ring off of me?"

He offered his leg from which Malfoy's ring dangled. He had intended to ask Harry to take it off, but the boy was in no condition to do so. She checked the ring, turning it round and round his leg and rubbing her thumb over the emerald and the family crest thoughtfully.

"A very pretty thing. Good for holding enchantments," she noted. "How did you get this?"

"It was forced upon me. You see, I am very much a prisoner, just as Harry is."

"So the Dark Lord is not above such debasement."

"Frankly, he seems to enjoy them rather too much," Bobby said flatly. Harry made a protesting squawk they both ignored. "One of his servants sent me here, not realizing I would have come anyway."

"Filial attachments?" she guessed, catching him by surprise yet again.

"How- how did you...?"

"Father told me of Harry's preincarnation. When you introduced yourself to my guard as a Carrigan, it was yet another clue that you were here for him and not myself. You really must learn to be more cautious, sir."

"I am starting to see that." He looked at Harry, who was looking back at him steadily. He was well suited to a falcon, Bobby acknowledged, the intensity of his stare did not fade in the slightest between the transformation. He turned back to the princess. "You may keep the ring if you can take it off."

"How generous."

"Aren't I though?"

There was a knock on the door that made him jump, but it was only a brownie bringing in the promised bowl of water. She set it on bed and quickly left without a word. Bobby watched her nervously until she disappeared, and when he turned back to Selufiare he found her holding the ring in her hand.

"My Lady, you are remarkable. I should caution you there is yet another curse on it. It will kill the wearer come dawn."

She slipped the ring upon her finger, and admired it.

"That is of little concern in a realm where the sun never sets."

"Just in case you feel the need to go traveling."

She acknowledged his consideration with a nod, and turned to the bowl of water which she took and set down in the center of the room. She went to one of the side rooms and returned with a bundle of dried herbs, which she crushed in her hand and sprinkled into the bowl. Tapping the edge of the bowl with her silver wand, she cast a spell and waited until the water turned translucent violet and then cleared again. She went to Harry and untethered him.

"Both of you drink. It will give you strength."

Both birds hesitated. She waited. Bobby moved first, settling himself on the floor and looked down into it. Everything up until now could have been a trick on her part, an elaborate game like the ones Gulandri was notorious for. The water was already enchanted, but whether it was the sort of enchantment that would in fact provide them strength or some herb that would transform them into fae...? This was the real test of trust right here. At this point, however, it made no difference. If she were truly their enemy, she had caught them long before.

Slowly, he dipped his head down and took a sip.

It tasted vaguely sweet, but also a little sour, like unripened apples. Not faerie wine by any stretch of the imagination.

"It's fine," he told Harry. "Come on."

Harry's flight down was rather clumsy, as he was unaccustomed to controlling not only arms but also a tail, but he demonstrated a strong instinct for it. This was good, because Bobby didn't think he had the time to teach him the various techniques of flight. He hobbled over to the bowl, his talons making the walk awkward, and settled next to him. Once he had decided to drink, he went about it with gusto, swallowed down mouthful after mouthful.

"Easy, Harry," the enchantress warned. "Even this can make you sick if you overindulge."

Harry lifted his head, and looked at her for a long moment, as if seeing her for the first time. He resumed at a more sedate pace, until both he and Bobby were satisfied and then pulled away. He flapped his wings experimentally and found they no longer ached with fatigue. He flapped harder and managed the short flight to the bird stand, and then again to Selufiare's outstretched arm, which she had wrapped in a throw. She laughed in delight.

"Very good, Harry. Very, very good."

"A natural born flier," Bobby agreed, also impressed. He, himself, had been reborn a bird and had to go through the natural progress of growth and practice before he had managed to grasp flight. He had seen enough changelings and animagi in his lifetimes, as well, to know it was an exacting art that not all were suited to.

She stroked the falcon's feathers admiringly, hissing softly in her native tongue.

"I hope this kindness will instill some genuine affection in place of faerie charms and trickery," she said, and Harry bobbed his head eagerly, making her smile. "One day I will come for that kiss you denied. Will you give it to me then?"

Harry tilted his head in a birdy curiosity or possible consideration, but after a moment bobbed again with a touch more solemnity. Her smile widened.

"Come then. I will show you a way out."

She did not take him out to the hall, but instead led them to the side chamber she had retrieved the herbs. It turned out to be a potions cupboard, very similar to the one back at Hogwarts, only with more strange plants and less spider legs and salamander eyes. Moving a jar of glittering pink sand from one spot on a shelf to another, triggered some hidden mechanism, and caused the entire shelf to swing forwards, to reveal a crawl space.

"This is my private escape tunnel. Not even father knows of it. It will take you further underground for half a league, and then you'll see some light coming from above. It's an old well, and if you go straight up, you'll find yourself out of the city walls."

"Thank you," Bobby said sincerely. "We won't forget this."

"You may thank me by keeping Lord Voldemort away from this place. Now go, I must be elsewhere when they discover you are missing. Lisirrlis."

A small orb of light appeared from her wand and entered the secret passageway, illuminating roughly carved limestone walls. Bobby dove into the passage first, and was followed closely behind by Harry. The passageway closed behind, so that the only light was the little orb they continued to follow deeper and deeper. They said nothing as they went, concentrating on flying in the confined space, forced to drop to the ground several times when the tunnel dipped too low or the slight draft that kept them alight suddenly failed or fluttered. The raven could sense Harry's anxiety and hesitation, perhaps caught up in the guilt of leaving the others behind or the possibility of facing the Dark Lord after once again getting himself into danger.

If Bobby had his way, he would never see the Dark Lord again, but he had made a promise to Selufiare and he would keep it if at all possible. If that meant, temporarily, delivering Harry back to the Dark Lord, then so be it. Now that he was free again, he could always return for him later. Perhaps Harry's latest disobedience would be enough to form the rift Bobby needed to separate them for good.

As for himself, Harry was indeed thinking about the men he was leaving behind and also about the Dark Lord he was to face. What he was also thinking of, however, was the fact that he had a brother. He had had a brother his entire life and never known about it. He had had an entire life and known about it. Why hadn't Bobby told him? He had to have known. There had been hints, although he never could have guessed it before today.

And if Gulandri had told the truth about him being Carrigan, had anything else he said been true? Had the prophecy been true? Did Bobby know? Would he tell Harry if he did?.

Oh, Goddess, was Voldemort was going to try and kill him?

The last time he had gotten himself on the wizard's bad side had resulted in the most miserable year of his life, living in exile and guilt. Could he survive if the Dark Lord actively started hunting him? What sanctuary could he possibly flee to? Germany was a war zone and would happily kill him as they would any other enemy soldier. And what about his friends? What about Hermione, who may or may not yet be free of the engagement, but would find no protection from a vengeful Dark Lord regardless. None of his friends would be safe if he tried to run for it. Did that mean he would have to fight? If the prophecy was true, did that mean he would become the Dark Lord's enemy? And if, by some miracle, he were the victor he would rule the wizarding world for a thousand years? That sounded even less appealing than killing the elder wizard. He had a hard enough time dealing with his life as it was now, how could he cope with the responsibility of entire nations on his shoulders?

But, no, he was getting way too far ahead of himself. Even if the prophecy did exist, and hinted at some uncomfortable similarities to himself, it did not fit entirely. Gulandri himself had pointed out it referred to one born on July 31st not August 1st. There would be no reason for his parents to change his date of birth. Unless they knew of the prophecy, but then why would they only change his birth date by one day? They could have pretended it was an entirely different month, and who would have been the wiser?

Of course it had nothing to do with him. As if he would ever start a fight... er, a serious fight... with Lord Voldemort? Harry had never thought of killing the Dark Lord, not even at his most angry or frightened had he ever entertained the idea of harming the other seriously.

Aargh! Stupid, bloody faeries! As if his life wasn't weird enough without them screwing around with his head. He would be happy to get out of this nuthouse once and for all, even if he had to face his angry mentor to do so. He'd take his punishment, go home, apologize to Hermione, hold a memorial for all the soldiers lost to his arrogance, cure Ron (and Lucius by extension), figure out what the hell Snape's deal was, show off his new animagus form to his godfathers (as soon as he figures out how to turn the damn thing off), and then dedicate the rest of his life to never being where he wasn't supposed to be again.

Ever.

At last they saw light that was not from their own magic orb. Once they reached it, however, they found their task would not be as simple as flying up and out. The well was narrow and made enough more so by tendrils of roots and dead vines that had dug deep in search of water and died as the well had dried up. They were forced to climb nearly thirty feet through the bramble, squeezing through tiny spaces, snapping bits of ropy vines with their sharp beaks, using as much strength as their small bodies could manage to break through as got tangled, and scraped and clung with their taloned feet as they inched their way up the shaft. By the time they finally reached the top, they were both exhausted despite Selufiare's potion.

Bobby, however, refused to let them rest until they were reached safety. The nearest portal back to the mortal world was several miles away, straight through the passage Harry and his party had likely been herded through on their way here. Chances were, they would find the Dark Lord along the way, and if they were lucky they would meet up with him before the Dark Lord did and fulfill the princess' request, leaving Hausteheim without further incident.

Harry followed as best he could, helped along by the fact that although he wasn't yet as skilled a flier as the raven, he was naturally built to be faster and more agile. They kept high above the trees, looking down through the bare limbs in search of any sign of Gulandri's people or the Dark Lord. As they drew nearer to the border and no sign of friend or ally appeared, Bobby became increasingly anxious. Surely they should have run into someone by now?

No one appeared, however, and as they crossed over a small stream they were suddenly surrounded by darkness. Harry reeled in surprise, taken off guard by the sudden change from twilight to a few hours past midnight. Bobby circled him twice and led him back towards the ground, finding a wide dirt road.

"Calm down. We're back in the human realm. We should be safe now."

The falcon landed beside him, but continued to search the surrounding trees. His vision was not intended for night, but the moon was only a few days past full and he could see enough. And the more he saw the more panicked he became. Where was Voldemort? Could they possibly have missed him along the way? Did that mean he was still on his way to the faerie stronghold? Could he have not even set off for the journey? It had been days in Hasteheim but how long had it been here? Hours? Days? Years?

In his frantic distraction, he failed to notice someone coming up behind him, until he felt a pair of human-shaped hands grab hold of him, pinning his wings to his side. He let out a panicked cry and started to struggle.

"Hold still! I'm not going to hurt you!" the man said, Bobby's voice unmistakable, shocking him into stillness. "There you go, just relax. I'm going to see if I can undo this spell on you. You can't stay like this or you might get stuck."

While his raven-now-human guide manhandled him, looking for who knew what, Harry stared at him fixedly. It was still dark, even with the moon, but he got a general idea of the shape and contours of the man's face and was surprised on how similar it was to the Carrigan

he had seen in his limbo. In fact, more than brothers, they could have been twins except that Bobby appeared younger and his eyes didn't have quite the same shape to them. He couldn't see what color his eyes were or the tone of his skin, but he could guess.

"Ah, I think I found it. Hold on, this probably won't feel very nice."

It was Gulandri's spell all over again, and felt exactly the same, agonizing and unnatural in its force but over much more quickly. When it was done he found himself screaming in Bobby's arms, the sound muffled in the man's black sweater. He let himself relax, to catch his breath.

This is my brother, Harry thought. I wondered what it was like.

"Are you alright?"

He nodded, and after a few more deep breaths spoke.

"It's not going to be like that every time I change, is it?"

Bobby grinned. "I should think not. It shouldn't hurt at all once you've figured out how to do it yourself. Like tightening or relaxing a muscle you've never used before."

"Oh... good. Where's Voldemort?"

"I don't know. I thought he would have come this way, but perhaps he went in somewhere else. I guess he would have had to. There's no way to get there from here until tomorrow. I hadn't thought of that."

"What do you mean? How did we even get here?"

"Faerie realms have a lot of doorways into other realms, including this one, but those in this realm tend to be time sensitive or must meet a lot of special requirements. In order to cross into Hausteheim from here, it has to be sunset."

"Then how did you...?"

"I came in through Wales."

"How much time passed here since I was taken?"

"Less than half a day. Two hours here is about a day... what passes for a day over there."

"Oh! Good. Maybe we can stop the Dark Lord before he tries to come after me or sends someone after me. You don't think he went through already, do you?"

Bobby would have been very surprised if the evil bastard hadn't, but he didn't say so.

"I couldn't say with any certainty. There should be a village nearby. You can make a fire call to find out."

"Yeah, okay. Just give me a minute. You don't think we'll be followed, do you?"

"I doubt the Mlesians will risk being caught in the mortal realm for an entire day just to follow us. They can't exactly track us even if they wanted to."

Harry smiled at that. Yeah, imagine that. They had just escaped a faerie realm. How many people could put that on their next job application? He started to pick himself up. They needed to hurry. If Voldemort hadn't left yet, it was still unlikely they had much time before he did. Bobby helped him to his feet, and they made their way towards Aoiwig. Harry didn't have his cloak after he became human, so Bobby wrapped his arm around his shoulder to help keep him warm.

"Hey, Bobby..."

"Yes, Harry?"

The young wizard was going to ask if he really was his brother, but felt a sudden moment of shyness. It would be rather awkward if he had somehow misinterpreted things.

"Where have you been all this time?" he asked instead.

"Oh, you know. Held prisoner by-"

The transfigured man jerk in his arms, stiffening for a moment, before succumbing to spell that had struck him. Harry managed to catch him before he fell, and found himself holding a raven once again. He clutched his fallen companion to his chest, and bolted behind a tree with him. His heart began racing with fear. Had the faeries followed them after all? He didn't have his wand, and the binding glove was still covering his sword hand. Bobby lay limp in his arms, and he could not tell if he was alive or dead.

All he could do was run and hide, but the spell had come from in front of them which meant the attacker(s?) were standing between him and Aoiwig. All around them were brittle, fallen leaves making stealth impossible.

How was he going to get past without being seen?

Had he escaped only to be taken once again?

~ Author's Notes~

Fleur gave Harry a book of Prophetic practices of Centaurs during his summer in Germany, which was actually given to her by a third party.

There is that nasty prophecy. I tweaked it a bit for the purposes of this story, but it is quite similar, and will likely prove just as troublesome for poor Harry and friends. Just to be clear, however, Voldemort did not in fact kill Carrigan or have any intention of killing him. That's pure Gulantri B.S.

Book VI

Chapter 17:

After what Tom estimated to be three days without food and at least one without water, he became decidedly sick of the body he could no longer discard at will. Faeries were wiser in the ways of spirits, being largely spirits themselves, so binding him to his current vessel had been as simple as a few magic words and the green wood of young holly branches woven snugly around his neck. It also had the unfortunate side effect of binding his magic, making his physical deterioration as rapid and unpleasant as it would have a mere muggle. His cellmates were similarly fitted, and he supposed Kingsley and the others were as well, although he had neither seen nor heard anything from them beyond his own space.

Adding to the ignominy and his general disgust was that despite Gulandri's knowledge of his identity and the risk he took in keeping him alive, he had made no special accommodations. He was kept with two other common soldiers, Beckly and Slaunderhouse, and received no extra precaution or privileges. By all accounts, the guards that did on occasion enter the cell or peek in at them did not seem informed of the danger he represented.

And to his own mortification, he had not found any way to make the dark elf regret his arrogance.

He was hungry, thirsty, sore, and very near strangling Beckly (she whined for several minutes about how hungry she was every couple of hours and then asked incessantly when the rescue party would arrive) and still no closer to figuring out how he would escape. He had never been so thoroughly cut off from his own magic before, and smooth talking the guards was proving impossible. He suspected they didn't speak English.

On the estimated third day, when the cell door opened, he was embarrassingly unprepared when they were dragged from their enclosure by a pair of orcs. Their hands, which had already been bound behind them in cumbersome wooden cuffs, were linked together by a length of rope and once outside their cells they were

faced with the other prisoners and tied to them as well. He made a note of Kingsley, his most likely ally in a future fight, and could tell he must have attempted escape at some point judging by the abundant swelling on the side of his face and limp that had not been present before their imprisonment.

They were led through the maze of corridors to a large open chamber that reminded him of Hogwarts's Great Hall, but for the complete absence of iron of any kind and the red and blue heraldry that hung on the walls. Along the left wall there was a large empty space, but for a series of wooden stockades nestled low to the ground. The prisoners were made to kneel while their ankles were secured. Then one by one their hands were cut free.

Kingsley, who had seemed too battered to see straight let alone resist, suddenly smashed his fist into the orc's face and snatched his sword out of the scabbard at its waist. An orc that had just been about to cut Beckly's hands free turned towards the commotion, and Tom slid his short blade free too smoothly and quickly for him to even notice, and quickly hid it under his legs and covered the protruding hilt with his hands.

Kingsley fought off the orcs for a short while, but ultimately only received another knock to his head and some more bruises for his trouble. That and Gulandri's mocking applause as he strode into the room. Even without his hunting gear on and no weapon in sight he looked every inch a predator.

"It is good to see some of you have maintained your fighting spirit," the elf said, as he moved before them. His eyes flickered briefly to Tom and then down at his hands resting unnaturally in front of his knees. He only smirked, however, and looked away. "You must all be hungry and thirsty. I have been terribly remiss in my duties as your host."

Some of the orcs snickered, and moved away to watch from the corner of the room. Gulandri made a gesture, and by some unspoken cue several servants, human-ish but for the small curling horns protruding the sides of their hair and golden eyes, came in from a narrow opening at the far corner of the room, carrying trays of food

and goblets of wine. Very cautiously and very quickly, they unloaded their trays of food and drink within reaching distance of the prisoners and moved away. The smells of cooked meat and sweet spices made Tom's mouth water and his stomach twist, and on either side of him he could see the others reacting similarly. The only thing keeping them from jumping for the plates was surprise and a healthy dose of suspicion.

Gulandri gave them a devil's smile and gestured for their meal.

"Are you not as hungry as I thought?" he asked with cruel geniality.

Beckly reached out timidly to take a fat, green grape from the plate.

"It's poisoned," Tom said.

She snatched her hand back as if bitten.

"'Poisoned' is such a strong word," Gulandri said, still amused. "But there are indeed consequences for eating it. This is faerie fare, after all. To eat it, to drink it, is to make a contract with your host... with your very soul."

"You may or may not become faeries," Tom translated. "But you will belong to this... king... and his court. Forever."

"Succinctly put, but really... what have you to lose at this point? You will never leave this court, be it dead or alive. You already belong to me. Isn't that right, Salaki'alyne, Trabli?"

Two of the servants turned to Gulandri, and nodded. Someone gasped.

"Oh Merlin, he's Titanhorn!" one of the prisoners gasped, pointing to the male servant.

Sure enough, as Tom looked closer he could suddenly recognize the basic features of the late squadron commander, the square jaw and the shape of his nose. He looked to the female servant, and recognized Guppy's large round eyes and the tiny star-shaped

birthmark on her right cheek. These familiar features now blended seamlessly with foreign ones, and nothing about their movements or unmoved expressions suggested they had ever been anything other than faeries in this life or ones past. The only hint of their pre-incarnations were their names. Tom wasn't fluent in Elvish, but 'trabli' he knew was the name for 'tiny fish' and 'alyne' translated to 'horn'.

"Once upon a time, perhaps," Gulandri said, making his way to the front of the banquet hall where a large chair that could not quite be categorized as a throne stood, and threw himself into it. He was now lounging with the same negligent grace he displayed in Selufiare's room. Guppy... Trabli handed him a goblet of wine. "They hardly seem any worse for wear now, do they?"

That was true. Despite one having been seriously injured and the other being... well, dead, they both now seemed the picture of health, even attractive in a weird, faerie way. Tom couldn't help but be fascinated by the skill of the transformation. He had never seen it occur to anyone he knew.

"Eat. Drink," the king invited, "Or do not. It's all the same to me. And all the same for you in the end."

And after that, nothing else was said. The servants all left, including their two former comrades, and Gulandri and the orcs watched them unwavering from their own roosts, killing any conversation that might have sprung up amidst the prisoners. There was no distraction to be had from the tantalizing mound of roasted meat, fresh bread, and ripe fruit seated within their reach or the goblets filled with thirst quenching wine. Tom heard more than one stomach growl. His might have been among them, but he prided himself on his own self-discipline. Rather than look at the food and wine, he gave his attention to the lock of the stockade currently securing him to the floor and calculating the quickest and surest way to break it with the sword he was hiding. There was no telling when the orcs would realize it was missing.

He knew that some of his soldiers would break and eat. His only surprise in that regard was that it was not Beckly who was the first to loose it. Jettermen, already a skinny fellow, lasted only about ten minutes before he reached for his plate.

"Don't!" Kingsley hissed, but there were two soldiers between them, and they only watched with horrified fascination as he grabbed a rib of meat took an enormous bite. Then another and another. He finished it and then moved on to take wine, swallowing the goblet's entire contents in one swig. Then some bread and another piece of meat.

Nothing seemed to happen.

There was no sudden transformation or signs of pain. If anything, he only seemed more desperate to eat, losing all semblance of decorum to shove food into his mouth. Predictably, another two soldiers, one of them Beckly, began to eat as well. Within the hour, another started on it, leaving only Tom, Kingsley, and a stolid witch, whose name he had forgotten, untainted. From his chair, Gulandri just smiled and took a sip of his wine.

~ Page Break~

Gulandri watches the humans break one after the other until only three of the seven remain steadfast. The food and drink will not transform them. It contains only those ingredients that will bind them magically to his lands and his court. It is not a proper Introduction. That would come later, when he is done testing them, threshing out the chaff to pick those, if any, he deems worthy of his household. Tom he is not surprised remains defiant. It's more to do with pride than any sort of virtue, but pride of his kind requires its own sort of strength.

The black man is not particularly bright but there is a sort of integrity to be found in his defiance. Depending on how much longer he lasts, he may take him into his counsel as a knight. He hasn't had a real knight since Ferenderil married a princess from a visiting court, and he feels nostalgic for one. The woman's defiance remains a mystery to him, but he finds it an enjoyable trait in a woman even if he prefers it to be more subtle. Perhaps some innate skill will present itself, and he can commission her education in one of the city guilds.

The rest he would auction. It would help to keep the household coffers full (faeries did not practice taxation) and appease his subjects their own need for new blood. It made his hunts a national custom rather than a private sport. His scribes would be at the banquet later and give him an estimate of the profit he could expect.

While he was speculating all of this and watching his prisoners struggle and fail themselves, one of his guards entered. Gulandri felt his heart suddenly quicken. Had Voldemort been spotted? He should not have come ashore for another three hours at least.

"Veneri," he acknowledged, trying to hide his eagerness. "You have some news for me?"

"Yes, My King. News that requires some discretion."

The elf looked distrustfully at the orcs lingering in the corner, who looked back with equal distaste. Gulandri, who had merely been tolerating their loitering, waved them out of the hall. The humans would not understand, as they spoke in Elvish. Once alone, Veneri spoke again.

"My King, Lady Selufiare has received a messenger. A raven, unbound to the fae, who speaks and conveys a message on behalf of a prince he would not name."

Gulandri frowned.

"A raven who speaks? Did he give his name?"

"Yes... its was something ridiculously pretentious. Bostimilus or Beramas something the III..."

The king suddenly straightened.

"Bobbitimus?"

Across the room, Tom suddenly turned his full attention to them.

"Ah, yes. That was-

Gulandri suddenly stood.

"Where is he now?"

"I... I left him with the princess in her quarters."

If he had had his sword on him, he would have slain the guard where he stood. How could this fool choose to lower his guard when so much was at stake? Had he no instinct? But he had no sword, so instead he ordered him to remain and watch the prisoners in his absence and headed for his daughter's room. It was unlikely someone of Bobbitimus'... limitations... could harm someone of his daughter's skill, but he did not dare rule out the possibility of trickery. Those of the changeling arts were infamous for them.

He arrived at her door and entered with out knocking. The room was empty. No Selufiare. No Bobbitimus. No Harry. No sign of a struggle. Only a bowl of water set on the floor and an empty bird stand to hint at the room's previous occupants.

"Daughter," he called, but there was no reply. He checked her powder room and storage closet to be sure, but found nothing amiss. He turned to the guard at her door, who was looking at him anxiously. "Where is she?"

"Her Ladyship went down to the armory. She wished to bespell some weapons for the guards before your honored guest arrived."

"And the hawk and raven?"

The guard merely looked at him in confusion and then at the doorway to the princess' bedroom. Gulandri did not bother waiting to hear his excuses, and moved on yet again. Surely, his daughter had not left the two shapeshifters alone together? But even if she had, how had they escaped her room unnoticed? Could she have taken them with her to the armory?

Deeper into the stronghold, the corridors became little more than the raw tunnels left by their dwarven creators; winding, narrow, and maze-like. Natural chambers sprung up randomly and without warning, and he made use of them to store his more valuable assets, including his armory. The chamber was twice the size of the banquet hall and covered floor to ceiling with armor and weaponry. Aside from leveling most of the floor, the architects who had designed the room had kept its natural features; the uneven walls were lined in uneven rows of shelving and stands to hold weapons and armor. He found Selufiare just where the guard had said she would be, industriously enchanting shields against magical attacks. Normally, he would applaud her foresight, but his soul focus then was on the conspicuous absence of both the hawk and the raven.

"Father? Is something wrong?" she asked as he stormed into the chamber.

"Where are they?" he demanded.

"Who?"

"Bobbitimus and the boy!" he snarled. To her credit, she did not flinch away, merely looked at him levelly.

"I left them resting in my chambers. Are they not there?"

The silence that followed was murderous. Gulandri felt his heart beat venom. This was impossible! Not in his house! That child would not make a fool of him in his own house! He would not ruin his carefully laid plans and undo all the effort he had sunk into this.

He stalked to the west wall. It was lined with swords, but he ignored them in favor of the small table that stood nearby. A long, narrow chest rested there and he opened to reveal his favorite sword. Light and sleek, and reflected like a mirror. The very edge of the blade was forged mithral.

It was not the sword he had used on his hunt, which was as common a faerie blade as any. This piece he had intended to save for when

his honored guest arrived, but for this latest act of defiance he was willing to use it against a lesser enemy.

"Get me twelve of my finest hunters and have them mount up. We hunt."

~ Page Breakers~

The mermaids brought the gondola to shore just as they promised, although the landing sight was not ideal. Voldemort scanned the marshy banks for fae. The fog had almost completely disappeared by now, but while he couldn't see anyone, there could be any number of faerie-bred predators hiding amongst the mud and cattails. He turned to the mermaid matriarch who had dropped her rope to swim back to him. She smiled, but there was nothing coy or warm being whispered through her eyes.

Their bargain was complete. She had led him to Gulandri's land where he would not be seen landing, several hours sooner than if they had traveled the route of Tom-All-Alone. She would allow him to reach the shore safely, but the next time they met they would be natural enemies once again.

"Goodbye, my dear," he said, smiling back just the same. She slipped beneath the brackish waters and disappeared without so much as a ripple.

He cast a spell to create a path of ice from his boat, through the reeds, and to the shore. Once safely there, he cast a locating spell for Harry. His wand spun uselessly in circles.

"Fantastic," he muttered. He scanned the area for signs of a road or trail, but it was all young virgin forest, unusually flat and stretching out into forever. He had intended to sneak up on his enemies, but had stupidly gotten himself lost. Harry would have been proud.

And as if summoned by the thought of its master, a ghostly apparition appeared from between two trees. Harry's patronus was a magnificent specimen, and in the semi-spiritual realm of the faeries it should have glowed brighter and seemed more solid than ever.

Instead, it was pale and nearly transparent, the strain of its continued existence even on this plane draining its strength... draining its master's strength. Had Harry sent it for help? For him?

"Take me to him."

He had raced the stag once before at the height of its strength, bounding over hills and through trees as if though flying, but now the patronus could only saunter steadily towards the North. Biting down on his impatience, the Dark Lord followed.

It was not as far as he had assumed. Although the forest seemed to stretch out endlessly in every direction, there was a point at which it suddenly sloped downward and half a hour later he found himself looking down that slope at a strange city carved into what looked like an enormous sinkhole. It was a walled city, and even at his distance he could make out guards patrolling. While sneaking in undetected might be possible, it would require time and planning he currently didn't have the patience for.

"Harry is in there?"

The stag didn't answer, of course, but its gaze remained fixed on the city.

"I will handle it. Go. Your task is complete."

And like that, the apparition dissolved into diamond dust and disappeared.

He calculated his options for some minutes, and decided the direct approach would be the best one.

~ Page Break~

"Alach jaunef e ir?" an goblin guard called out from the gate entrance, as Voldemort stepped out of the trees and onto the road leading towards him. The Dark Lord said nothing at first, and moved closer. More guards appeared atop the walls and then more at the entrance.

They were primarily orcs and goblins, but it was clear that the handful of elves that appeared were the ones in charge.

"Alach juanef e ir?" another guard repeated, this one an elf and a commander by the look of it.

"Dekliar nab hai le'hia nies ne'ar."

I have your master's hospitality.

Decades ago, Gulandri had spoken these words to him and he felt a delicious sense of irony at being able to use them now. The affect was immediate. He wouldn't say they lowered their guard, but all of them conspicuously moved their hands away from their swords or pointed their crossbows down. A small argument broke out between the commanding elf and two goblin sub-commanders, but Voldemort did not slacken his pace to give them time to sort it out. He was walking past them through the gates, sending the lower minions scrambling out of his path.

"De nis le'hia Voldemort?"

"De nisi," he agreed, not bothering to slacken his pace. He honestly didn't know where he was going, but the city only seemed to have one main road and that seemed as likely to bring him to Gulandri's hall as anywhere else. And judging by the guard commander's increasingly distress expression and goblin's deepening scowls he was accomplishing his goal of throwing them all off balance.

"Lysak siri e ir nefrete," the elf said, as if trying to placate him, "Usur-"

Voldemort had no idea what he just said. His Elvish was limited to the most basic of travel phrases and a few random pieces he had picked up throughout his life. Not wanting to give away this exploitable weakness, he interrupted the elf.

"De na'urut hai le'hia?"

Where is your master?

The elf grew quiet. Around him, the city inhabitants looked confused and anxious by his unrestrained movements through their streets. He let his gaze fall quickly on them and away, pulling out random bits of thoughts. He had to swallow a grin at what he found there.

The master was away.

Why? It seemed rather a reckless thing to do, even if he wasn't expecting Voldemort for a while longer yet. Well, he intended to take advantage of it.

De na'urut is le'iamsfer?

Where is my apprentice?

Again there was no immediate answer, but this was far less surprising. Reuniting two powerful wizards was probably the last thing any one of them wanted, regardless of their master's presence or absence.

"I will take you to the Mistress," was the closest he got to an answer. The commander lead the way now, and Voldemort strolled leisurely behind him and looked around idly, as if though he were merely a tourist passing through. Whispers followed him as he went, fear and confusion thick in their voices. It seemed at home or abroad, some things remained constant.

Gulandri's... castle wasn't the right word... stronghold, perhaps?... was as alien as the rest of the city and equally as curious. He devoted half a mind to it while the rest plotted to find his protege and leave. When at last, he was brought to the apparent destination, a large dining hall currently in the process of being prepared for a banquet. Probably meant for himself.

How thoughtful.

The first thing he really made note of was the seven humans chained to the left wall. He scanned their faces quickly. He saw Kingsley and Lucius' assistant, but no Harry. The second thing he noticed was the 'Mistress'. He could clearly see the familial resemblance to Gulandri,

for all that she was not herself an elf. She did not look the least bit surprised to see him.

She made a gesture for the guard to leave. This apparently hadn't been a part of his plans, because he looked momentarily panicked. Her expression darkened, her father's features suddenly becoming more prominent, and she said something he did not understand that sent the commander scurrying. Then she turned to him. He met her gaze evenly, and was disappointed when he could pull nothing from her mind. If breeding held true, she too would be gifted in sorcery.

"He is gone," she said in English.

"Who?"

"The boy."

Voldemort blinked, then burst out laughing. In the banquet hall, the sound was booming and the two dozen gathered servants froze at the terrifying sound.

"When?" he asked. Perhaps he could catch up to him yet.

"Not long. There is nothing for you here. You should go before my father returns."

He gave her a curious look. "A treasonous suggestion."

"Less than you might think," someone said.

He turned a cool eye to one of the prisoners bound to the floor. It was Lucius' assistant. He knew little about him except that the general found him reliable. Clearly Lucius' judge of character was slipping given present circumstances. He listened anyway. Failure or not, the man had been present here longer than he had, and probably knew more about what was going on.

"Gulandri is chasing after Har- Lord Potter as we speak. If he catches him, he will kill him. And when you meet him again... and you'll likely

have to in order to get back... you'll end up fighting to the death. Which is exactly what he wanted in the first place."

"Why should he want to kill me?"

"Because he's crazy."

The Mistress let out an angry hiss, and stormed towards him. She raised her hand as if to strike him, but then seem to find the act beneath her.

"His madness is genius compared to your lacking wit."

"He was outsmarted by a child!"

He would hardly be the first, Voldemort noted mentally. I really don't have time for this.

He turned to leave.

"Wait! Don't leave us!" a witch cried, struggling to rise but still restrained.

"I have no interest in fools who cannot accomplish the same things as a mere child," he said coldly.

Lucius' assistant let out a dark chuckle that drew his attention despite his resolution to leave. The look in his eyes was a savage glee, unbent and unyielding to his own obvious defeat. He watched, transfixed as a sword was drawn seemingly out of thin air.

"Justly so," the lieutenant said, and brought the blade to his neck. At first, Voldemort thought he meant to slit his own throat, a final act of defiance against his captors, but the blade slid not into flesh but between skin and the faerie collar encircling his neck. With a harsh tug, the binding snapped, and there was a surge of magic in the chamber. The stockades binding them, jumped and shattered.

Servants shouted in alarm, dropping what they were doing and ran away while guards who had been standing outside the chamber

suddenly threw the doors open to rush inside. Gulandri's daughter was as surprised as everyone else for once, and only made to pull out her wand when the human sprinted for her. The wand was drawn, but too late. He was too close, and had grabbed her wrist, jerking her around harshly. The move twisted her arm behind her back, and she let out a cry of pain and dropped her weapon. His blade was to her neck before the guards could draw any closer.

They immediately froze, the threat obvious.

"Now Princess," he said with cheerful venom, "Where is my wand?"

"We destroyed it. We destroyed all of them."

"I don't believe you." He pulled her wrist back further, eliciting a hiss of pain.

"Then kill me! You won't have it either way!"

"Don't tempt me. Kingsley, you awake over there?"

"I'm still kicking."

"Get the others, we're leaving through the servant's entrance."

"What about..." the man gestured towards the Dark Lord who was just standing there watching them curiously.

"I don't think he needs our help or that we should expect it from him. Is that not right, my Lord?"

"I did intend to kill you myself when I found you," Voldemort said honestly. "But if you make it out of this stronghold on your own, I will let you live. I hate to waste talent."

Kingsley and the witch who had called out for him looked at him as if he were mad, but the lieutenant only nodded as if made perfect sense. Seeing no other course of action, they followed the man's lead and gathered up the soldiers who seemed a bit dazed and reluctant to leave their meal but willing enough to be herded towards the

servant's entrance. Stratus brought up the rear, dragging the still struggling princess with him, keeping the armed guards between them. And then they were gone.

Voldemort immediately found himself surrounded with several weapons pointed at him. He held out his empty hands, and blinking innocently.

"It was not me," he said in Elvish.

They didn't look convinced. It would almost have been funny except he really didn't have time for this. He pointed to the servant's door.

"They are going."

There was a long moment of hesitation, then the commander snapped something and guards split into two groups. Sixteen, including the commander, pursued the escaping prisoners. Four remained to glare at him uselessly. He let out a mental sigh. There was no helping it. He turned to leave. Predictably, a guard moved to stand in his way. His solution to this was to draw his wand with a flick of the wrist and cut him to pieces. The guard had not even fallen yet before his comrades were on top of him, slashing at him with their swords. If they had been elves, he would have been in serious trouble, but they were merely goblins and an orc, little more than ugly muggles with bad overbites when it came down to it. Their magic lay in their resilience to the elements and injury, not to the devastating affects of the Dark Arts.

Their attack was well-coordinated, striking at him from three different directions, but their blades bounced uselessly off his bespelled cloak. They were so close to him he barely had the space to maneuver his wand for his incantation, but also being so close two of the three attackers were caught in the magic at the same time. Their necks snapped and they tumbled to the floor, dead. Snarling, the remaining orc guard leaped onto his back and bit savagely into his shoulder.

He should have aimed for the neck.

The orc's teeth were no more successful in piercing the cloak's protection than the blades had been, and he only succeeded in unbalancing the Dark Lord for a moment. Pointing his wand over his shoulder, Voldemort blasted his brains through the back of his skull without uttering a word.

It lasted no more than a minute, and there had barely been a sound. He didn't bother to look back and admire his work. He closed the doors behind him as he left, and made his way out of the stronghold. The corridors were filled with panicking faeries, running everywhere to find out what was happening or to find a safe place to hide or searching for the flee prisoners. Voldemort waded through it unimpeded. There were no guards and no one else he came across seemed brave enough to attempt to stop him. It still took longer than he would have liked, as halls that had been open were now being blocked with locked gates he was forced to destroy. This contributed to the overall panic of the denizens who seemed to think he was attacking them... and admittedly he wasn't considering their safety while he started blasting away their defenses.

The streets outside the stronghold were no less chaotic. It seemed the escaping prisoners had managed to make it out with their hostage and were headed for the city gates. There were more guards now, more civilians armed and ready to fight as well. He cast a notice-me-not spell on himself, but it was mostly useless against the fae and there were no side streets or back alleys for him to take. He used the chaos to the best of his ability as well as the phrase 'I have your master's hospitality', but it was painfully slow going.

When he reached the rim of the city, he found the prisoners trapped against the closed city gates and the fighting forces of the fae now numbering at least two hundred from the original sixteen. He kept his distance. He had told them he would let them live only if they managed to save themselves, and he meant that. Instead, he moved off a ways to one of the guard towers which held an exposed staircase on the city side, and climbed up. He slew the Elven guard at the top who was distracted by the events at the gate. Once at the tower, he quietly levitated himself down the other side and slipped into the woods.

Now free of the city and free to chase down Gulandri before he reached his protege, he became aware of a significant flaw in his plan.

He had no idea which direction they had gone.

Mentally cursing, he made his way back towards the city gates. To his surprise, the prisoners were already outside of it, and were gathered just outside of a stable stationed outside the walls. The lieutenant still had his hostage, who clearly hadn't been making things easy for him. There was a rather nasty scratch over the man's cheek that looked suspiciously like claw marks, and the princess' neck was bleed from several shallow cuts from struggled against the blade. Kingsley and the witch from before appeared from the stable, leading out two skittish mares each.

"So you made it after all," he said, by way of greeting, giving them all a start.

"My Lord!" Kingsley said, looking amazed at the sight of him. Did he think he had been killed? Fool.

"I suppose you've made it far enough," the Dark Lord said, looking past them towards the city. The walls were now crowded with bowman , and the gateway packed with angry fae waiting for them to make the slightest error, to expose the smallest weakness that would allow them to free their princess and tear these mortals apart. He could see several crossbows aimed directly at him, the only one amongst the wizards standing clearly out in the open. He graced them with a little wave.

And then another wave.

With his wand.

The wall, composed almost entirely of wood, exploded in a blaze of sickly green fire. The front section of the wall that was hit directly shattered and crumbled immediately, while the rest of blaze raced a long edges. The wind that blew back at them from the force brought with it stinging heat and the screams of the dying. They could only stand and stare in horror and awe as it burned.

"NO! NO!"

The princess, now completely heedless of the blade at her throat, turned with an insensate rage, slashing and clawing at her captor as she struggled to break free. The lieutenant shoved her away savagely, throwing her the ground and raising his sword to strike her dead.

"Wait."

The soldier turned his venomous glare at him.

"Why? We have no use for her now."

"We will need her to find Gulandri."

"Never!" she screamed, scrambling to her feet. "I'd rather die than help you now!"

"No doubt. But if I have to wait around here for Gulandri to reappear, I have no intention of being idle. I will go back into your city and flood every tunnel, chamber, and crevice with the blood of your people. I have already destroyed your defenses with one blow. Imagine what I can do if I should put some real effort into it."

The horror in her expression was truly gratifying, as was the moment she looked away and nodded.

"Good. You'll ride with me."

~ Page Break~

Harry crouched behind a tree, Bobby nestled in his arms, unmoving. In the darkness he could not tell if he was breathing or not. He had no access to his magic without his wand, and the binding on his hand. Perhaps wandless... but no. Even that seemed blocked from him, otherwise he would have been able to turn back into a human at will without Bobby's assistance. He would have to escape without magic.

A treacherous thing to do in an unfamiliar forest while being pursued by unknown assailants.

But he couldn't just wait around and-

"Potter!"

His heart skipped a beat. He knew that voice.

"Potter, get out here now or I'll-"

Harry peeked his head out from around the tree.

"Professor? I mean Head-"

"Front and center, Potter."

He rushed to comply, stumbling out of his hiding place and moving forward. He never thought he would ever be so happy to hear Snape's voice in his life. Stepping back onto the road, he could see his guardian illuminated in the blue-white glow of a lumos charm and he was not alone. Lucius stood beside him, looking even crazier than when he had left him.

The happy feeling was starting to dissipate.

"How did you find me?" he asked, moving forward a little more hesitantly.

Snape did not immediately answer, instead looking him over from head to toe. No doubt he was wondering about his strange clothes and the raven he was currently carrying. Bobby.

"What did you hit him with?"

"Him?"

"The raven... the man who was standing next to me."

"It is a shapeshifter?" Lucius said, looking scandalized at the thought.

"He is, yes. Of a sort. What did you hit him with?" he repeated, more insistently.

"A simple stunning spell. I did not see a reason to be hasty with something more... permanent," Snape said. Lucius stared down at Bobby with unconcealed loathing, and when he reached for him Harry moved quickly away from him and to the other side of Snape.

"Don't!"

"That creature is dangerous," Lucius snarled.

"He's my bro- my friend! I won't let you hurt him!"

They both looked at him like he had grown a second head. Snape closed his eyes and rubbed the bridge of his nose as if he had a headache. "We can't afford to stay out here in the open. Lets get somewhere more secure."

"Yes, sir," he agreed readily, glancing behind him. They might be in the mortal realm again but he couldn't say he felt that much safer. "Where is Lord Voldemort?"

"Still in Germany last I heard. You've only been gone half a day here. How long was it for you there?"

"At least three days, but it's hard to say. I was unconscious for part of it, and they don't have days the same way we do. The sun never fully sets there."

"And your escorts?" Lucius interrupted. "Stratus? Kingsley?"

They were the two he would have the hardest time explaining away. They were higher ranking individuals, well known by their colleagues and the press. Harry's expression turned pained, and he shook his head.

"We were captured together, but then separated. I don't know what happened to them. How did you know where to find me?"

"The ring I placed on the changeling. It had a tracking spell on it. I am going to want that back."

Harry almost told him he was tough out of luck, but held his tongue for a while longer. There would be time enough for stories and arguments once they were safely behind the wards of Treelafore. There was still much to be done. Voldemort had to be warned. If so little time had passed here, perhaps the Dark Lord had not gone to Hausteheim yet as he had originally been told. That had to have been why they hadn't seen him when they left. If Lucius could get a message to him in time, they might avert yet another disaster.

Kingsley was gone. As was his almost friend Lt. Stratus, Reggy, and the nearly dozen others who he had barely known but had fought with their lives to protect him. How could he explain their loss? Would he be allowed to go to their funerals? Would their families even want him there? The phantoms of parents and wives crossed his mental eye and he withdrew his thoughts quickly as he felt his heart begin to race. He hadn't had a Calming Draught in days and did not want to tempt fate. He needed to focus on things he could do remain useful. A message to Voldemort was-

Beside him, Snape suddenly stopped, and turned around, looking into the darkness beyond.

Harry felt a spike of fear.

Had he been followed?

"Potter, get behind that tree and hide."

"You hear something?" Lucius asked.

"Riders. Potter. Hide."

"What are you going to do?" Harry asked even as he edged towards the hiding place. The faeries he had faced had wiped out an entire squadron. He didn't like the odds of just two wizards, no matter their impressive skill set. They didn't know what they were getting into.

"They will not see us. Now hide!" Snape hissed, and extinguished his wand. Lucius immediately followed his example so that only the pale light of the moon remained. Harry fumbled half blind off the road and behind a large old oak, making his way most by feeling with one outstretched arm while the other held Bobby protectively to his chest. There was a natural nook at the base that he curled himself into it and waited.

He prayed Snape knew what he was doing.

"You do know what you are doing, don't you?" Lucius asked his friend skeptically.

"It's a little too late to be questioning my judgment now."

"Do you?"

"The potion works. I've used it in the Forbidden Forest for years. I've stood in a crowd of orcs and they've been none the wiser."

An exaggeration. It had been hobgoblins and only two at that, but he wasn't about to let honesty feed his paranoid friend's skepticism. The Caecus Fae Potion was one of his proudest achievements, and potentially most profitable. He had developed the potion to go undetected by faeries in places like the Forbidden Forest, where potion ingredients were abundant, free, and usually guarded over by dangerous creatures. The patent he held on it made it almost guaranteed he would make a fortune off of it as soon as it completed testing by the Potion Safety and Standards Commission (a process that would likely take years unless he bribed someone). He had complete faith in it.

As much faith as he had in anything at least.

The pounding of hooves grew louder and suddenly they could see the glow of torches flickering amidst the trees. They stood completely still and watched as the lights multiplied and grew closer, until they counted about a dozen riders. They could barely make them out, but

their movements held a sort of military precision that was worrisome. And then they broke out of the trees and onto the road and...

Stopped.

Their horses... where those horses?... halted on the road, turning in place and rearing up as their riders pulled back sharply on their reins. There were a few brief seconds of artless movement and then they were all back in formation. They were still too far away to see clearly, but they were gathering around something.

"I think they found Potter's tracks."

Lucius hissed something colorful but otherwise unhelpful.

"Go get him and make a run for the train. You should both be adequately protected."

"We'll apparate."

"No!" he hissed, catching his friend off guard. "You're in no state of mind to attempt it and if the boy were capable of it, he would have done so already. Just take him and hurry. I will attempt to slow them down."

The general glowered at him for a moment, a haughty defiance clear on his face even in the weak light of the moon, but after a moment he simply turned and stalked off towards Harry's hiding spot. Snape let out a silent sigh and started wordlessly casting anti-tracking spells on the road to erase their trail, and moved cautiously towards the group of hunters. He had only made it a couple of yards before the hunting party began moving towards him at a clipped but controlled pace. Cautiously, he moved to the side of the ride but continued to cast his spells. As they drew closer together, Snape saw something that put true fear in him.

Set at the head of the hunting party were two furry, white forms, their noses hovering only a few inches above the dirt. Dogs. His potion would not work against dogs, even faerie-bred ones.

And as if sensing his thoughts, one of the creatures suddenly lifted its head and looked right at him and stopped. The fae stopped right behind it, and followed its gaze out into the darkened road. The creature began to growl, and then sprang forward. Snape hurled a curse at it, but it leaped aside. The spell sailed on until it hit one of the mounted fae's horses, causing it to rear up and throw off its rider before falling down dead. One of the riders, now close enough for him to identify as an elf dressed in crimson and likely the band's leader, pointed towards him.

A tree a short distance behind him suddenly burst into flames.

Of course Potter would be pursued by an elven sorcerer, he mentally grumbled as he turned to start running. Some distance ahead of him, he could just barely make out Potter and Lucius' shadowy forms also running. He would have to do a side-along apparation, one after the other, to get them to safety, despite the innumerable dangers of apparating in and out of an unfamiliar combat zone in the middle of the night. Just as he prepared himself to apparate directly ahead of them, Lucius suddenly grabbed Harry's arm and pulled him completely off the road.

"What is he- oomf."

He was thrown to the ground, the wind knocked out of him. Stunned, the first thought that crossed his mind was that he had been hit by a spell. This thought was quickly driven out of his mind by a sharp pain in his right leg as it was savagely shaken in a set of powerful jaws. He kicked and struggled, managing to turn himself over to see one of the hunting dogs latched onto his leg. This close he realized the beast was larger than he had thought, its brilliant red ears and large black eyes the only touch of color on its phantom form. He kicked it in the head twice, but the angle was bad and it only tightened its hold and let out a threatening growl for its efforts.

Lifting his wand, he was about to curse the beast, but then he saw riders speeding towards them. Amongst them was the sorcerer, his hand once again pointed towards him. This time Snape doubted he would miss. He closed his eyes tight, sucked in a deep breath, and apparated.

He landed hard on the ground, his hasty exit preventing him from factoring in his supine position and dropping him several feet. This had the benefit of knocking of the dog who was even more surprised than he at the sudden displacement.

"Gylikitus."

The dog yelped in surprise, then fell dead. Snape climbed to his feet cautiously, testing his weight on his injured leg. It hurt, but his boots had done their job and he could limp on it well enough. He took a quick assessment of the situation. He was halfway between where he had been and the village of Treelafore, just out of sight of both. Lucius, who was somewhat crazy, and Harry, who had never been sane, were running around blindly somewhere in the forest, unable to apparate, one of them visible and one of them not, at least one tracking dog and a dozen faerie hunters, including one sorcerer, chasing after them.

And it was up to him to save the day.

When did he turn into such a Gryffindor?

Somewhere in the forest he heard Harry screaming.

~ Page Break~

Harry's sole focus had been reaching Treelafore before Gulandri or his minions reached them. That was the biggest threat, and therefore the only one worth worrying about. So despite the warning signs, he was caught completely off guard when Lucius grabbed hold of him suddenly and pulled him back off the road and into the woods. He stumbled over a branch, and barely caught himself with his one free arm on the trunk of tree. Before he could regain his balance, the elder wizard had him pinned with his wand pointed at his chest.

"What are doing?"

"Did you cast the curse on me?" he demanded.

"Curse? What-"

"Yes, the curse, you nimrod. The one you used so conveniently to dissolve Hermione's betrothal and force an alliance so clearly in your favor. That curse!"

Harry just gaped at him. The man thought he had...? He shook his head.

"We don't have time for this! They're going to kill us all if we-"

"Crucio!"

The pain came over him instantly, overwhelming to the point of senselessness. Lucius seemed to have mastered it perfectly. When it stopped, he found himself on the ground, his throat raw from screaming and his arms empty. Bobby...

"You are right that we don't have time for this."

His eyes seemed to have trouble moving properly and swam about in his sockets for a moment before settling on the dark wizard standing over him. Standing over him with the raven tucked underneath his arms. Fear had been a constant companion this day and night, but this newest layer left him nearly frozen with it.

"Tell me the truth now, or I'll snap its little neck right here."

"No! No, no, no! I didn't do it! I swear! I'll make a wizarding oath out of it if you want, but please don't hurt him!"

Lucius was taken back, but quickly recovered.

"You would say anything to save him, wouldn't you?" he said in disgust. "What is he- Protego!"

The shield charm was thrown up around them, and through its invisible barrier Harry saw the world catch fire. Flames rolled over their sphere of protection, swallowing trees and leaves and the very air itself. He rolled and crawled closer to Lucius, driven more by the

burning heat than common sense, and pushed himself into a crouch at his feet. Recovering somewhat from the curse, he could see they were now submerged in a sea of fire, and yet his attention inexplicably went directly to Bobby. Too distracted preventing their eminent immolation, Lucius barely registered when the boy reached up and pulled the limp raven out from under his arm.

The spell seemed to last forever, forcing the dark wizard to recast the protection spell over and over, reinforcing it against the killing heat that seemed to seep through more with every passing second. He found himself sweating, trembling, and not all of it from exertion. How long could he keep this up? His thoughts turned to apparation. Snape said he wasn't in any fit state to do it, but he was more than willing to risk it if it kept him from being burned alive. At his feet, Harry was shaking like a leaf, the after affects of the pain curse still strong, and showing no sign he was capable of casting a spell to defend or apparate himself.

If he left, the boy would die.

He didn't know if thought was a deterrent or an incentive.

Nearly six minutes of maintaining the shield charm and no sign of the flames subsiding, Lucius felt himself begin to tire and began making plans for his escape. He had perhaps ten minutes more he could spare before he lacked enough magic to maintain the shield, maybe less if wanted to have enough magic to defend himself after apparating. Turning down, he saw Harry look up at him, and it didn't take a legilimens to see that he knew what he intended.

There was the slightest twinge of regret. As much as he had wanted to hurt Harry, he hadn't wanted to destroy him completely. He had been a worthy opponent, and to have their game end at the hands of another was more than just dissatisfying.

"I didn't cast the curse on you, Malfoy," the boy said, and nothing else. He closed his eyes, and curled himself protectively around the raven, attempting to summon whatever innate magic he could to protect them both.

It wouldn't be enough.

The brilliant golden white hue in their sphere suddenly flickered. Lucius looked around as much as he dared, hoping against hope that the enemy spell was finally beginning to fail. He nudged the boy with his foot to draw his attention. But as they both watched they began realize the flames themselves were not dying, but changing. Ribbons of sickly green, a shade both were all too familiar with, wound their way amidst the gold, mere glimpses at first and then growing more numerous. Within half a minute from when it first appeared the green flames had suddenly swallowed the gold, and Lucius' spell suddenly shrank under the unprecedented force of this newest attack.

He gasped and without thought reinforced the spell again and then again, feeling his strength flowing rapidly away from him. He needed to apparate. That was the only salvation here, but he didn't dare drop his guard for the two seconds it would require to leave. In two seconds the flames would render him completely to ash.

And then the pressure reversed unexpected, retreating back so rapidly it forced his barrier to expand and expand until like a balloon it popped. The curtain of flames dissolved into thin air. At first, Harry could see nothing, the sudden change of light from near blinding, meant his eyes needed a moment to adjust. A moment he didn't think he had, and he jumped to his feet with the idea of running. He hadn't managed two steps before a distinct pop sounded next to him and a pair of arms was suddenly wrapping around him. Another nauseating moment of disorientation, as he pulled into a side-along apparation. He struggled instinctively.

"Calm down, Harry," a familiar voice said soothingly. "You're safe now."

"Reggy?"

He craned his neck around, and his vision began to adjust. The forest around them was on fire. Not the magical blaze that had nearly killed him, but the remainder of dry leaves and seeping resins having sparked in the aftermath, creating natural burning heaps and torches around them. He could see Stratus features clearly, his face

scratched and bleeding but grinning like a devil. There was another pop and he twisted around to see Kingsley now holding Lucius.

A feeling of a joy and relief swelled up inside of him. Harry didn't consider himself a cynic, but he'd never believed in miracles until this moment. As he looked around, taking it all in, the miracle seemed to grow into something almost absurdly fantastical. There were other survivors there as well, almost seven of them, looking mostly perplexed but otherwise fine. Some of them were sitting atop horses, while others were on the ground looking about dazedly.

"How did you..."

"Without your help," Kingsley said shortly. Harry's bit of joy dimmed considerably into something closer to surrealism.

"Shut it, Kingsley," Stratus snapped, then softened his tone for Harry, as if though he were a skittish animal ready to bolt. "We're not completely incompetent. We managed mostly on our own."

"Mostly?"

Before Stratus could provide him with an answer, an arrow whizzed over their heads, and they immediately jumped behind the smoldering remains of a tree. The others there found their own places behind rocks and natural mounts. None of them had their wands or any any weapons. How had they managed to escape? How had they defeated the fire spell without them?

"Snape!" he gasped.

"Not even close," came an amused reply.

Stupidly, Harry stuck his head out from his hiding spot. Further ahead, a short distance from the circle untouched earth surrounded by smoldering debris where Lucius and he must have been standing, was still another familiar sight.

"My Lord?"

Voldemort stood in all his dark glory before Gulandri and his forces. He was dressed for battle, but as always did not appear as if he had been fighting one. He was free of blood and dirt and any mark of struggle, as clean and deadly as a freshly drawn sword. A few yards ahead of him, Gulandri stood in a sort of dark symmetry, equally armored and untouched. Behind him a dozen elven warriors sat motionless on their mounts, awaiting their master's orders.

That explained the green fire. It was a trade mark of the Dark Lord, and had to have been his counter attack to Gulandri's. Voldemort had to have timed it perfectly so that Stratus and Kingsley could rescue Lucius and him without putting them back in the dark elf's line of fire.

What it didn't explain was why Selufiare, whom he had last seen safely in the faerie stronghold, was currently being held against the Dark Lord's chest, his free hand wrapped around her throat. A hostage. An effective one, apparently, because Gulandri hadn't made a single move to attack the man he had professed to be so eager to kill.

She did not look frightened. In fact, she looked angry enough to spit nails, although she held herself perfectly still. Angry or not, Harry did not like her odds of walking away. He swallowed thickly.

"Are you alright?" Voldemort asked.

"I'm fine." Relatively speaking. "Um... I'd really just like to leave... now."

"Of course. No one here is going to stop you."

There was a touch of challenge there, directed at Gulandri, who did not even bother to glance in his direction. Harry didn't move. As much as he really did want to leave and put an end to his part in this madness, he couldn't just abandon Selufiare after she what she had done for him. Stratus touched his shoulder, drawing his attention.

"Come. I'll take you back to the train if you want."

But Harry just shook his head. He would stay and watch. Perhaps Voldemort would negotiate their peaceable withdraw and then let her go. Harry was safe now, and to harm the princess would only provoke yet another full scale war neither side needed. Hopefully, the Dark Lord would remember that before he did anything... regrettable.

"So..." Voldemort began, conversationally. "You look to have done well for yourself. Started your very own family, I see. Very pretty. Her mother must be, as well."

The princess let out an angry hiss, but her father said something sharply and she went still yet again. Then he turned his electric blue eyes to Voldemort.

"What do you want for her?"

"Some answers to start with. Why did you attempt to take my protege, and do not claim ignorance of who he is. All the realms know him by now, and you were always more informed than most."

Gulandri smiled at that, but there was no warmth to it.

"Yes. I knew of him. They speak of his bravery, but not how incredibly arrogant he is. Coming to this place, knowing the risk. Hn... he made himself a tempting target."

"He lies," Stratus said.

The elf turned to him sharply, catching his eye. The lieutenant shrank back from his gaze. He looked away and said nothing more.

"Now, now. I know you can't lie. Not directly. Not so boldly. But half-truths are your specialty. Tell me, Gulandri, what you intended when you took him?"

The elf said nothing, and the silence stretched and with in the sense that whatever the dark elf had intended he dared not say it aloud. Harry swallowed thickly. He had known Gulandri's intentions, and honestly, if it were only the elf's life on the line he would eagerly offer up the answer and let them fight it out. But it wasn't just Gulandri, and

more likely than not it was Selufiare who would suffer the consequences of her father's vainglorious scheming.

"No answer?" the dark lord mocked, seemingly more amused than anything now that the victory was clearly in his favor. "Then I suppose I will just have to take her with us until you can come up with something."

He began to back away slowly.

"Follow us, and I will leave pieces of her scattered across the countryside. Attack us, or any of my citizens again, and I will cast her to the dementors."

Harry could not see the full intensity of either Gulandri's or Voldemort's deadly glares, but he could feel it in the air, like watching clouds from two different storms rushing to meet each other. He felt himself beginning to shake, knowing this wasn't going to go as smoothly as the Dark Lord seemed to think it would. That Gulandri had set forth a task for himself, one that he took as perverse sort of duty, that he had to fulfill even to the point of his own destruction. Perhaps even to the point of his daughter's.

So he wasn't surprised when the words that came out of Gulandri's mouth were not a affirmation or a concession or even an answer. He was already edging further back behind his hiding space when the dark elf said;

"Giris."

Three things happened at once. Gulandri drew his sword. The hunters, which had been sitting perfectly still behind him, pulled their bows from their backs and notched their arrows in one swift movement. Selufiare smashed the back of her head into Voldemort's face, causing him to stumble slightly. She used the subsequent slack of the hold on her neck to grab his arm, and sink her teeth into the exposed flesh of his hand.

Voldemort cried out in surprised pain, and turned his wand towards her.

She released him, and with a preternatural speed, she turned and disappeared into the forest.

The hunters let their arrows fly.

Book VI

Chapter 18: Acts of Fealty

As the arrows were aimed, Voldemort threw up his arm instinctively to protect his head. There really there was no time to think up a better strategy. Luckily, preparation was still the better part of valor even in the magical world, and as those arrows struck they bounced harmlessly off the repelling spell on his cloak just as the goblin's swords had. It was enough, however, for the princess to buy those few precious seconds she needed to disappear into the dark sanctuary of the forest, the burning pain in his mauled hand the only evidence she had ever been there.

Behind the safety of his cloak, he prepared his counterattack, but had not time to utter it as a blade seared through the magical cloth as if it were paper. He barely managed to save his arm from being severed along with the cloak, and stumbled back gracelessly but kept to his feet. Mithral, he realized. Nothing else could have cut through the spell so easily. He spared no more thought to it, as Gulandri, who was charging forward with that unnatural elven grace attempted a counter swing aimed to take his neck. Voldemort apparated. Only a few feet behind the murderous elf, but enough distance to cast his spell.

"Devero terras viperas," he cursed, anger driving his voice into a parseltongue hiss.

Beneath Gulandri's feet, the earth began to writhe and slither into enormous coils of soil and detritus. He danced backwards, leaping into a half fallen tree. Earthen serpents, a half a dozen, surged from ground after him, coiling up the trunk and tearing it down with their combined weight. The soldier elves that had held their formation where forced to scatter as the tree crashed down over them. Gulandri himself managed to hold his footing even then and with vicious speed loped off three serpentine heads, causing them to instantly dissolve into clouds of dust that temporarily blocked him from view. Voldemort tried for a second spell, but there was nothing to aim at, and already he could perceive the remaining earth serpents being destroyed by the elf's blade.

The soldier elves were starting to regroup and notch their arrows for a second strike. The Dark Lord turned his wand to them, sparing them only enough attention as he dared in order to destroy them before they became a nuisance.

"Desuri flueh hey miasfithr. Suris fumatis sati'e ei'et." Gulandri's voice sounded from the concealing cloud, drawing back his opponent's attention. The voice was soon joined by a silhouette, and then by the man himself. The elven king was coated in a fine layer of dust and his cheek was streaked with mud, but already he appeared to have regain his malicious good humor. He was grinning as he approached the Dark Lord, and Voldemort spared him a cruel smile of his own.

He barely spared a thought to the elves that quickly scattered at their king's command and disappeared into the forest just as mysteriously as Selufiare had. Whatever their intentions, it was not his concern. He did not know the meaning of Gulandri's words, but clearly he intended the rest of this fight to be between themselves alone.

He wouldn't have had it any other way.

~ Page Break~

When the arrows flew, they weren't all aimed in Voldemort's direction and Harry and the others quickly found themselves ducking behind anything that resembled cover. Except for Lucius, who was standing most conspicuously out in the open and yet no one seemed to bother targeting. This was a pity, Harry thought uncharitably, because he thought the man deserved an arrow to the head. Or at least a leg.

Stratus and he ducked behind some trees, then moved a little further away to an old log laying partially upright against a tree and Harry barely avoided getting hit twice. The log wasn't the best cover, but from behind it offered them some protection and a good view of the battle that was unfolding between Voldemort and Gulandri.

He still cradled Bobby protectively in his arms, terrified he would drop him and yet also worried all this violent moment and his firm grip were hurting his frail avian form. What if he were accidentally smothering

him? What if he turned too sharply and broke his neck? Cautiously, he loosened his hold so that he was merely laying in his arms. There was nothing else he could do or check for until they were somewhere safe with better lighting.

Tom gave Bobby a curious look Harry didn't know how to decipher, but said nothing about him or his strange behavior towards the raven. They were soon joined by Kingsley and a Cultie he wasn't familiar with, and neither seemed to notice.

"Think he'll win?" Kingsley asked without preamble as the Dark Lord barely managed to avoid Gulandri's first attack. Harry would have glared at him, but that would have meant tearing his eyes away from the battle.

"Normally, I would say absolutely," Stratus said, not looking away either, "But the Enchantress is a naga, and their bites are notoriously deadly. If he were a normal wizard, he would be dead already."

Harry's breath caught in his throat. Naga venom... Merlin. It was known to dissolve iron and could even kill a vampire. What would it do to someone like Voldemort, whose potentially immortal body was composed of unknown frailties in accumulation of seemingly endless strengths? It was possible that the venom would have no affect at all or that it could kill him in minutes. There was no way to know.

And if the venom did not kill him, Gulandri would certainly do it himself.

Nothing else was said as they watched the first of Voldemort's counterattacks, caught in the amazing power of it cast so casually. Harry felt himself relax slightly. If the Dark Lord were capable of that, then the bite probably wasn't going to suddenly strike him dead.

"What are they doing?" Stratus asked, reluctantly drawing Harry's attention. He followed the lieutenant's line of sight to the elves which were suddenly retreating into the forest.

"Gulandri must have ordered them not to interfere," Harry said. It seemed the arrogant sort of thing the elf would do.

"I think he told them more than that."

"Think they're coming after us?" Kingsley asked.

"They don't have anything better to do. They'll want revenge after what happened to their city."

Harry wondered what they meant by that, but now wasn't the time to ask.

"We should head back to Treelafore," Stratus continued. "We're not going to be any use-"

"Stratus, look out!" someone yelled from behind a tree.

The lieutenant jumped to the side just barely avoiding being bludgeoned with a large tree branch. The Cultie that attacked them, let out a savage scream and swung again, her eyes wide and crazed.

"Bentley? What the bloody hell is wrong with you?" Kingsley shouted, moving to intercept her, but received a heavy blow to his chest for his trouble.

"Don't! She's tainted! She ate and drank their food. She's under Gulandri's control now," Stratus shouted, warning all the untainted of this newest threat even as he scrambled underneath the log to get out of range of her next attack. Harry was still closest to her, but with her back to him. Quickly, he set Bobby into a rotted opening in the log, unwilling to put him on the ground where he might be unwittingly trample. In the dark, little nook, he was all but invisible, and Harry made a quick and silent prayer that he would be safe as he turned to face this newest threat. If he could knock her down or hold her, Kingsley would be able to take her weapon away. He didn't stop to think of what they could possibly do with her after that.

He started for her, but was pulled up short when a pair of heavily muscled arms reached out and pulled him out of midair. One arm wrapped around his chest, pulling him clean off the ground while the other encircled his neck, catching him in a headlock. He tried to shout,

a scream of anger more than anything, but he could no longer draw the air for it. So he kicked at the legs behind him and tried to punch and scratch. It was useless. The man holding him was not as big as Kingsley, but he easily had fifty even seventy-five pounds on Harry, and the military training to back it up. Not only was the man able to hold onto his captive, he was quickly carrying him away from the others as well. Harry couldn't even drag his feet to slow him down.

Dammit, why the hell was he so bloody short?

Defiantly, he continued to struggle, clawing behind him in hopes of blinding his captor, but catching nothing but the occasional stubbled cheek. The lack of oxygen began taking affect, his vision (already miserable without his glasses) began to dim and his hearing faded into the hot thumping of his own pounding heart. He started to panic, his arms now flinging outwards, attempting to grab hold of something, anything, to pull himself out of the suffocating grasp.

He wasn't sure how far from the others he had already been taken or if they were being followed, but his hands were brushing against dozens of objects. Branches, rocks, rotten wood that crumbled when he tried to hold it. Then something he thought was a branch. It came free of what ever it had been protruding from. It was blind luck that it was actually an arrow that lodged itself in a nearby tree.

It was a miracle that during all his gracelessly purposeless thrashing he managed to stab his attacker in the leg and not himself. There was a cry of pain and Harry was suddenly free, and collapsed to the ground gasping for air. For a second, he couldn't move, but the panic had't left him and soon he was crawling to get away. First on his arms, then on his hands and knees, until he breathed enough that his vision cleared and he's regained enough equilibrium to climb to his feet.

He finally managed to turn around and look at the enemy and he was half surprised to find it was one of the Culties and not an orc or large goblin that's been carrying him off. The look in the man's eyes was crazed, and even though he still clearly registers the pain Harry has inflicted on him, he was already stumbling towards him.

Harry ran up to him and smashed his foot into his face, sending him flying backwards. He felt a twinge of guilt when the man landed with a heavy 'oomf' and laid still. It wasn't his fault he was acting this way, but he wasn't going to let the man get a hold of him a second time. He turned back in the direction he assumed they came from.

"That was entertaining."

"GEAHH! Dammit, Malfoy! Don't do that!"

The blond aristocrat stood as if he had been there the whole time, and Harry wondered if this weren't the case and he had been taking enjoyment out of watching him nearly get killed. Son of a-

"Harry? Where-" Stratus's panicked voice, was soon followed by the man himself stumbling out of a hedge and into the small clearing they'd found themselves in. The lieutenant was visibly relieved when he spotted him, and Harry felt strangely touched by his genuine concern.

"I'm okay. What about Kingsley?"

The man in question appeared behind Stratus.

"I'm fine. Can't say the same for Bentley, though," he said accusingly, and for once it doesn't seem aimed at Harry but at Stratus, who met the accusation coolly.

"She gave herself to the enemy. There was nothing left of her that could have been saved."

Kingsley was clearly about ready to disagree but was interrupted by Lucius.

"Save it for later. The elves are circling around and there are still more tainted Culties out there. We're sitting ducks here."

"We should go back to Treelafore. We'll be safe behind the wards or at least in the Minotaur," Stratus said.

"I will not leave until I am certain of my Lord's victory, and neither shall you. We will split into two groups. You and Kingsley go out and distract the enemy. Potter and I will find a new position to observe the battle from."

If Lucius hadn't had his wand or perhaps if the others had had theirs, Harry was almost certain Kingsley and Stratus would both have thrown the aristocrat at the nearest elf and told him to distract them himself. Or maybe they wouldn't have. He was still their commanding officer and he was right in this instance. Voldemort's safety was still their responsibility. They couldn't leave without him.

Kingsley gave them all a mutinous look and stalked off without another word. He would do as he was told, but he wasn't going to pretend he was okay with it. Stratus lingered a moment longer, and to Harry's surprise grabbed his hand. He flushed with embarrassment, but it quickly faded when he realized what the lieutenant was doing. The scrap of cloth and leather cord encircling his hand and binding the magic there was suddenly cut free.

The suddenly swell of magic inside of him left him tingling and light headed, and Stratus stepped back in surprise. Harry stood there stunned for a moment, then blinked. The lieutenant was already gone by the time he regained enough sense to thank him. It wasn't until he and Lucius moved from the clearing and circled around from where they had last seen Voldemort and Gulantri that he thought to wonder why Stratus hadn't removed the ward earlier.

~ Page Break~

Fire and pain and snakes were Voldemort's weapons of choice. Each contained a sort of sensual horror that he had always been drawn to since his youth, and which he had a natural talent for handling both for himself and against others. He used them liberally and enthusiastically against Gulantri whose weapons were speed and fear and blades. The Dark Elf's movements were quicksilver fast, always outmaneuvered whatever Voldemort threw at him and never left him enough time to properly strategize anything more effective before he was forced to evade or block an attack on himself.

The patch of forest where they had begun their fight was now a clearing, the trees overturned, the ground scoured by fire and spellcraft. Voldemort remained at its center, aware that left him open to attack from all sides, but it also left him plenty of space to spot Gulandri coming and the time necessary to get off a spell. The elf stuck close to the edge, where the shadows cast by the still burning fires swallow him up as if he were a shadow himself.

The Dark Lord had shed his ruined cloak for the sake of maneuverability, and without it his wounded hand was visible. It had already turned black, and was now slowly withering into a mummified claw. It was also as painful as looked. No. It was far worse. Like it was being burned in fire and acid at the same time and stabbed repeatedly with a dozens of barbed hooks until it seemed his arm shouldn't have been there at all, but merely a shredded, burned, and melted muscles left hanging from his desiccated bones.

It was distracting to say the least.

"I have to admit, I am impressed," Gulandri said, his voice seeming to come from every direction. "Naga venom is not something to take lightly, and I suspect my daughter did not hold back when she filled you with it. I was afraid she had ruined our fight before it had even began."

Poisons were not something Voldemort typically feared. In fact, he enjoyed several sorts of teas and delicacies that were deadly to wizarding kind. He had lost a number of kitchen staff because of it, but had never suffered more than a mild headache himself. It wasn't something he experimented with extensively, but he had known innately that most poisons were ineffectual. It seemed he had found one of the few exceptions.

"My blood is venom itself, Gulandri. What is a little naga spittle compared to that?"

There was an approving chuckle, even though they both knew it was pure bravado on Voldemort's part. He could no longer move his left arm where Selufiare had bitten him, and the venom was slowly but steadily seeping into the rest of his body as well. He had broken out

into a sweat and his right hand developed a fine but noticeable tremor. He was finding it harder to remain focused, to keep his eyes and his brain moving, prepare his next attack or to ward off Gulandri's. The pain was... he was a master of pain so that didn't matter. The gradual loss of control over his own body was the true danger here.

A shadow moved out of the corner of his eye, and he cast his next attack. There was a flash of bluish-green light that briefly scattered the shadows and illuminated the space in a stark, unforgiving light before it struck boulder and promptly melted it, sending up an burning, acrid blue smoke in its wake.

No Gulandri though. Just his voice, taunting him from nowhere and everywhere at once.

"How long do you think you can keep this up? You're getting weaker. What do you think will happen once the venom reaches your heart? What do you suppose it will feel like when it shrivels up like your hand? Or perhaps it will reach your brain first and you'll have a fit, pissing yourself and choking on your own vomit like all those muggles you liked to torment so much. There would be a sort of ironic justice in that."

Fear is Gulandri's weapon, and though Voldemort's expression never changes he still feels the bite of it. It steals a breath and a thought, before he crushes it down savagely. If he is to die, it will not be by Gulandri's hand or his daughter's poison. He was the harbinger of the Earth, and while in her realm She would not allow him to fall so ignominiously before his destiny had played itself out. She had given him this monstrous body, and he had faith in it just as She had faith in him.

But faith meant nothing if it were not tested.

~ Page Break ~

Harry and Lucius settled themselves some distance away from the fight on a stony outcropping that offered them some elevation. An old oak grew there, and Harry had quickly moved up into its branches to hide as well as watch. Lucius did not bother, once again remaining

out in the open and taking advantage of the view their position afforded him. At first the young Gryffindor thought the man crazy, but recalling Snape's words earlier about neither being seen and then how Lucius had not been targeted once during their evasion of the archers, he decided Snape must have done something to protect him.

He hoped that what ever it was the Headmaster had done was working on the man as well. He hadn't seen his guardian for some time and was starting to worry about him. As much as he could afford to worry about him. At the moment, he was worrying about almost everyone. Stratus and Kingsley and any other untainted Culties were running around without their wands to distract elves who had thoroughly kicked their asses during their last encounter. Bobby was unconscious and defenseless where he had left him- hopefully where he left him. There was no telling who or what could have found the raven, but he was still likely safer where he was than being totted around by a walking target like Harry. He was definitely worried about himself, and not just because of the elves. He couldn't help but notice Lucius glancing up at from the ground every so often, clearly contemplating something. Possibly the resumption of his previous torture session to extract the truth of his curse from him.

Most worrisome of all was Voldemort. He was far more used to be worried about the Dark Lord than being worried for the Dark Lord. Time and again the dark wizard had proven himself seemingly indestructible, and yet before his eyes he could see him struggling and slowly failing as his body continued to weaken. It wasn't noticeable at first, the spells seemed as fast and savage as ever, but gradually his reaction time slowed. His tall confident form began to slump and move awkwardly.

Inside his own body, Harry felt his magic broiling inside. It had only been sealed for a day, but already he could feel in struggling to break free, fed on the intensity of his own physical and emotional struggles, rising up to defend and attack any and all that came before him. Without his wand, he could not properly channel it, and while his sword hand yielded a certain level of control he had little practice with it.

All of that was irrelevant however.

If the Dark Lord stumbled, he would go to him. He knew so many of his misadventures, this one included, had resulted from him recklessly rushing into situations he didn't understand and couldn't control. He knew to do so now would be the stupidest decision he had ever made and would likely get him killed. And still, even knowing this, he was already preparing himself to apperate himself into the thick of things. Some critical, broken part him wouldn't let him turn away, and to do so would surely result in a different sort of madness. Even just keeping his distance now, was driving Harry into fit of anxiety and guilt.

"Don't even think about it," Lucius warned, and Harry was suddenly certain the general had his wand pointed directly at him. He didn't even pretend he didn't know what he was talking about. It had to be written all over his face what he intended to do.

And his expression wasn't changing any time soon.

~ Page Break~

The venom was nothing if not fast. Within minutes his vision began to blur... or maybe it was his mind that was deteriorating, melting away under its corrosive touch. He couldn't feel his tongue anymore and was now forced to rely solely on wordless casting or else risk blowing himself up with a mispronunciation. One of these spells he cast, caught Gulandri as he made another attempt to sweep in behind him. The elf was thrown off his feet and smashed into a nearby tree before falling into some shrubbery beneath it. Voldemort set the shrubs on fire, pain and necessity taking away the desire for creativity.

There was no screaming.

He knew better than to assume he had managed to kill the Dark Elf with that meager spellwork.

Suddenly, his entire wand arm spasmed, and for a second he thought perhaps Gulandri prediction was coming true. That he was going to have a seizure and lose any semblance of control over his body. His wand was shaken free from his weakened, trembling grasp and fell to

the ground. And just as suddenly as the spasms started, they stopped. He was shaking still, but it was because of weakness now more than anything. It took all his will power to remain standing and more than he thought he had to reach out for his wand.

An sharp pinch struck his right shoulder, and it bloomed into a hot, wet pain. His whole body jerked against it and his mind seemed shaken loose from the sensation. What just happened? Then another pain, this time a burning slash to his arm. He saw the blade this time. Bits of mirror shining through the coating of blood. His blood.

He snarled like a beast, and spun around, animalistic anger and desperation flooding his failing body with murderous intent. Gulandri didn't dance away this time or attempt to evade. His electric eyes with were wide with a terrible glee, a horrifying triumph. As the Dark Lord leaped for him, he positioned his blade and leaped forward to meet him.

The blade slid into the Dark Lord's chest, slipped easily between his ribs and through his lung to the heart that pounding beneath and then clean through the other side. Voldemort gasped, blood welling up and spilling out over his slackened lips. Gulandri smiled.

"That was exciting," the elf half laughed. "Perhaps we'll have the opportunity to do it again some day."

There was no response from the Dark Lord, whose body had gone rigid and then suddenly went limp. Gulandri caught him as he fell forward. It gave him another moment or two to mock his defeated opponent before he was gone completely. He was about to do just that, but someone in the distance was shouting something. 'No' he thought, and it made him smile.

Was that the boy? If he was still here, he might yet have the opportunity to-

Voldemort's wand, which had been laying a short distance away, suddenly flew from the ground. Gulandri's amusement turned immediately to alarm and he dropped his prey to dodge the inevitable attack.

Only Voldemort didn't fall.

The right hand that had been lying bonelessly at the Dark Lord's side jumped up to seize him in a vice-like grip before he could pull away. Voldemort's lifted his head to look up at him, the crimson eyes burning into his own. Gulandri eyes widened. It made them an even better target when his enemy spat a mouthful of blood into his face.

The elf shrieked in pain and tore free. He pulled the blade free of the Dark Lord in the process, and it was the only thing that saved him when Harry's curse hit him squarely.

"Sectumsemptra!"

From the ground, Voldemort felt blood splatter across his face and hands. He felt it through the myriad of tortures afflicting his torn and poisoned body, and he smiled despite himself. There was a moment where he must have blacked out, because when he regains some sense of himself and his surroundings he was not lying directly on the ground.

Potter had pushed him partially upright so that he could lean him against his own body, and his free hand pressed some sort of cloth over the open wound of his chest. There was a tingle of magic there that wasn't unpleasant, but if it was meant to heal his wound it wasn't doing so quickly. His vision was still blurred, but he looked from the corner of his eye up at Harry's face. It was a strange mixture of pain, anger, and fear, but mostly determination. His vision swam for a moment, before partially focusing on Harry's wand hand and his own wand clutched tightly there.

Funny, hadn't he used Harry's wand just today? Did his protege find it as unnaturally natural as he had? They had brother wands after all. Perhaps they knew when their kin's master was yielding them.

He followed the line of the wand, but here his vision failed. There were vague shapes and movements, but nothing he could distinguish. An enemy, obviously. Who else was left after Gulandri? It took him a moment to remember his enemy had brought his own minions.

"Is the elf dead?" he asked, his voice wet with his own blood.

Harry started at the sound of his voice, but his position didn't change. He didn't allow himself to be distracted from the enemy.

"No, my lord," he replied. His voice cracked and he stopped. Voldemort could feel him swallow thickly, regaining his control. When he spoke, his tone was deceptively light. "It seems he's almost as stubborn to die as you are. His people got to him before I could finish him off."

That was disappointing, but not really surprising. Serpensortia was a nasty spell, but was rarely an instant kill. It certainly wasn't going to be a pleasant experience recovering from.

"They're retreating now. Carrying him off. Please hold on for a bit longer."

Voldemort smirked at the bit of pleading he heard there. Potter could almost cutie sometimes in his sincerity.

"I'm not going anywhere. Where are the others?"

"Malfoy's following the elves, making sure they don't try anything. Kingsley and Lt. Stratus are... somewhere... hopefully. I don't know where Professor Snape-"

"I am here."

Voldemort lets out an uncomfortable grunt as Harry jerks in surprise. It would seem his servant had lost none of his stealth over the years. He follows the potion master's movements more by sound and feel than sight. He doesn't want to waste the energy attempting to move his head.

"Move your hand, Potter, so I can work."

The tingling sensation over his chest retreats and he realizes it was definitely doing more than he had originally thought. The pain, which

he had thought considerably before, swelled again. His breathing became labored, filling his lungs with blood rapidly.

"Professor!"

"I know, Potter! Purus pulmo!" And then he could breathe again, painfully but easily. "Corsigno!" His heart stopped completely for a moment then resumed, this time without the tearing sensation of before. "Sisto sanguis. That should stop the worst of the bleeding for now."

"Professor, his arm. He's been bitten by a naga."

There's a moment of complete silence, then the frantic shuffling of clothing. It's curious enough and he was now feeling somewhat strong enough, to tilt his head towards Severus.

The man appeared to be undressing.

But no, he was just taking off his belt, which made into a loop and slipped over Voldemort's withered arm and tightened into a tourniquet.

"Are there no spells for that?"

"Naga venom eats through magic the same way Nagini's venom does. This is crude, but should hopefully slow the spread of the venom. I don't know how you're still alive."

"Yes, you do, Severus. You just don't like to think on it."

Lucius' voice appeared before any type of reply could be made.

"The fae are all gone now. We should go. There should be at least one Healer in the village."

"Don't be insipid, Lucius," Voldemort hissed, his strength very slowly returning. It wouldn't last indefinitely, but it would be enough for him to do what needed to be done. "No one can know about this. Our enemies will swarm on us at the slightest sign of weakness. Besides,

no one knows more about this body than myself. Take me somewhere quiet and secure."

"The Minotaur," Harry suggested, and it took Voldemort to realize what he was talking about. The Minotaur was here? So it had completed the first half of its first mission.

"Yes, that would work perfectly. Severus, you'll treat me on the way back to Bristol. I have safe houses there where I can recover. Now get me up."

"My Lord, you shouldn't-"

"But I'm going to. Potter, give me back my damn wand."

"Er... sorry." Harry handed it to him. He felt the magic inside practically purr, and was reassured that despite its obedience to his protege, it still knew who its true master was. He slipped it into sleeve, and made his first attempt to stand. He made it too, although it required him to hold onto first Harry and then Severus and to pause twice before he was upright. He didn't dare let go of Severus' arm else he'd surely have fallen flat on his face. No point in letting anyone else know that.

"You'll have to apparate us both, Severus. My focus is a bit...Hhmm..."

"Understandle, my Lord. Just say when."

"Wait. Before I forget. Potter, your wand is in my other sleeve. Take it out."

Harry looked down at his blackened arm, and while the Dark Lord could appreciate the reason behind the look of revulsion there he really didn't have the patience for it right then.

"Take it out!" he hissed in parseltongue, and the boy jumped to obey. He grabbed his arm as gently as he could (not that he could feel it at this point anyway), and carefully slide his thumb and finger between

his skin and sleeve and pulled out the wand there. The boy stared at it for a long moment, as if unable to believe he was seeing it.

"How did you...?"

Under normal circumstances, he would have found some way to either gloat or else regale Harry with his intellectual and magical prowess, but these were not normal circumstances and despite his returning strength he was running out of time.

"Later. Take me to the train, Severus."

"Yes, my Lord."

~ Page Break ~

And then they were gone, and Harry was left disoriented and filled with questions. Later, Voldemort had said, and that wasn't unreasonable. Except now still felt so urgent. There was still so much to do, and it needed to be done quickly.

"You should go," Lucius said, coldly. "He will expect you to follow him."

There was a bitterness to his tone that Harry recognizes as jealousy, but didn't really understand the cause. Was he mad that Voldemort called him insipid?

"Soon. We need to find Lt. Stratus and Kingsley."

"We don't have time for that. They could be dead already. If not, they're in no immediate danger and will find their own way back eventually," he said, as if explaining something to an imbecile. Harry's clever reply was to ignore him completely, which was more insulting than any retort he could have thought up.

"Expecto patronum."

His patronus appeared, its ghostly visage even more eery in the surrounding devastation. It regarded him with some curiosity, as if

surprised to see him and Harry felt a smile tug at his lips. You and me both, my friend.

"Find Kingsley and Lt. Stratus and bring them back to Treelafore."

It turned and bound off into the forest. As it went, Harry caught a flash of reflecting light in the embers nearby. Lucius would have seen it too, except that his gaze was drawn to the patronus. He had never seen Harry's before. The young Gryffindor took the opportunity to investigate, and found Gulandri's sword half buried in ash and leaves. He picked it up with his sword hand.

His magic surged into the blade readily, traveling along the mithral lining, before circling back into his hand. It felt familiar, almost like holding the sword of Gryffindor.

"Where did you find that?" Lucius demanded once his attention was drawn back to him.

"It was on the ground. Gulandri must have dropped it when I hit him with the curse."

"The Dark Lord will want it."

"Then he can have it," he said without hesitation. He liked the sword. He really, really liked it, but if Voldemort asked for it then he would give it to him. He owed him more than a shiny bauble right now, and he knew it. "You can go if you want. I just need to check something and I'll apparate back."

Lucius regarded him for a long moment. He could persist, but already he was feeling more like a nagging housewife than a menacing presence. Now that Harry was armed and the Dark Lord was so close, it was too risky to attempt to resume his interrogation and they both knew it. He wasn't going to give up, but right now he had to focus on absolving himself of wrong-doing to his master. Despite Severus warning against apparating, Lucius' pride had taken too many blows already that day. He disappeared in the blink of an eye.

Harry let out a breath of relief when he was gone. One less thing to worry about. Alone again, he lit his wand with a lumos charm and jogged out of the clearing and to the fallen log where he and the others had first hidden themselves. It took him several tries to find it, there were so many more fallen trees now, but when he did he found Bobby safe and sound where he left him.

"Bobby? Bobby? Enervate," he cast. The raven gave a jolt and flopped around in a panic for a moment, nearly causing Harry to drop him. "Bobby, calm down! You're okay! You're safe!"

The raven froze.

"What happened?"

"You got hit with a stunner. Actually, its all kind of complicated and I don't have the time to get into it now. Can you fly?"

"I... I think I can. Yes, I should be able to. At least to the village. There are safe places to hide until dawn there."

"Good, then go. I don't trust Lucius not to try something."

"General Malfoy is here? Is he the one who stunned me?"

"No, that was Snape."

"Oh... what? What's Snape doing here?"

"He's..." Harry sighed. "I'm sorry, but I don't have the time to explain it right now. Go to the village and find a place to hide. When it's safe, find me at Hogwarts and we'll sort this all out. Can you do that?"

"I... yes, I suppose. Are you alright?"

Harry grimaced. He didn't know what he was right now, but alright wasn't it.

"I'll be okay. Hurry."

He didn't give Bobby time to say anything more, but tossed him into the air, forcing him to fly or else crash to the ground. The raven gave an indignant caw but soon disappeared into the night. Then he too disappeared, and then reappeared outside of Treelafore.

The Minotaur stood as a shadow just outside the low stone wall around the village, nearly invisible in the darkness except for where light from a nearby lamp post made lines of gold shine along her shiny black body. The village was quiet, its inhabitant tucked sound asleep in their beds. Not even a barking dog or an owl to break the silence. It was like walking into a place where time had suddenly stopped.

This disturbing illusion was soon shattered by Snape appearing from between a row of houses, carrying a large sack under one arm and stool under the other. He was soon followed by Lucius carrying a bundle of sheets and what could have been firewood. He watched curiously as they carried their loads to the Minotaur, and watched as one of the side loading doors slid open, allowing them to deposit their load and climb inside. Harry followed after, slipping in behind them before the door closed.

"Potter, where have you been?" Snape snapped. The answer, however, seemed less important to him than his current task, and he quickly ignore him in favor of it.

Inside, Voldemort had been laid rather ignominiously on the floor of the compartment. This was a necessity, since the compartment was a empty now as it had been when Harry had come in it. The crates that had been there previously had been transfigured into some sort of frame and Lucius was busying himself completing it. Snape was now sorting through his bag, pulling out items that had clearly been filched from the local apothecary.

Harry stood there helplessly for a moment.

"Is there anything I can do?" he asked.

"Take off his shirt," Snape said, not looking up from his task. "Clean him up if you can."

He hesitated, but then did as he was told. Voldemort was still conscious when he went kneel beside him. He regarded Harry rather blandly, and if he was in pain he was doing a masterful job of hiding it.

"Where did you get that?" the Dark Lord asked, referring to the sword that Harry was very carefully using to cut away his shirt. Everything the blade touched seemed to fall apart as if it were nothing more substantial than water.

"Gulandri dropped it. The other elves must have forgotten to pick it up."

"Careless of them. He'll punish someone for that blunder."

"He didn't seem in any condition to punish anyone last I saw him."

A faint smirk broke the blandness of the man's expression.

"You think so? He is too much like me. Even in his current condition, he will find some means to punish them."

Harry paused, catching some meaning in what he was saying. No, he refused to be sidetracked. He set the sword aside, removing the shredded remains remains of his shirt. It was suddenly difficult to breathe. He knew about the withering arm and the stab to the chest, but now that it was completely exposed he could see the true extent of the damage even through the layer of blood and gore. The blackening of his arm was only few inches from his shoulder and still spreading, the flesh below that little more than mummified flesh and brittle bone. Then there was the wound to the chest. Harry had assumed it was close to the heart, but looking directly at it he knew there was no way the blade had missed. The wound was still open, although bloodless, and through the slivered opening Harry could see the white of his ribs and below that the faint movement of the beating heart beneath.

He had to stop for a moment, pull back and breathe. His insides rolled, and though he hadn't eaten in days his gag reflex tried to force something out of nothing from inside him. He closed his eyes,

counted to ten and went back to the Dark Lord. Taking out his wand, he carefully began cleaning and sterilizing the exposed skin, being as gentle as possible around the open wounds of his chest, shoulder, and arm. When he got to the Dark Lord's face, he found the man watching him curiously.

"Do you think I couldn't punish you as I am now?" he asked, as if bemused.

"I would hope you'd wait until I was done before you tried."

That earned him a grin.

"Maybe that is the punishment? It hurts you to have to do this, doesn't it?"

"... Yes."

"But you deserve it, don't you? This is your fault, after all."

Harry grimaces, but nods. He carefully cleans the rest of man's face. The absence of blood gives him a semblance of normalcy, but somehow makes the intensity of his stare that much more disconcerting. Maybe it's the pain talking or a side affect of Snape's spells, but the cruelty of his words coupled with the softness of his expression was unbearable.

"Everything is ready, My Lord," Snape said, chasing Harry away from the Dark Lord's side. There was a feather-lite charm on him already, so lifting the Dark Lord onto the transfigured gurney was simple enough. Voldemort closed his eyes and took a deep breath. It was the only sign he gave that he felt anything at all. Snape finished cleaning and sterilizing his back before laying him down completely. He turned to the others.

"You should both go."

Lucius didn't question it, and Harry was ashamed to admit he didn't want to have to see what he had already guessed was going to happen either.

"Harry stays."

Everyone froze.

"He stays. There is something he must do for me."

They all share a look, but there were no words to argue. What the Dark Lord wanted the Dark Lord got.

"Wait ten minutes," he continued, directing his orders towards Lucius. "If Stratus and Kingsley are not back by then, start the train. If they're alive, they can find their own way back."

"As you command, my Lord."

"Close the door behind you."

The train door slid shut smoothly, sealing them safely inside so that the only danger were those they presented to each other. Harry moved himself to the farthest corner he could, hoping to stay out of Snape's way and if miracles existed, be completely forgotten. If they did exist, he had apparently used up his quota.

"We need to remove the arm first," Snape said. "I've manage to stop the venom from spreading any further but it's only a temporary. It will eat through the magic shortly."

"I know. I want Harry to do it. With the sword. I think that would be appropriate."

Snape didn't know what to say to that except perhaps 'you're crazy' and that wouldn't have been helpful to anyone. He turned to Harry who looked healthily horrified. It seemed there were some things he wouldn't jump into without thinking after all.

"I don't know if that's a good idea," he said instead. After a beat, he added. "He might miss."

"I don't expect him to have to swing. The sword is lined in mithral. He need only press lightly and it will cut clean through."

"I could-"

"But he must. Stop questioning me, Severus. It's unhealthy."

There was nothing more to say then. The potions master looked back to Harry who was now white as a sheet, and felt something akin to pity and also an understanding behind the Dark Lord's logic. This was perhaps the worst punishment Voldemort could give to Harry, the one thing that might actually force him to learn from his mistakes. They could make him do a thousand unpleasant tasks, ground him until he was ninety, and cast cruciatus on him for hours and none of it would have the impact of forcing the boy to hurt someone he cared about. It was brilliant like so many of Voldemort's customized tortures were.

"Potter," he said, making his tone sharp and commanding. "Get over here."

Harry shook his head. He wasn't going to do this. They couldn't make him do it. Voldemort lifted his head, glaring at his stubborn protegee.

"If you don't get over here and cut off this useless lump immediately, I am going to kill both Stratus and Kingsley when they get back, just to relieve stress."

Harry felt like he was going to be sick. Like he should have been sick already, but somehow he didn't think that would stop Voldemort from making good on his promise. Clearly, he was a lot angrier with him that he had originally made out or perhaps now that he was losing an arm he was regretting his decision to attempt to rescue Harry at all. So he forced himself to move forward, knowing whatever happened next, the Dark Lord was right. He deserved this.

"... I don't know how to..." he started, but stopped. He couldn't even say it.

"I will position the sword," Snape said briskly. "You only need to push down sharply. I will take care of things after that. As long as you can manage to not cut off your own leg, it should be fine."

"Yeah... okay."

He dried his sweaty palms on his shirt and readjusted his grip on the handle. The sword was lighter than the average sword, even lighter than the Sword of Gryffindor, being Elven crafted but it felt incredibly heavy as he lifted it. Snape moved the withered arm out perpendicular from Voldemort's body and rested it on a partially transfigured stool, now curved in a slight 'U' shape so that the arm wouldn't just roll away when it came free. Snape unstrapped the belt tourniquet and used it to strap the limb down, just in case.

By now the blade was shaking in Harry's hands, and the impromptu surgeon was even more skeptical than before.

"Are you absolutely sure about this," he asked the Dark Lord. Their patient wasn't even looking at the sword or his own arm. He was looking at Harry's face and committing it to memory.

"Absolutely."

Snape took a deep breath. Harry didn't think he could breathe at all. He watched as the headmaster carefully grabs the sides of the blade between his thumb and forefinger and pushed it down towards the arm, letting it hover just above the line of reddish-purple between the blackened limb and the fleshy body. The moment he let go, Harry's shaking hands caused the blade to dance back and forth, and Snape caught it again.

"Potter, we really don't have time for this. I need you to calm down."

"I know. I know. I'm trying. It's.. it's really heavy."

"If you can't keep it still, you're going to miss the mark and either cut too high or too low. Cut too high and he's going to bleed out in seconds. Cut too low and you'll have to do it again. Do you understand?"

"I... yes...I... Merlin, I can't breathe."

"Can I give him a calming draught, at least? He's about to have an attack," Snape asked the Dark Lord.

"There's no time. I can feel it starting to spread."

Harry and Snape looked down, and sure enough the line of bruised purple moved ever so slightly upwards.

"Shit, shit," Harry cursed. Doing nothing was making things worse. What if he wasted too much time and it spread into his chest cavity? That wasn't something they could just hack off! "Okay, okay, I'm ready, just..."

Snape repositioned the blade, pushing it down further this time so that it cut through the first fragile layers of skin.

"Push, Potter! Push it down now!"

He started, and then in a panic shoved down hard. Snape's inappropriate joke about not cutting off his own leg turned out not to be a joke at all. As the blade cut through, smoother than anything he'd ever seen, it kept going and he fell forward, nearly hitting himself. He threw himself backwards to stop himself, over compensated and nearly vivisected Snape in the process. He landed on his back, and the sword skittered out of his hand and across the compartment. There was no attempt to go after it. He was liking it a lot less then he originally thought.

There wasn't any time to think after that. He could only lay there, listening as the Dark Lord who had been so composed and docile a moment before was now spitting out the vilest of curses into the universe in that tell-tale sibilant hiss of parseltongue. Snape was struggling to keep him still and treat the bleed wound, which looked something like a man trying to hold down small dragon and juggle at the same time. For an instant, Harry thought he had cut too high or at a wrong angle, but the blood wasn't gushing out in the wild burst the

potions master described but a sporadic splatter that was quickly painting the floor and the Dark Lord himself.

"My Lord!" Severus cried, still trying to hold him down by his shoulder with only minimal success. The wound on his chest and shoulder had reopened and were gushing more than his arm, soaking the man and the gurney beneath him within seconds. "You must be still! Please! Hold still! Potter, get over here!"

Harry stumbled to his feet. He was shaking and light-headed, but here was something that needed to be done and that he could focus on, and nothing fought off his panic attacks like a goal. His first thought was to try and hold down Voldemort's shoulders like Snape was doing, but that was ridiculous. If a man of Snape's side could barely manage it, then he certainly couldn't. So he climbed up on top of the gurney, straddling the Dark Lord and using his weight rather than his muscles to hold him down. It was fortunate he had excellent balance, because it seemed the Dark Lord was trying to throw him off. All the while, he kept spitting out the vilest words a forked tongue had ever spoken.

"What's he saying, Potter?"

"Er... basically... ow ow ow and then you know... swearing."

"Fantastic. Try to keep him still."

Harry didn't know how to keep him still. He was having a hard enough time just staying on top of him. He could feel the Dark Lord's magic radiating outwards in cold, dark tendrils and making his blood feel like acid to the touch. It was becoming hard to breathe again, not because he was panicking but because the air itself seemed to be flowing out of the room as Voldemort's magic rose to defend itself.

There was suddenly a blow to the side of his head that sent him flying. When Harry opened his eyes again, it was to silence and Snape's face staring down at him. And a serious headache.

"Ugh... what happened? Is he okay?"

"He is stable and conscious. His magic knocked you clear across the compartment. Fortunately, we've already determined that you have high tolerance for that sort of abuse. Can you stand?"

"Do I have to?" he groaned, because he would be perfectly happy to go back to unconsciousness.

"Yes. He's asking for you."

"Yeah, okay. Give me hand up?"

Snape did help him, which was fortunate because if he hadn't known he suffered a blow to the head before he could certainly tell now. His vision swam and settled then swam again as he took his first step. After the third step, he was mostly sorted and manage to let go of Snape to walk the remaining half dozen steps to the gurney. The white sheets were coated with blood, but the man laying on top of them was clean once again with pristine white gauze encircling his chest and the small stump that remained of his left arm. He was also looking back at Harry with that same cool, slightly bemused expression he had had before.

"I trust I didn't damage you too badly?" Voldemort asked, eying him from head to foot and not quite certain of his conclusion.

"I'll survive. How about you?"

"I'll survive, as well. Most of me at least."

"Is there nothing that can be done to get it back?" he asked, looking pointedly to the limb that someone seemed to have shriveled even more during the minutes he had been knocked unconscious. It did not even look real or at least not human. The Dark Lord spare it a disinterested glance. Harry couldn't seem to turn away from it.

"Nothing worth the effort. I have other options. Do not concern yourself over it."

"I'm sorry."

God, that sounded like such a stupid, useless thing to say after what had happened. It always sounded so useless, but some how essential. He felt Voldemort's hand on his arm, drawing his attention back to him.

"I know. Your punishment is over. I forgive you."

A hitch caught in Harry's throat and he couldn't speak, was coming dangerously close to crying which was completely absurd. After everything that had happened, he wanted to cry once the worst was over? He tried to wipe his eyes but stopped when he realized his hands were covered in blood. And they felt oddly numb.

"You need to wash that off," Voldemort said, suddenly more earnest. "My blood is toxic enough on its own, I can't imagine having naga venom added to the mix has lessened the dangers."

"Ah, shit."

"Aptly put. Have one of the others take care of it. Your hands are shaking."

"Did Kingsley and Stratus make it back?"

"I can't say I've been up to check," he replied.

"Er... right. I'll go... figure something out."

"Try one compartment down," Snape said. He was already focused on grinding ingredients for some sort of potion, and not looking at either of them. "There should be a lavatory there to wash off the blood if you don't find anyone."

"Thanks."

He moved away and as he did, the room swayed a bit but now that his senses were a little clearer he realized it was because they were moving. The train had taken off without him realizing it and was now on its way to Bristol. He was going home. He felt the urge to cry again,

and he understood now it was out relief and laughed a little at himself. Merlin, he was so incredibly tired.

But he had to get clean first.

~ Page Break~

Snape did look up from his work when he heard Harry move into the next car. His work was far from over for the night, and he couldn't afford to be idle. He wasn't such a novice however, that he couldn't speak and prepare ingredients at the same time.

"I suppose you had your reasons," he said, "But that seemed rather pointless. There are far less painful and dramatic ways to take off an arm."

Voldemort chuckled softly.

"Indeed. There are countless curses and spells that could have achieved the same affect, but then you must have realized I did not do it just to remove the limb."

"Yes. I just don't know what motivated you, except to torment Potter, which while fun, again there are a lot less painful ways of achieving."

"Quite, but there are far fewer ways to maintain his dependence on me."

"Dependence? This was about curving his independent streak?"

"I know we've discussed if before. He's only becoming as he gets older. He is already more self-reliant than most wizards twice his age. More self-motivated than most wizards will ever be in their entire lives. It makes him very difficult to control."

"So this about control?"

"No. There is no controlling Harry. I don't particularly want to control him. What I do want, however, is to keep him focused. All that

independence and self-motivation I want directed towards... me. Towards my goals and my ideas and my well-being."

Snape nearly dropped his pestle.

"I don't mean like that, Severus. It would be so easy for him to get distracted and find some cause to follow. Something that would lead him away from his true potential or even to bring him into conflict with myself. This... this was all about reasserting exactly how much he owes me, and how much he will always owe me."

"That sounds an awful lot like trying to control him."

"Control implies I would have some means of determining his actions. That's not the case. He always has and always will surprise me with how he fulfills his sense of obligation. The fiasco with the werewolves was a perfect example of that. There are some things I will always be able to make him do, but it is the actions he takes under his own initiative that have the most dramatic affect."

"It certainly had a dramatic affect tonight," Snape said with a touch more irony than was probably appropriate.

"Loosing my arm was my own fault. I should have known better than to handle a naga so carelessly. If it hadn't been for that, I would have been able to defeat Gulandri easily and this all would have been an amusing tale to tell at the next Christmas party."

"And yet, you never would have had to deal with either the naga or the elf if Potter hadn't disobeyed your orders to never enter Ireland without your supervision."

"A matter I am still rather confused about. How did he get here in the first place with Minotaur and his own squardron?"

Shit, Snape mentally cursed. He hadn't meant to bring that up yet.

"That... is a very good question."

"And one you do not wish to tell me."

"It is... complicated."

"Hhhmm... I am going to have to punish you after this, aren't I?"

"... That's entirely up to your discretion. I would ask that you wait until the full explanation is given... And you've recovered."

Voldemort chuckled. It should have been reassuring, but having just witness the Dark Lord smiling away while he psychologically tormented his protege he did not find it encouraging.

"I am sure you would."

~ Page Break~

Tom watched the streaks of red and black swirl and mix before disappearing down into the darkness of the sink drain. It was hypnotizing or perhaps he was too close to physical and psychological exhaustion. Sleep sounded magnificent. Food sounded even better. Being clean would have been a minor comfort, but he would take what he could get. Stratus' wand was gone, probably forever, and he wasn't going to ask Lucius for help. His 'superior' was currently pacing a line into the floor, and wasn't in any state to help anyone. So that left good old fashion soap and water. Not as good as magic, but not a bad method for attaining cleanliness. Or at least it wouldn't be if he had an actual tub or shower and a change of clothes.

He supposed he would get those soon enough. Bristol was only a short trip from here, and whether he went back to headquarters or his own quarters, there would be all the necessities. Assuming he wasn't immediately thrown in prison. He thought he might have dodged the bullet on that one. The Dark Lord might not have said it, but he thought he had impressed him when he organized their escape. He wasn't expecting accolades by any means, having failed his primary mission of protecting Harry, but Voldemort would remember him from now on and not entirely with negativity.

And of course, now Harry knew him too.

Well, he knew 'Reggy'. Definitely a start in the right direction.

There was a light tap at the lavatory door. He bit down his irritation. He was no where near getting clean, but there wasn't much more he could do.

"Just a moment," he said, and slid the door open.

Harry stood there covered in blood from the splatters across his face, to his soaked shirt front, and gore coated hands.

"Merlin! What the hell happened to you?"

The boy blinked at him owlishly.

"It's not mine."

Well, that was a relief. Whose then? Oh... oh. It seemed Voldemort hadn't fared as well as Lucius had implied.

"It's good to see you made it back in time. Can I use the sink? There's naga venom mixed in this and I'm starting to lose feeling in my fingers."

Tom quickly moved out of his way letting Harry slip inside. Lucius was no longer in the compartment, so he was probably checking on Voldemort. Kingsley and the untainted witch, he now knew as Fiona McDier, were already asleep, leaning against each other on the far wall. He and Harry were essentially alone.

"Thank you for sending the patronus. We were all lost in the woods by the time it found us."

"I'm glad it helped," he said, politely. There was an extreme tiredness to his friend's voice and body language, as if he were mere moments from falling asleep on his feet. Tom could sympathize, but he couldn't let this chance to speak with him pass.

"How are you Harry?"

The boy had managed to turn on the tap but was struggling through handling the slippery soap with his mostly useless fingers. Tom wanted to offer to help, but Harry had his pride and he wouldn't make him compromise it.

"I should be asking you that," he said, not turning around. "You just survived being held prisoner by the fae for... however many days it was and then lost all but one of your soldiers."

"Like you said, Harry, we're soldiers. Death is a risk we accepted when we took the job. I regret the loss of my people, but this is hardly the first time I've lost men to a battle. When I was just a foot soldier, most of my squad was killed during the invasion of Berlin."

"Except that your men aren't really dead in this case."

"Dead. Lost. However you want to look at it, there's no helping them."

"You sound like you don't care."

"I can't afford to care about the dead or the lost, Harry. I have to care about the living first, the ones you can actually do something for. It's something you learn out on the battlefield. It's something you're going to have to learn too."

Harry had finally managed to get a grip on the soap and was rubbing vigorously over his hands and arms, like a surgeon prepping for an operation. He scrubbed his face with his soapy hands as well, before rinsing all of it off again.

"So I should just forget about what happened? Dead and gone, after all," he asked, a tightness in his voice that was quickly falling into anger. Tom had to tread carefully.

"Not all of us are dead and gone."

The soap fell with a clatter to the floor. Harry's previously numb fingers were now clutched tightly to the rim of the basin, and his entire body taut as a cord even as his head hung down. Tom couldn't see Harry's face in the mirror anymore, but he could almost imagine it.

"Goddess... how can you not hate me?"

"Why would I hate you?"

The boy turned to him, and if Tom had a heart it would surely break at the haunted look in his eyes. He tried to shout but the only thing that came out was a strangled;

"This is my fault!"

Tom tilted his head. He understood Harry's logic and he vaguely understood that guilt under these circumstances was probably normal, but honestly it seemed irrelevant who or how it all started. It had happened. Nevertheless, it seemed to bother him, so he would try his best to alleviate some his torment.

"This was inevitable," Tom said, catching him off guard. "I don't know what Gulandri told you while you were under his... care, as it were, but when he spoke to me just after our capture, he made it pretty clear he had intended something like this all along. He wanted to kill Lord Voldemort and he would have eventually found a way to lure him into Haustenheim, with or without you. In fact, if it hadn't been for you ruining all his plans, he might have actually succeeded."

Unlikely, but still possible.

Harry clearly hadn't considered this, or perhaps he had never known Gulandri's plans were not merely an exploitable opportunity Harry had given him. He was frowning, but now it seemed more thoughtful. Another exploitable opportunity Harry was providing, and Tom wasn't going to pass it up.

"Listen, Harry. I'm happy that I was here for what happened. I'm happy I got to help stop a plot against the leader of Britain. I'm proud I got to fight beside you, and see all those stories about your resourcefulness and bravery were true. I'd do it all again if I had to."

He might have gone a bit overboard there, because now Harry looked overwhelmed and if though he might tip over at any moment. But

even as he started to reach for him, the boy reoriented himself and straightened.

"Goddess, you deserve a promotion."

Tom smiled at that.

"I wouldn't object to a good word here or there. I wouldn't worry about it though. The general needs me where I am."

There was another flash of guilt there, although he couldn't determine the source. It was gone as quickly as it appeared, and Harry was smiling again. Weakly, but it was a start.

"Thank you. I- I'm way too tired to do it properly, but thank you."

"You're welcome. You should dry off," he said, and handed him a towel hanging by the door. Harry accepted it, burying his wet face into it before moving to his hands. The smile was gone now, and he seemed distracted once again.

"Thanks, again. I should check back with Lord Voldemort. He'll have questions."

"You should sleep," Tom said. "I'm sure he'll understand."

"Maybe, but no point in taking chances. Besides, I owe it to him."

Tom would have happily told him he didn't owe the man shit, but held it back. It was clear from Harry's expression that he wasn't saying this solely because he felt obligated. He wanted to do it. A spike of jealousy shot through him as Harry slid past him and headed towards the next compartment. He had just managed to undo most of the guilt Harry felt over the circumstances, and here the boy was running back to the man who had made him feel guilty in the first place! It was unfair and ridiculous. Why did Voldemort get Harry's undivided attention? Why did he get the respect and affection?

Alright, he had to admit Voldemort going into a faerie land to rescue the boy deserved some consideration, but hadn't Tom himself done

the same? Not really, now that he thought about it. Honestly, he had nothing to complain about and given the circumstances Harry's fealty wasn't something he should be angry about.

But he was. He hated it. Or rather hated that it wasn't his. He had done so many things to protect Harry that the boy never knew about and all Voldemort seemed capable of was using him shamelessly, and still he was preferred! To Harry he was nothing but a kind stranger. He didn't know that the man standing before him was Tom, the dear friend he had admitted to worrying about even after years had passed. Would Harry be so quick to run back to his precious Dark Lord if he knew the man was responsible for the murder of his friend? If he knew all his terrible secrets?

But then, why ruin it, when he planned to take the Dark Lord's place himself? One day the connection that Voldemort and Harry shared would his, just like everything else.

It was only a matter of time now.

Book VI

Chapter 19: Coming Together

"Severus, you look exhausted," McGonagall said. She kept her tone somewhat accusatory, knowing he'd chafe under a display of sympathy. He spared her an annoyed look across the small table, but took another sip of tea rather than reply. Generally pale to begin with, he looked deathly in the pale autumn light peeking through the window. It had snowed the night before, but turned to a freezing rain with the dawn and covered the world in a cold, wet gloom. A bad omen for the approaching winter.

Then again, there had been stronger portents of danger than rainy days long before this.

"Perhaps you should assign some additional duties to the staff at the meeting tomorrow," she suggested. "We can't afford to have you falling ill because you are being stretched too thin."

He snorted.

"And what duties would you propose I unload upon them? They are busy enough as it is completing their dissertations and wrangling the miscreants they call students into submission at every waking moment. And if they're not, they're busy 'volunteering' in Hogsmeade Hall."

"Lockhart seems to have plenty of free time."

The look he gave her would have petrified a basilisk.

"And which of my responsibilities do you think I could possibly give to that imbecile?"

"Darling, he's not that bad," Ira said, looking up from the detention roster she taken over for her overwhelmed husband. There was an inordinate amount of mischief making amongst the students lately, resulting in a skyrocketing number of detentions. Teachers were having a hard time finding appropriate punishments with so many

offenders and even less time to supervise them, and had subsequently been handing them off to Snape. The headmaster, in turn, found ways of making the miscreants useful as unpaid labor around the castle they seemed so intent on tearing down around their ears. Ira had taken over when it became clear her husband was driven to a nearly epileptic state after being regaled continuously with tales of his students' gross stupidity and selfishness.

"He's a ninny," he stated as if it were an absolute fact. Which it was.

"True," Ira said, "but he's good with the students."

"Only the stupid ones. Which, I suppose, covers just about everyone."

"Severus," she chided gently. "I think he would be a good choice to supervise the concert. He has experience with those sort of things, I'm told."

He set down his teacup, else he risk throwing it across the room.

"I am turning down the offer," he insisted. "I have no intention of riling up the students any more than they already are with a rock concert. I don't intend to reward them for their behavior either. You know what happened during Halloween."

There was a collective shudder around the table.

McGonagall shook her head.

"You're approaching this from the entirely wrong perspective," the transfiguration professor said. "The students are misbehaving because they are bored and restless."

"I don't know how they can be either of those things. They should be much too busy with their lessons and other responsibilities."

"Yes, but those are routine things. They cause stress and fatigue, which results in all the trouble we're seeing now. This concert could be something to distract them, to look forward to, and to relieve stress. You should use it as an incentive to make the students behave. Tell

them anyone who gets a detention from now on will not be allowed to go. I think you'll be amazed at how quickly they'll straighten up."

He turned thoughtful, but his thoughtfulness ran longer than McGonagall thought was characteristic. He was typically more decisive when it came to practicalities. Ira was looking at him curiously as well.

"Do you have some other reason to be reluctant?" McGonagall asked.

"Hmmm..." He picked up his tea and took a distracted sip. "It seems a bit... suspicious is all. We've never been offered a free concert. Given the Wicked Sisters-"

"Weird Sisters," Ira corrected.

"Whoever they are, I was led to believe they are very popular. They must have received many offers, many wellpaying offers to play elsewhere."

"True, but this is hardly the first free concert they've thrown. They've done dozens of benefit concerts for good causes over the years, and Hogwarts has had many difficulties this year. I don't think it odd that they would want to show some good will to students going through a rough time."

He still did not look convinced, but seemed to be either reluctant or unable to articulate the source of his disquiet.

"What precisely do you think their intentions might be?" McGonagall said at last. "A vendetta against the school seems unlikely."

He could have pointed out several unlikely vendettas against the school that had occurred but didn't have the energy.

"That's not what I'm worried about. I'm just wondering if this isn't one of Potter's little schemes."

That made Ira smile. "Harry? You think he's behind this?"

"I was rather under the impression that Mr. Malfoy was a more likely suspect. He was boasting about it to Miss Cypher earlier. Besides, Mr. Potter hardly seems in any condition to plot anything."

Snape could see her point. Harry had spent the last week as if operating under the Imperius Curse. He moved and ate and went to classes and even spoke occasionally, but there was no sign of self-motivation behind any of it. He wasn't watching the boy per se, as he had very little time to do so between running the school and traveling to Bristol to run errands for the recovering Dark Lord, but the teaching staff was as bad as the student body when it came to gossip and any time he had dinner at the staff table he was bound to hear how Potter hadn't turned in his assignments this week or skipped Dueling Club practice or was avoiding all of his friends.

Most of the staff thought he was just depressed over the Dark Lord. The Court was reporting that their great and terrible leader had returned unexpectedly to handle some sort of crisis that had emerged from General Malfoy's sudden turn of ill health (something Severus cringed at the mere thought). No one really believed this, and the press had been unusually defiant in expressing their skepticism of the 'official story'. Most of the world seemed to suspect Lord Voldemort had suffered some sort of injury in Germany and had returned to recover, but the extent and nature of this injury varied from a nasty cold to a life-ending curse depending upon the individual's level of naivety or morbidity. Many of his own staff had looked at him expectantly when broaching the subject at mealtimes, but Severus had nothing to say except that he was more concerned for General Malfoy than the Dark Lord.

The staff's assessment of the cause of Harry's depression was only partially correct, as it almost always was. Snape could only imagine the demons his ward was wrestling with at the moment, and even then he was certain he only knew a small part of what had happened. He had believed he knew the boy better than anyone, including the Dark Lord, but now he wasn't so sure. Harry, he knew, was capable of killing a man if pushed to it, but Lucius' suspicion that he was responsible for the curse he suffered niggled at his psyche. Was he capable of plotting murder against the father of one of his close friends? In a moment of rage or self-defense, he didn't doubt it, but to

actually craft a plan so cruel and discreet required a cold-blooded viciousness he had not thought Harry capable of.

And chances were he had nothing to do with it.

At least not directly.

Probably.

He mentally shook himself. It was ridiculous to suspect his ward of attempting to murder Lucius. If the boy was so clearly despondent over having merely cut off the Dark Lord's arm, something that he had been reassured was fixable, he would be completely incapable of the necessary malice to poison a man he might strongly dislike but had little enough reason to truly hate. Harry still maintained a friendship with Lord Voldemort for Merlin's sake, a man who had used and abused him in a far more terrible and terrifying manner than the general could have ever managed.

"I'll bring up the matter in the staff meeting," he said, pulling his thoughts back to the matter at hand. "They'll be the ones giving their time to help organize it. I haven't the time to deal with it personally."

McGonagall coughed into her hand something that sounded suspiciously like 'Lockhart' and then let the matter drop. Severus had almost finished his tea, and when he did he would go back to his office or private quarters to continue working. She was content to let him, having several essays waiting for her to grade, but she wanted to say one more thing before they parted.

"I think you should speak with Harry sometime this weekend. The sooner the better."

He choked on his tea.

"I beg your pardon?"

She leveled the same look she gave students who hadn't done their homework at him.

"Because he's obviously upset about Lord Voldemort, and has avoided discussing it with his friends."

"How would talking to me make him feel better?" he asked as though she had suggested mangoes would ward off dementors.

"Because he can't talk about it with anyone else."

"I..." he started, but stopped.

She was right. Harry couldn't talk about what was wrong with him to anyone other than Snape himself. The world had no idea he had been kidnapped by faeries or cut off the Dark Lord's arm. Both situations would have spurred public outcry and even created a certain level of suspicion against Harry. No one who went to a faerie realm and returned was ever completely trusted afterward.

There were other reasons he needed to speak with his ward as well. Dozens of reasons, most of them regarding subjects he should have discussed with him months ago but had avoided due to one excuse or another.

"I don't expect you to be sympathetic with him," McGonagall said, "But I think he needs a little direction. He respects you, and given your trips to Bristol, I would say he would trust you if you explained that the Dark Lord is going to be fine."

"Madam, I have no idea-"

"Oh, zip it, Severus. I know you can't talk to me about it, but don't think I'm falling for that nonsense about Lord Malfoy being sick. If he were sick, Draco wouldn't be so nonchalant about it."

Let it never be said that McGonagall wasn't astute, but she wasn't privy to all the facts that Snape was. Draco wouldn't be nonchalant if he knew his father was sick and recovering from a myriad of torture curses inflicted upon him by a very angry Dark Lord, but like everyone else he hadn't believed the official story and neither his godfather nor his parents had any desire for to worry him needlessly by telling him the truth. Apparently, neither had Harry, or perhaps the

boy was too caught up in his own self-centered angst to even consider what might have happened to the man after they had parted ways in Bristol.

"If I can find the time," he said noncommittally, and then just to be difficult, added, "And if I can pull him away from his busy schedule."

It was cold in the Astronomy Tower. Icy cold and yet still too wet for snow, and all the more miserable for it. She slipped past the magical barrier, mentally chiding the teaching staff for using something that wouldn't have kept out a determined Third Year, and immediately started to shiver. The tower had been damaged during the battle and, while it had been secured from falling, the spellwork to keep out the elements it had not yet been replaced. The stairs were starting to rot from water damage and creak terribly as she ascended to the top.

"What are you doing here, Hermione?" Harry asked as she reached the top of the stairs. The observation platform was empty. All of the equipment had been moved to storage. Harry sat himself on the ledge of the balcony wrapped in a cloak, his feet dangling over the edge between the rails. Even in the pale gloom, she could see the green of his eyes from where she stood and knew they were not even attempting to meet hers.

"It's too cold out here for what you're wearing."

He was right. She was freezing. She had thought about going to get her cloak before coming after him but was afraid she would lose her nerve. Muttering a warming charm, she continued forward out onto the balcony. Pointedly not looking down, she sat down beside him. He was already looking outward again, towards the Forbidden Forest where a shimmer of moonlight glowed behind the wall of shimmering clouds.

"Sentinel Seitler said you volunteered for guard duty up here," she said.

"Yeah." He couldn't seem to think of anything else to say. She couldn't either. It wasn't entirely uncomfortable. Something about the

cold darkness seemed to lend itself to silence, to swallow words and plant thoughts.

They sat for several minutes and said nothing at all.

"I'm sorry, Harry."

He stiffened.

"I'm sorry I said what I did before you left. It wasn't true and it wasn't fair."

"Hermione... I think it was true enough."

She shook her head.

"No. I mean... I know you tend to rush into danger, but... that wasn't why I was really mad at you. That's actually something I've always really admired you for."

"Hermione-" he started to protest, but she held up her hand.

"Just let me finish, Harry. I... it took a week for me work up the nerve to say this."

He grimaced, but held his tongue.

"I was really just frustrated that day... or rather, I've been really frustrated for a while now. This whole marriage business... God, I hate it. I haven't felt this helpless... this victimized since I was at WYRA. I never thought... even when things were bad at home with Lucius, I always felt like I could handle it. I was smart enough to figure things out for myself and strong enough not to let others keep me down. I got so used to being the perfect little pseudo-Pure Blood, after a while I tricked myself into believing it didn't even matter. That I'd won. That I had my friends and my education on my own merits and nothing he did could hurt me anymore."

She took a long deep breath.

"And then... then he proved me wrong. He got me. I haven't been able to think clearly since he announced the betrothal. I've been too afraid to do anything for myself. And then you came in like a white knight to save the day, and I thought that things would be okay, except I don't know how to be rescued, Harry. I never wanted anyone to do that for me before. I never wanted to be so weak that I needed it."

She was close to tears now, the honesty painful to hear even though she had known the truth for weeks... months even. He started to protest but she held up her hand.

"Let me finish before I lose my nerve. Anyway... I... I felt really vulnerable. I really wanted to talk to someone about it. I really wanted to talk to you about it, but... you seemed to close yourself off. You were hurting... are hurting, but you don't talk about it. You try to hide it... badly, by the way.. and I... I was just really frustrated. I thought if you opened up to me, I wouldn't feel so vulnerable about what was happening to me. How disgusting is that? Wanting your best friend to tell you how awful they feel so you don't feel so awful about yourself? And then expecting you to open up first when I kept pretending everything was fine myself? I was completely hypocritical."

He was looking at her with something close to horror, but perhaps it was just because she was crying. He always looked horrified when girls cried in front of him. But even if he was as disgusted with her as she was with herself, she couldn't stop now. She had sworn to herself that she wouldn't stop until she had said everything she needed to.

"So I'm sorry I said what I did. I don't think that way about you. I understand that you don't feel like you can tell me about everything that happens to you or how you feel a lot of the time. It wasn't fair of me to try to force you to. So... even though I know something happened this weekend, something that really bothers you, I won't ask you what it was. Just... if you do want to talk about it... whatever you can talk about... and if it will make you feel better... I'm here."

She sniffed and wiped away her tears roughly.

"Okay, I'm done."

He half laughed, half choked at her less than eloquent conclusion, then continued to just stare at her. The horrified look was gone, replaced now with something more akin to lost. It was her turn to avoid his gaze, now staring down at her hands wringing her robes into a wrinkled mess. She hoped she had done the right thing. Things had been so tense between them, their friendship slowly unraveling from the things they didn't speak of. There was a time when she thought she could tell him anything, and he would have trusted her enough with his secrets. Neither of them were that naive anymore, but she wasn't prepared to give up on them just yet. He was still her best friend and that meant something.

"Hermione..." he said at last, "I don't want to talk about it."

Despite what she had said, she felt hurt. Incredibly hurt. If he didn't want to talk about it now... the chances were slim he ever would again. She had blown it or maybe he was already too damaged or-

She stood up to leave, because if he didn't want to talk he surely didn't want to see her cry, but he grabbed her wrist before she could turn away. She looked down at him in surprise. He still wouldn't look up.

"I don't want to talk about it... but I don't want you to go either."

Oh...oh. She sat down again, this time a little closer. He didn't move away and he didn't let go of her wrist. After a moment, she pulled it out of his grip so she could take his hand in hers and squeeze it gently. He seemed a little embarrassed, but he squeezed back.

"You know, when I was younger," he said, "I used to be terrified that I would lose you by lying all the time. Now I'm more terrified of losing you to the truth."

"Harry..."

"I still can't tell you much of anything. It's too dangerous. And complicated. I wouldn't even know where to start if I could. But I'll tell you something. Something I've never told anyone."

"I promise I won't tell."

"You said you were scared of relying on others to save you. I'm not scared of that. I'm scared that no one is going to try. That I'm finally going to go too far and all of you will just... just give up on me. Then I'm afraid you will try and you'll die trying."

His hand tightened around hers. His eyes were looking out to some distant place she'll never see.

"I'm afraid to be alone."

Her heart broke and soared at the same time. She wanted to cry. She wanted to hug him and promise it would be okay.

She would have if not for the fact that he might have shattered to pieces in her arms, or worse, he might have believed her. So she didn't say a word. Not making promises the world would never let her keep. All she could do was lean over just a little, so that her shoulder pressed gently against his and said without words that she was there now, and she'd be there as long as possible.

They said nothing else after that. Minutes passed. Maybe hours.

Harry leaned back against her and let his head rest against her shoulder, closing his eyes. She smiled despite the chill that had started seeping through her warming charm and the numbness in the hand he was holding just a little too tightly.

Neither noticed as Ron moved back down the stairs, his footsteps muffled under a silencing charm nor the slam of the door behind him.

McGunny went down to the visitor center to work on the dragon book. After so many months, he was able to walk the half mile without getting lost or forgetting which direction he was going without either Hagrid or Charlie to escort him. He still had a tendency to get distracted by little things, like an unusual flower or a dragon flying off in the distance, but most of the time he could figure out where he was going afterward. It had been cold and wet that afternoon, and little

was curious enough to keep him from the warmth of the indoors, so he made it inside without distraction.

The visitor center was barely more than a large cabin with a number of pictures and diagrams and small display cases of teeth and claws and fetal skeletons for decoration. There were two long tables running through the center of the room, with more dragon artifacts under the glass surface, that McGunny liked to use when writing. The bits and pieces of his subject matter scattered around him helped to keep him focused, and unlike Hagrid's cabin, the subject matter was less likely to crawl out of its rookery and set his papers on fire.

From his breast pocket he let out his paper bird, letting it fly about the open space, safe from dragonets and the rain, and then went about unloading his materials from his satchel. He kept everything in exact order and was able to position everything with precise geometrical precision within only seconds. This obsessive orderliness was helpful with his short term memory although it tended to drive Hagrid up the wall.

Prepared to spend the remainder of the day hard at work, it was unfortunate that he let his eyes wander around the familiar confines of the cabin and spotted something unfamiliar. Predictably, he found himself distracted and wandered over to examine the newest novelty. Covering the north wall, where a large diagram of different dragon species had been hanging previously, was now nearly a hundred or so children's drawings. As he started to examine them, he found them to be mostly of dragons themselves, but a number of them also had childish interpretations of Hagrid or sometimes of themselves (also with dragons). It seemed there had been a number of field trips to the dragon sanctuary and in typical elementary gratitude, the children had drawn pictures to commemorate the event. He had heard about them from Hagrid, but he had always been cloistered safely in his cabin whenever they were passing through.

After several minutes of curious examination, one picture in particular caught his attention. It had a castle in it and a rather impressive depiction of a Norwegian Ridgeback. Standing on the castle were a series of little figures that seemed to lack joints of any kind, but were bravely fighting off the dragon. One of the figures had glasses.

He knew who it was immediately.

Harry Potter.

He felt a violent mental start at the name. Harry Potter? How did he know that name? But he did know it. And surrounding that name was a series of memories, memories he hadn't know he had but apparently had always been there. Harry Potter staring up at him from the cold, dark waters of the lake. Harry Potter sitting in front of a canvas and steadily working out a picture of an owl in charcoal and chalk. Harry Potter hyperventilating into his hands in the corridors of a castle. The castle was called Hogwarts. He had gone to school there with that boy and interviewed him a couple of times for school paper he ran. Colin Creevey had been the photographer. Hermione Granger was supposed to take over for him when he left.

His mind raced, flitting through new avenues he had not known were there. Memories came, not in a flood, but like the limbs of a tree slowly branching outwards. Branches of places and people emerged slowly, and when he followed them he found himself discovering newer limbs and so on and so forth.

Had his curse broken? Had whatever destroyed his memories been removed or repaired?

He took a deep breath and tried to remember the hospital.

Sensations and impressions squirmed and boiled inside him, and he felt himself shying away before something more definitive and horrifying formed.

Perhaps it had been too traumatic?

He tried to remember his house.

Nothing.

His thoughts skittered to a halt, and once again he felt as lost and unfettered as he ever had once again.

His father's name?

Nothing but an empty space in his psyche that left him feeling equally hollow.

His mother's face? His favorite book? His first kiss? His hometown?

Nothing presented itself, and it seemed as mysterious and unknown as it had since he was self-conscious enough to wonder about himself the same way Hagrid and Charlie did.

Carefully, he turned his thoughts back to Harry Potter, and once again his mind bloomed with memories. Some of them of the boy himself, but more often they were memories that branched off from their previous encounters. He tried to remember classes he'd at Hogwarts, but they came only sporadically, and oftentimes involved a conversation about Potter or someone connected to him, like Cedric Diggory's discussion of the next Quidditch match or an argument with Granger about Harry's involvement in the Acromantula incident.

Why?

He found himself once again looking at the picture on the wall. Studying it intently, searching for some sort of clue. He looked to the bottom right corner where the artist had scrawled her name. Alyssa. Age 7. The name was unfamiliar. More than likely, she was just another young Potter fan. He was a prince after all.

A prince and something else. Something that held his thoughts where all else had failed. Why were his memories centered around this person in particular? Did he have something to do with his memory loss? Could he somehow hold the cure?

Hours later, he returned to his and Hagrid's cabin.

His large friend was busy stoking the fire under the nesting box of the newest litter of dragonets but looked up to smile at him as he entered. The smile disappeared almost immediately.

"What's wrong, lad? Yeh look pale."

"I remembered something," he said.

Hagrid frowned thoughtfully.

"Somethin' bad?"

"No. I don't think so. It's just... odd. I remember Harry Potter."

The half giant's eyebrows shot upward in surprise.

"What do yeh remember 'bout him?"

"A lot. We went to school together. I was going to write his biography."

The last part made the man chuckle a bit, but Horace's next words sobered him up quickly.

"I know more about his life than I do my own."

"... Well, that's still somethin'. Maybe yer memories are recoverin' on their own. Yeh've come a long way from where yeh were."

"Yes, that's probably true. But I don't know why it started with him. I just remembered today that you worked at Hogwarts during the Triwizard Tournament, but only because I remember seeing you talk with Harry. Why couldn't I remember that before? We've been living together for months. You should have been one of the first things I remembered."

Hagrid oscillated between surprised and disturbed at this bit of information for several moments, before frowning a bit.

"I'm afraid I don't know much about memories. I tried to read up on it when yeh first got here but I couldn' make heads or tails of all that psychological mumbo-jumbo. Maybe it's natural for yer memories to start off tha way. Just picks up somethin' random and runs with it."

Horace had considered this, but after several hours of consideration he wasn't convinced of it. He had instincts. Instincts he trusted and Hagrid had trusted, when they came to the mutual understanding that he would not return to the hospital. That they would not attempt to search for his family and continued to let the world believe he was dead and gone. Right now, his instincts were telling him that he was remembering Harry Potter for a reason.

The precocious young man had been involved in so many weird incidents, was it such a stretch that he might somehow be involved with his memory loss? Or perhaps that he might know a cure for it? Perhaps his memories had been taken intentionally by someone else trying to protect Potter. Certainly, he had plenty of protectors who had the skills and resources to have him committed to a hospital. And given his general improvement after falling into Hagrid's care, hardly someone qualified as a mental health professional, perhaps his stay in the hospital had been orchestrated to remove his memories rather than restore them.

"I think I need to speak with Harry Potter."

"Oh... I guess that might help bring up some more of yer memories. I write to him every now and then, so I wouldna mind slipping something in from yeh. I doubt I could manage a visit until holiday break though. Hogwarts ain't exactly know for letting its students out for the weekends, especially not-

Horace shook his head, cutting him off.

"No. I don't want anyone to know about my staying with you. Not until I know it's safe. We never talked about it, but we both suspect something fishy was going on at that hospital. And if that's the case, it had to have been arranged by someone with power and influence."

This seemed to disturb Hagrid considerably.

"Yeh think Harry had something to do with what happened to you?"

"... I don't know. I think he's involved if not responsible. And even if he isn't, he might have the ability to find out."

"Now see 'ere. Harry's a good guy. He's always been the decent sort. He wouldn't have done this on purpose."

"Yes, I remember him being a 'good guy'. He always impressed me that way. But he has a lot of associates who wouldn't be considered 'good guys'. If one of them did this to me, he might know about it."

That disturbed Hagrid a great deal, and he paced the little cabin for a while trying to work out the anxiety he felt about it. It didn't seem to work, but eventually he stopped to continue the conversation.

"So how do you expect to talk to him? He told me before that his mail is looked through. Hogwarts ain't receivin' visitors these days either."

This wasn't anything Horace hadn't thought of. He just hadn't found a solution yet.

"I'll think of something."

The sixth night on the Astronomy Tower was the coldest by far, with a harsh north wind causing a series of tuneless whistles as it sped through the castle's many nooks and crannies. The sound reminded him of Durmstrang, and something about that kept his mind shying away from the desire to sleep. He didn't mind the cold. A part of him actually preferred it, although he couldn't say why. Most of his worst memories were staged in the depths of winter, after all, but then again those were also the moments he had felt most alive.

He could use that feeling again these days.

Since waking after his return from Ireland, he had felt strangely removed from the world around him. Food was tasteless, music was tuneless, and all the myriad of activities and worries of his day to day life seemed strangely insignificant. His attention had been turned inward since leaving Voldemort at the Sianach Lodge, pale and restless and inescapable even now with half the country in between them. His mind was now focused on those things he had learned in Hausteheim that he'd had no time to contemplate in the frenzy that had defined his time there and the night after having escaped.

Foremost on his mind was the prophecy that Gulandri had spoken of. He could no longer remember the exact words, but the gist of it had been that Voldemort and he were destined to fight to the death and one of them rule for a thousand years. Assuming the prophecy was referring to him at all, and his certainty of his role in it changed from hour to hour. Also assuming the prophecy was even real and not one of Gulandri's games designed to torment him.

Voldemort sometimes talked as if they were destined to stand side by side, and history had shown that their bond was not easily severed even by their own gross mistakes, abuses, and complete lack of moral compatibility. If anything, the worse things got the closer they became. What could possibly drive them to kill each other? Except perhaps the prophecy itself, which seemed to dictate an all-or-nothing end scenario of which Voldemort was not the sort to overlook. Even after learning of the prophecy, in the those moments of the day where he believed it, Harry felt no desire to harm the Dark Lord and even less desire to rule. Yet, he could not himself predict what he would be willing to do if Voldemort did attempt to kill him.

The patriotic thing to do was simply let the man kill him.

The human thing to do was fight with everything he had.

The Harry thing to do was run off and complicate a situation until the problem was solved or else forgotten in favor of some other crisis.

Predictably, he found himself favoring the 'Harry thing', except he didn't know if he should be physically running away or just mentally-ignoring the danger that exists only in words and only if the Dark Lord ever learned of them. Sometimes he wondered if he shouldn't just tell Voldemort himself what Gulandri had said. He wanted to believe that his friend would be reasonable, and perhaps together they could find the loophole or reinterpretation that proved the lynchpin of every prophecy. He wanted to believe that, but he wasn't that naive.

Voldemort cared about him. He knew that without a doubt. But he also knew that he cared about his destiny more. It had been the will of the Earth that he usher in the second age of paganism and the

ancient magics, and even his soul hadn't been spared in the effort to achieve that goal. Harry was a sacrifice he could live with, just as he had lived and continued on after the death of Carrigan.

And there was another matter all its own that sent his head spinning. He was the reincarnation of Carrigan, the only other person Voldemort seemed to have loved in life. He didn't know if that was ironic or just appropriate. He supposed it all depended on whether the reason they were so drawn together was because something in their souls recognized each other or else influenced their personalities into some sort of compatibility. It seemed too much to be serendipity.

It also seemed exceptionally cruel that if the prophecy were true, their betrayal was as inevitable as their bond. Yet, the prophecy being true did not disturb him as much as the possibility of being reincarnated. The prophecy he could ignore or work around, but his soul was something else entirely.

The idea that he had ever been someone other than himself, particularly someone like Carrigan was hard to accept. Nothing in the Dark Lord's or anyone else's description of the druid or in their meeting in limbo had suggested anything of similarity between them. Carrigan had always seemed laid back, benevolent, and almost all-knowing; while Harry tended to be all over the place, prone to anger and pride, quick to rush into a fight, and secretive. But then, he had only heard of Carrigan in his later years, when he had settled into a presumably quiet life of teaching and study. Perhaps he had been more adventurous and more uncertain in his youth. Bobby might tell him.

Bobby being the only one aside from Gulandri who had known who Harry had been, and the only reason Harry knew it now.

Bobby also being the reason he had volunteered for the night watch up in the tower for the entire week. His days lacked anything resembling privacy, and nights in the dormitory were no better. With the grounds now off limits, the Astronomy Tower was the only place he could hope to meet the raven in privacy and get the answers he so desperately needed.

Except Bobby hadn't shown up. The first two nights had been a disappointment, but he had consoled himself with the fact that the raven had to fly from Ireland to Scotland, and that was not a short journey. By the third day he had started to grow anxious, and by the fourth he had become seriously worried. Bobby was a follower of Raecellos and an expert navigator between all the secret ways between realms and over continents. If he had truly wanted to, he probably could have beaten Harry back to Hogwarts.

Had he been captured again? Killed? By whom?

Gulandri's people? Lucius'? Some random misfortune wild birds were susceptible to?

For a moment, he wished Hermione was with him again as she had been the night before. Although he could tell her nothing, or perhaps he simply hadn't known where to start, she had been a greater comfort to him than she would ever know. They had been drifting apart for weeks now, Harry to his own distractions and she to her growing fears, and the fight, silly as it was, seemed to be the beginning of the end. Except Hermione had proven herself the better person and the better friend, and reached out even as he was pulling further away.

Goddess, he loved her. He loved her the same way he loved her during their first year together, two lost and frightened souls whose only faith seemed to be in one another. Their lives were no longer as simple, and their circle of friends and loved ones had grown considerably, but she was still his best friend and he was still hers. She was the person he most trusted with his secrets, but she was also the one he most wanted to protect from them. That she seemed to understand this was a cause for both relief and guilt.

He promised himself that he would make it up to her. He had spent all day with her and his friends, who were relieved to see he was finally coming out of his funk, catching up on schoolwork and making plans for Hermione's emancipation. He was glad he hadn't tried to stall her plans when it seemed he had reached an accord with Lucius, as their situation was even more precarious now that he suspected Harry knew far more than he should about the general's curse (another

matter he couldn't afford to procrastinate on). More than that, this segment of the plan depended on Hermione far more than it did Harry, and he was glad she could once again play a proactive role in her own rescue.

Hermione had come up with the idea for Hogwarts to host a concert by the Weird Sisters and have the opportunity to meet with Andoria Smythe, her potential sponsor, in person. She had been working mostly with Draco, who had worked with Narcissa to see about arranging something. It had gone better than planned when the band up and offered to perform for free. Perhaps Smythe had seen the opportunity for what it was, and taken the initiative. If so, it was a good sign that their meeting would prove helpful. Draco was attempting to draw credit for the idea although it somehow ended up being attributed to Harry, probably because anything interesting that happened at Hogwarts seemed to be his fault whether it was good or bad. He had felt a moment of genuine happiness watching her spitting out questions and ideas with her usual frantic enthusiasm that afternoon, and for a little while he was able to forget about his own troubles and concerns.

But after dinner, it was back to the tower and the cold silence that did nothing to deafen his screaming thoughts or ease his growing worries. Back to wondering if the one he already thought of as 'brother' was dead, and if it was his destiny to follow after him shortly. He curled up inside his Baluvian cloak to keep warm, but his thoughts were as chilling as the wind and he couldn't seem to get any warmer.

At a quarter to midnight, his shift nearly done for the night and his thoughts at their darkest, a raven alighted on the rail. As if forming from out of the night itself, he appeared out of nowhere, and Harry blinked at him for several seconds. He couldn't tell if he was dreaming or not.

"Shouldn't you be in bed?" Bobby said, sounding genuinely aggrieved. "I went to your dorm room first, but you weren't there. I waited for an hour."

Harry's grin practically broke every muscle in his face it was so wide.

"You're alive! Thank the Goddess, I thought something had happened to you!" he cried, and jumped to his feet. He would have hugged Bobby as well, but was afraid he would have crushed him in his enthusiasm. The raven looked taken back by his earnestness, and then somewhat contrite.

"Oh. Ah... yes, sorry about that. I had to spend some time recovering after you left. Spent nearly two days sleeping it off in a chicken coop. Then getting here... what a mess. I didn't dare try any routes through the faerie realms and didn't know if Voldemort was looking for me... anyway, I'm here now."

"I'm glad you are safe, brother."

There was nothing else to be said for several moments. Harry gently stroked Bobby's feathers with the back of his knuckles, the closest thing to squeezing his shoulder as he could come. The raven looked a little lost.

"Why did you never tell me?" Harry asked at last. "You always talked of Carrigan as if he were..." Dead. Gone. Not me. He didn't know what to say exactly.

"I don't want you to get confused, Harry. I didn't want you to try to be Carrigan. You're not him. He had his life and it ended. You are... you are Harry, and that is more than most can handle."

"But you still wanted me to be," he said, thinking back over all the times he had spent in Bobby's company and always wondering why the raven had chosen him in the first place. "That's why you chose to help me in the Black Forest. That's why you remained my friend even though I am Voldemort's protégé"

Bobby didn't answer for a moment, merely stared up at him as if judging how much was safe to say.

"I admit, I was curious. Reincarnation is a funny thing. The soul remains the same, but everything else is different. Body, personality, beliefs... those are unique to each new life. Sometimes, however,

something of the soul shines through regardless of form. I wanted to see if I could recognize anything of Seamus in you."

"And did you? Is there something of him left behind that you still recognize?" Harry asked, unsure if he really wanted the answer. It was different than with Voldemort. At least with the Dark Lord, he knew even if he only liked Harry because he was Carrigan's reincarnation, it was because they shared some innate trait between their incarnations that drew them together and not because of an attempt to reforge a friendship with a man long dead. Bobby, he couldn't be so sure about.

"I didn't at first," Bobby said. "I liked you well enough, but it became obvious very quickly that your personalities were different. You were a lot more stubborn for one. He had more patience. But, you know, after a while I realized you had at least one trait in common."

"What trait is that?"

"You both seemed to like difficult relationships."

"You mean Voldemort?"

"No, well yes, but I mean difficult people in general. Your closest relationships seem to involve people whose lives are too complicated or personalities too off-putting for most people."

Harry wasn't sure if he was being complimented or chastised or most likely Bobby was just stating a fact. He had never really thought of himself as being drawn to difficult relationships, but looking at his life since he came to the wizarding world he could see where Bobby got that impression. All of his friends and family held a lot of personal baggage, but then again they had also been the most understanding of Harry's.

"What sorts of people was Carrigan friends with?" he asked, wondering at the comparison.

"All sorts. Miniature Dark Lords aside, he had several friends and students who weren't entirely human, and you should have seen some of his girlfriends. Then of course, there was me."

"You? But you were his brother."

"I was a lousy brother. A difficult brother."

"Oh." Harry wanted to ask what he meant, but it seemed too delicate a situation to broach. Instead, he said, "I suppose some things haven't changed between your incarnations either."

"Hey!"

Harry just smiled and Bobby gave an annoyed huff. They talked a little more about what happened to them since they last saw each other. Their congenial mood quickly withered as they told of their misadventures. In its place was guilt. Harry had not even thought to look for Bobby, and if he had then he would have been able to end his captivity. Bobby knew he was at least partly responsible for the terrible injuries Harry had suffered in the Berlin Underground and the consequences he was still living with to that day. There were still other factors that further complicated their feelings about what had happened, not least of which was Voldemort.

"Did he hurt you?" Harry asked once they had fallen into silence. He didn't know what he would do if the Dark Lord had hurt Bobby. The raven would not have deserved it and if his mentor had tormented him out of callousness, he didn't know if he would be able to forgive him for it. He didn't know if he could easily hate him either.

He suddenly had new sympathy for Luna.

"Not really," Bobby said, his voice taking on a haughty tone. "He would have regretted it if he tried. I'm Bobbitimus IV, after all."

It was false bravado, but Harry appreciated it. Bobby didn't like Voldemort. In fact, he absolutely loathed the Dark Lord, but he didn't want Harry to feel bad that he didn't feel the same way. He must have

gleaned from Harry's story that the bond they shared was too complicated to turn to hate easily. Anger, sure, but not hate.

"So what will you do now?" Harry asked. "You're free again. You could go anywhere."

"Ah, that's quite tempting. Perhaps you would like to come with me."

Harry just smiled.

"I couldn't do that. I've got too much to do here."

There was no reply to this, and he felt suddenly uneasy.

"Bobby?"

"You know, when I started to believe I wasn't going to escape, I started having regrets. The ones that bothered me the most were the ones where I didn't tell you something. Something I should have told you years ago."

"What is it?"

Despite his regrets, the raven still seemed to struggle with what he needed to tell him. He fidgeted on the rail, looking around nervously, maybe even looking for eavesdroppers. Harry waited for him, even looked around himself. There was nothing but the soft whistling of the wind.

"Have you..." Bobby began, hesitantly, "ever heard of the Trelawny Prophecy?"

Harry just blinked at him.

No freaking way.

"You ass!" he snapped, before he could stop himself. The raven jumped back in surprise, fluttered gracelessly for a moment in the air before landing back on the rail. His surprise didn't lessen any more

than Harry's anger as he continued. "You knew about that? You knew about that this entire time? Why the hell didn't you say something?"

"Um... I'll take that as a 'yes'."

"When were you going to tell me?"

"Well, that's actually a good question. I mean, I did intend to tell you. It just never seemed the right time."

"When, exactly, would have been a good time, Bobby? After Voldemort found out? Oh Merlin, does he know already?"

"About the prophecy? Yes. That it's you? No. He believes he's already completed the prophecy. It's probably the only reason he hasn't figured it out yet. When did you figure-"

"Gulandri told me. And isn't that a wonderful source to receive momentarily bad news from? I didn't believe him at first...but afterward I wasn't so sure. Wait, what do you mean Voldemort thinks he fulfilled the prophecy already?"

"He killed someone he thought fit the prophecy. He killed several someones more than likely."

"Who?"

"I don't know. A baby. Babies. Depending on whether you believe the rumors or not."

Harry fell silent. He wasn't sure how he felt about that. He couldn't picture it in his mind. He had seen the Dark Lord kill. He had seen dead children after the Goddess Colony massacre. But in his mind he could not combine those two images, although he knew intellectually that his mentor was capable of infanticide. It seemed somehow abstract and not entirely real.

Did he even want to know whether it was real or not? He knew Voldemort was a monster, but he was more than that.

How much of his darkness could he stand to see before he could see nothing else?

"You okay?" Bobby asked. "You're not going to implode are you?"

Harry snorted, and rubbed a hand through his hair.

"I don't know what to do."

"That offer to travel is still open. You look old enough now; no one would question you traveling on your own if you had the right papers. Which I can get."

Harry was tempted. Right now, it seemed the sanest thing he could possibly do was pack his things and disappear. It would be different from before. He wouldn't feel so alone. He would have his brother, and they would take care of each other.

Except even with the new family member he had found, he could not bring himself to abandon the family he had made for himself. Hermione needed him now. His godfathers needed him. Snape... could probably get along without him, but he'd grow terribly bored after a while. Voldemort... had minions and sycophants and loyalists, but Harry was his only real friend. Even if he was the greatest threat to him as well.

"I'll have to put a rain check on that. Voldemort doesn't know, so I'm safe. I've been fine for as long as he hasn't known, and I don't see any reason for that to change. We'll just go on as normal, until I can figure something out."

"There are so many things wrong with what you just said I can't even begin to point them out."

"You have a better idea?"

"We could go kill the bastard before he's recovered his full strength."

Harry glared at him. Bobby gave an avian shrug.

"You asked."

Voldemort took a deep breath of acrid green smoke and held it, let it burn his throat and tongue on its passage into his lungs. The miasma filled the tiny vesicles there, then seeped through the thin membrane into his blood. Within moments he could feel the vaporized potion take effect, not unlike taking a hit of strong whiskey.

He exhaled.

There was a moment of slight disorientation, where everything suddenly took on a dreamlike quality. Had someone spoken?

"No," Morgan said. His disorientation increased for a moment- Morgan never said 'no' to him- but then it subsided so that his mind was once again clear even if his body did not feel like it was entirely his own. Of course, no one had spoken. At least, no one mortal. The only ones there, nestled amongst the hedges of his maze garden on his private estate, were himself and Morgan, who knew better than to distract him. His minions of various rank and occupation were sequestered in the main house of the Sianach Lodge and would not risk his wrath by coming down to spy. His mood had not been forgiving as of late.

The section of the maze they occupied was not the same as where he performed his solstice rites or his usual sacrifices. Those places had taken a certain air of divine mysticism he did not wish to sully with the more mundane, if sometimes more practical, modern dark arts. The magic he was performing was not traditional and required no god's blessing to perform, so he thought it best to move it to a small space in the furthest corner of the garden maze where he was less likely to offend some god or goddess with his apparent willful independence.

The magic he was performing was not one he was entirely familiar with, but had come at Severus' suggestion. It was a strange combination of alchemy and potions, biology and engineering. He was currently intoxicating himself with a potion entirely of the potion master's invention, the vapors steaming up as he boiled its contents in a cauldron over a simple wood fire. It was not something that could

be done indoors, even if the heavens threatened to break open and ruin his efforts with a sudden downpour at any moment. Today, his luck seemed to have turned in his favor, and he was able to complete this phase of the spell without incident.

He climbed unsteadily to his feet. Even after a week, it was difficult to balance himself without his other arm, especially since his body seemed to have convinced itself that the limb was still there. It had been itching terribly for days.

Morgan kept his distance at the entrance of the hedge, not offering to assist, although he tightened his grip on his wand in case he had to cast a spell to save his prideful master from falling into the fire. He had only been allowed to follow the Dark Lord into the maze because two hands were needed to prepare everything. He also seemed to be the only one available who could keep their hands steady enough to do the task while under their lord's venomous glare.

"Get the arlaghit," Voldemort commanded, his voice surprisingly strong even as he swayed heavily passing by him. Morgan obediently moved out of his way, and picked up the set of tongs that had been left beside the hedge. Holding his breath, he stepped towards the still boiling cauldron and used the tongs to reach inside and pull out a strange contraption. The arlaghit consisted of two silver bands, one slightly larger than the other, held together by a series of hooks and clasps that could be released or secured in order to adjust the position of each band. Morgan did not examine it too closely. It was still dripping and steaming the putrid potion that was already stinging his eyes, and he had no desire to hold it any nearer to his face.

"Do not tarry, my friend," the Dark Lord said impatiently, weaving his way towards the exit. His minion followed closely, having no idea how to get out of the maze himself. "I have a press conference in an hour, and I still must make myself presentable after we're done."

Morgan hardly needed to be reminded. He had been the one to stress the importance to Lord Voldemort of reassuring not only his countrymen but also the world that he was in perfect health. The general confusion of his early return from Germany had quickly given way to panic when their fearless leader had failed to show himself for

nearly a week despite the quickly spreading rumors that he had been fatally injured. The Polish Ministry was seething over the Dark Lord's sudden abandonment of their troops in Germany, and any good will he had intended to foster there had been ruined. He would have to provide them with some explanation soon, but it would not be until any perceived weakness could be corrected. The Germans had sensed blood in the water, and there were already reports coming in of potential attacks planned for both Germany and Britain. His Culties had lost ground for the first time in months and been pushed outside the region of Hesse, while fighting had lapsed into a stalemate along the border between Thuringia and Saxony-Anhalt, halting his advance both north and west. He was being continuously peppered with inquiries over his health and how soon he would be able to enter the fight and resolve this disturbing trend.

After a week of anxiety, discomfort, and impatience, his preparations to reappear were almost complete, but it would be months before he could repair all the damage his sudden absence had caused. Not to mention the large number of staff he was going to have to replace. He was half tempted to call on Harry just to harangue him some more on how all of this was entirely his fault. Severus had convinced him that less was more in this case, and his protégé was perfectly capable of blaming himself without the Dark Lord making him feel resentful by accusing him directly. It didn't help that in the long sleepless hours he paced his study, his mind had begun to circle around the unasked and unanswered questions of what precisely had happened in Hausteheim had begun to wheedle their way into his psyche. He caught a general understanding from Lucius, but at the time of his questioning he had been more interested in venting his anger than anything and knew now he had overlooked far more than was wise.

Lucius had been cursed, and that would have to be dealt with shortly although whether by himself or by Harry, he had not decided. Favoring Harry and putting the general into his protégé's debt was not how he had wished their game to play out, but Lucius bore the greater burden of responsibility in this situation. Harry knew he was defying his lord in going to Ireland, but he had at least gone through the appropriate channels and taken precautions rather than simply run off on his own like he usually did. It was Lucius who had

approved Harry's visit and provided inadequate protection, and to add insult to injury he had somehow freed Bobby in the process. And Bobby might have said some things to Harry that Voldemort wasn't entirely sure how he was going to explain.

He would need to make plans to recapture the raven. His interest in Harry was concerning.

Thoughts of the feathered fiend eventually had him turning his thoughts towards Tom, who was never far from his thoughts but rarely at the forefront either. The frail sliver of himself had not shown itself again, and after the death of McGunny at the Battle of Kent, he had lost all leads. He knew better than to leave him to his own devices indefinitely, but he believed he had some time yet. Whatever his horcrux's intentions, and they were no doubt centered around his demise, he would reveal himself long before he had gathered the necessary resources and supporters to usurp his position and then Voldemort would destroy him for good. He would have to keep his eyes open for malcontent in the coming days. As he recalled, his death eaters had been gathered at a time when the ministry had proven itself to be vulnerable. Now might be the rare and brief period of uncertainty in the Dark Lord's reign that Tom had been waiting for.

He had no intention of letting present circumstances continue long enough for such a rebellion to take root.

As they approached the house, the arlaghit had cooled sufficiently for Morgan to hide it within the folds of his robes. No one knew what they had been doing out in the maze, and as far as Voldemort and his chief of security were concerned, no one ever would. Victoria was waiting for them in the hall as they entered through the back gate. She was once again playing the role of a squib maid in order to discreetly monitor the conversations and behaviors of the higher ranking Court and Cultie officials attending to their Lord's demands, but she was no more aware of the situation than they. Which was the only reason he let it go when she offered to take his cloak.

His cloak hadn't been removed in front of anyone since his return to England, and it was the only reason no one knew he had lost his arm. Certainly many of his subjects, particularly those who had seen him in

person, must have suspected, but no one knew save those who had been there to see him lose it (and he was keeping them closely watched) and Morgan. After today, even those who had suspected would assume they had been wrong.

"Have the prisoners been prepared?" he asked, making his way towards the kitchen. The estate was not built with a dungeon, but the wine cellar was easy enough to convert for their purposes. Two Culties were dutifully standing guard at the door. One saluted.

"Sir, yes, sir!"

"You needn't shout."

"Er... sorry, sir."

"Open the door."

"Yes, sir."

The soldier scrambled for his keys, feeding the Dark Lord's impatience after several failed attempts at locating the right one. Eventually, his fellow guard sensed the developing disaster and unlocked the door with a simple 'alohamora'.

"Thank you. Now crucio your incompetent friend. I don't have time to do it myself."

Morgan shut the door behind them, cutting off the agonized scream before it reached its full pitch, and then locked the door. The wine cellar was little more than an earthen room dug out of the foundation, and no effort had been made to pave the floor or install lighting. The cavern-like room was illuminated by a single lantern that had been left at the bottom of the stairs. From its light alone, Voldemort could make out the three prisoners that had been selected for his purposes.

Two of them were German rebels captured and brought to Bristol for interrogation and the third was a convicted criminal of the British Court system. No one whose disappearance would be questioned. They were each in their mid twenties, too new to their internment to

have been badly damaged, and dressed in gray prison garb except for the sleeves which had been removed. He paid little attention to their faces and instead focused on their bare arms, which were being held out straight in front of them by petrificus totalus as they stood at attention along the far wall.

He peered closely at the left arm of each prisoner, judging their lengths and shapes and even their coloring as best he could in the dim light. Morgan had chosen well. They were all satisfactory.

He removed his cloak, revealing his truncated arm. There was no reaction from the prisoners. Even if they were not under the paralysis spell, he'd had them blinded. He only had need of one of them today and did not wish to leave the others with something to gossip to their jailors about after he left. He continued undressing, unfastening his cloak and then carefully unbuttoning his shirt with his one good hand, a feat he had practiced to perfection over the last week. Morgan took the articles of clothing as they came off and carefully folded them over a closed water barrel left in the corner. Once he was bare from the waist up, he addressed his underling.

"I am ready."

Morgan removed the arlaghit from his robes. He unhooked various latches, twisted a tiny dial, and thumbed a button or two until the arlaghit split apart into two separate bands. The slightly smaller band he secured to the very edge of Voldemort's severed limb. There was more thumbing of buttons and twisting of dials as he adjusted the band to conform to the irregular shape of the nub of flesh. The Dark Lord let out a hiss of discomfort as the arlaghit activated, Latin words suddenly illuminated in burning red against the smooth stretches of silver. The second band still in Morgan's hand activated as well, growing uncomfortably hot in his hand. He moved to the first prisoner, one of the Germans, and slid the second band over his left arm.

The prisoner didn't move, that was impossible, but his entire body stiffened. Morgan slid the band slowly up his arm, until it neared the top where it suddenly shrank of its own accord, conforming to the limb. The silver turned red hot, and he was forced to let go completely. A second later the arm fell to the ground.

"Careful with that!" the Dark Lord hissed. "Now bring it here."

His servant collected the arm, pausing momentarily to look at the prisoner. There was no blood. The severed limb had been cauterized, but the blackened meat and bone left behind was a grisly sight just the same. The prisoner himself wasn't just stiff now, but shaking all over. He must have felt everything.

Morgan did not linger. Torture was something he was familiar with and this was not even close to the worst he had witnessed or participated in. This, at least, served a valuable purpose. He returned to Voldemort and aligned the two arlaghit bands, and again magic took over the rest, hooks and clasps coming together of their own accord until they were sealed together and became an illusion of wholeness.

The Dark Lord let out another hiss, then took a deep breath. He turned his attention to the fingertips of his new hand, and after a moment of concentration the limp fingers curled into a fist. He exhaled and the fingers unclenched and wiggled experimentally.

"Excellent. It will have to be adjusted every week or so, and replaced in another month, but it will prove sufficient for now," he said, and moved to redress. Now that this particular chore was over, he needed to shower and change for the interview and catch up on a million other things he had let lapse during his self-imposed exile. His scratched his new limb and felt his mood immediately lighten when the itch that had been plaguing him for days immediately subsided.

"Dispose of him," Voldemort continued, gesturing offhandedly to the maimed prisoner. When Morgan did not immediately obey, the Dark Lord paused long enough to look directly at him. He looked decidedly unhappy. "You have something to say?"

He was feeling pleased enough at the moment to allow it. He probably wouldn't even punish the man for it.

"You seem to be taking this all very lightly," his security chief said, blandly. "You never used to be this reckless."

"Reckless?"

"Chasing after Lord Potter into a faerie realm without telling anyone..."

"Circumstances did not allow for it."

"Circumstances rarely do where he is involved. You've changed a great deal since you met him."

Voldemort supposed this was true, but he was not one for past examination and couldn't specify exactly how this was true. Aside from the soul thing... and he still wasn't entirely sure of the long term effects of that.

"Do you think that is a bad thing?" he asked, because he had no more desire to change who he was now than he did before having met the boy. It had seemed like such a natural progression, although there was nothing natural about the reparation of his soul or the myriad of trials he had experienced with and for Harry.

"It does not seem to have turned out very well for you," Morgan pointed out.

Voldemort actually laughed at this, because it was amazing to him how insightful this particular minion could be and yet how blind.

"Oh, Morgan. I have sacrificed far more than this," he said, wiggling the fingers of his new hand, "... to get where I am today. Things I thought I would never get back. Some things I never will. I have not regretted those sacrifices, and I will not regret this one."

His Chief of Security said nothing to this, but then there was nothing more to say or ask, and it would have wasted both of their time to try. What was done was done, and while Morgan may not entirely understand the 'why' of it, he did understand that it had not been done without a reason or reasoning. There was still a method behind his master's madness that Britain relied upon to guide them from the

stagnant and cloistered little world they had been to the glorious empire they were becoming.

Voldemort did not linger to reassure him. Just as his minion had faith in his master's purpose, so too did the Dark Lord have faith in his servant's obedience. Fully dressed except for his cloak now draped over his new arm, he climbed the stairs to face the world, leaving Morgan in the cellar to erase his sins from existence.

"Huh. I wonder how he did it," Harry asked, skimming through the newspaper article. The Astronomy tower was as cold and dark as ever, but a few levitating orbs of fire scattered throughout the interior added a touch of comfort and just enough light to read by. Included in the article was a rather large picture of Lord Voldemort standing in what looked like a parlor, one hand resting on the mantle of a fire place and his previously missing hand wrapped around a glass of water. The contents of the article were not particularly interesting to him as not a thing of it was true, except perhaps the reassurance that the Dark Lord was fit and would be returning to the German front within the week. Lucius Malfoy was still conspicuously absent, but Harry would turn his thoughts to that particular thorn later.

"At someone else's expense, no doubt," Bobby said, blandly.

"Maybe, maybe not. He said it would grow back on its own eventually. Maybe he found a way to accelerate it," he suggested. The raven didn't attempt to argue the point. Voldemort's recovery seemed to release a certain level of tension from Harry, and as tightly as wound as he was, Bobby knew it was a good thing. Even if it left a sour taste in his mouth.

"I suppose it's possible," he said, reluctantly. "Anyway, how are things going with your friend? Any success?"

Harry's other friends were something of a genuine curiosity to him. He had been observing them from behind windows and through Harry's conversations about them for the better part of two days. They were... innocent. Not exactly naïve, but still fundamentally uncorrupted. Perhaps it was simply their age, but their company seemed so incredibly wholesome in comparison to the Gryffindor's

other associates, Bobby felt inclined to encourage the friendship even if led to such a truly strange situation as the one with Hermione Granger. The fact that their little plan would doubtlessly piss off Lucius Malfoy was just icing on the cake.

Harry had not introduced him to them yet. Neither of them were sure how to approach the matter or even if they should. Telling them he was the reincarnated brother of Harry's preincarnation was out of the question and Bobby's fugitive status was a little awkward to explain. It would keep for the time being. There was no reason to rush into anything.

"Snape announced this morning the Weird Sisters are coming in two weeks, and Hermione's going to do an interview for the school paper with Smythe. That should give them plenty of time to talk and fill out paperwork. I have a friend familiar with legal circles who's going to try to get things pushed through, but we won't know for sure if it's approved until March at the earliest and that's pushing things quite a bit as it is. It's going to be tight, if the wedding is still on. I'll need to speak with Lucius here soon, and I'm not looking forward to it."

"You could always let him croak and speak with his widow instead," he suggested.

"That's rather passive aggressive of you."

"I prefer to think of it as 'fraternally protective'. I don't want you anywhere near the scoundrel."

"Maybe he'll be more reasonable when his brain isn't rotting inside of his skull."

"Probably not. He'll just be more subtle about it."

Harry sighed.

"He's still Draco's father. I can't just let him die. Besides, Britain needs him. He's good at what he does."

"I am relieved to hear you say so."

Harry leaped to his feet, spinning around and drawing his wand. Bobby disappeared into the rafters above. A familiar shadow detached itself from the Darkness, but the Gryffindor already knew who it was. His voice was unmistakable.

"Snape? What are you...? Uh... how long have you been standing there?"

The headmaster was the very picture of sinister intent. He looked tired, and yet somehow indestructible, dressed in pristine black and gray robes and an expression that could freeze water at a glance. Harry was getting the full brunt of that look now, and already he could feel his insides turning to ice. What had he heard? What would he do?

"Long enough to bring down your Silencing Spell and overhear your latest conspiracy," Snape said with an unreadable calm. "Follow me."

He turned and disappeared down the stairs, not even bothering to look back to see if Harry would follow. The Gryffindor looked up to rafters in search of Bobby. He still could not see him, but he heard him clearly enough.

"In case you've changed your mind about traveling, Egypt is lovely this time of year."

Book VI

Chapter 20: Battlefields of the Mind

They stood before each other as they always had: antagonists, compatriots, and unsolvable mysteries. Six years of shared domiciles and secrets and they still seemed no closer to understanding each other than they ever had, merely bound more tightly in an inescapable gravity of responsibility and necessity, locked in an orbit that neither increased nor decreased in distance. Harry, still too young, too inexperienced, too... Gryffindorish to play the game Snape had taught him, had gotten by on mostly ignoring the rules and bluffing his way through the rest. His guardian... he could not even guess his motivations at this point. Part obligation he supposed, part fear of the Dark Lord's wrath, and perhaps even a bit of ambition somewhere in there. Harry wouldn't kid himself into believing there was fondness... at least not at the moment. If he'd ever glimpsed it, now was not the time to put his faith in it.

Not with Snape sitting behind his ridiculously large desk, silent and vampiric, his black gaze staring at him with unwavering scrutiny. Harry consciously avoided the chair on the other side of the desk, opting instead for the long narrow window flanking it. When they spoke it would not be as headmaster and student, and although this terrified Harry, he had learned enough under the man's tutelage to understand that knowingly putting himself at a disadvantage was stupid and probably a little insulting to the other.

"What do you know of General Malfoy's curse?" Snape asked after several minutes of silence. Harry flinched but covered it up quickly with an air of unconcern.

"A bit. His condition has made it somewhat hard to miss."

There was another moment of silence, and Harry knew he had made a mistake. He tilted his head towards the man, careful to avoid meeting his eyes while still catching his expression. It hadn't changed in the slightest, but something had. He felt it in the air, something like magic, but more likely it was the lizard part of his brain warning him of impending danger.

"Do not lie to me."

Harry began to protest but stopped himself. He was a bad liar at the best of times, omission and diversion being his best forms of deceit, and against his guardian they would be entirely ineffective. So he withdrew and turned his gaze back towards the window and waited to see how far Snape would push.

"How long did you know about the curse?"

"I only learned he was cursed when he told me about it."

"You recognized it."

It was not a question. How much did Snape know? He hadn't said anything particularly incriminating to Bobby in the Tower, but there might have been enough there that any suggestions Malfoy might have made as to Harry's involvement in the curse could have been at least partially confirmed.

"I've read about it." True, even if it was after the fact.

"Have you cast it?"

And there it was. The accusation. He had been expecting it but felt a surge of anger just the same.

"No."

"Do not-"

"I SAID 'NO!'" he snarled.

It was Snape's turn to tense, his fingers curling around the ends of his chair and his eyes narrowing. He said nothing for a moment, and Harry wondered what he was thinking and if his fit of temper had made him seem more innocent or less.

"Do you know who did?"

He didn't answer. He couldn't. His throat had suddenly tightened to the point of suffocation. Snape was going to learn the truth. It was inevitable. Even if he said absolutely nothing, somehow the man would figure it out. May have already figured it out. What would happen now? He felt a sudden swell of fear for Ronald Weasley. He didn't even like the boy, but it felt like he had betrayed a friend somehow. Or maybe he had merely betrayed the family that had been so kind to him. Could Fred and George and Ginny ever forgive him? He had been the one to introduce Ron to the Old Magics in the first place, and he would be the one to expose his crime and all the dark consequences that would follow. His sense of dread deepened at the thought that his friends should suffer the scorn and legal retribution as the family of the one who had placed a personal vendetta above the well-being of the nation. Would Ginny be expelled? The twins lose their bar? What of Mrs. Weasley? It would break the poor woman's heart.

His distress must have shown, because Snape quickly jumped to a conclusion.

"Was it Hermione?"

And if the thought of Ronald Weasley getting caught horrified him, it was nothing compared to the thought of Hermione being blamed for it.

"Of course not! How could you even think that? That's... it's... She's Hermione!"

Snape rolled his eyes, and the gesture completely threw Harry for a moment.

"Don't be asinine. She's an intelligent, ambitious girl' and she's been backed into a corner. If you think something like this is beyond her ability, you're either a fool or willfully blind."

"She's not a murderer."

"And I'm not a pastry chef, but that doesn't mean I couldn't be. Potential and reality are two entirely different things, Potter. But never mind. Tell me who cursed General Malfoy."

"It wasn't Hermione."

Snape made a frustrated sound, and his neutral gaze was suddenly extremely annoyed.

"Yes, you established that already. I hope you don't expect to answer my question by listing off all of our mutual acquaintances it isn't?" he snapped, then added under his breath, "And Ira wonders why I don't talk to you anymore. You're impossible."

"You're not exactly Mr. Congeniality yourself, sir."

"Who cursed Lucius? It must be someone you know for you to be this willfully evasive."

Harry turned back to the window and said nothing. The farce he had been playing through was coming to an end, and nothing he did could stop it. What would Voldemort do? He had told the Dark Lord that he knew Lucius was cursed but didn't know by whom. When his mentor discovered he had lied to him what would he do? Snape rose from his chair and moved towards him, growing closer until he could see the man's reflection loom over his shoulder. His expression was inscrutable. Was he angry with Harry's continued defiance? Eager to discover the culprit? Pleased to finally have one over his troublesome ward?

"If you tell me who it is, I will tell no one else."

Harry spun around, his eyes widening. Surely, he hadn't heard that right? His thoughts scattered for a moment, only to freeze completely as he realized he was now looking the man directly in the eye, and he quickly turned away and prayed his thoughts were still his own.

"Wh-" He coughed to clear his suddenly dry throat. "What?"

"You heard what I said."

"Yeah... okay. I guess... 'why' is the better question? I mean, Malfoy's your friend, and... isn't this the sort of thing you... I don't know, get house points from the Dark Lord for?"

Snape snorted.

"Potter... Lucius and I have a complicated relationship. In my own way, I suppose you could say I am fond of the man. In a completely different and equally accurate way, I can tell you I would not be terribly aggrieved over his death. Neither is a factor in the offer I am making to you. Also, while it would indeed garner 'house points' with the Dark Lord, it would not gain nearly as many as I believe the information is worth given his current dissatisfaction with the aforementioned. Of greater worth to me is the re-establishment of something that for various reasons has been lost to us."

Harry knew what he was talking about. He had felt the other man's absence in his life more and more keenly as he was left to handle his own increasingly complicated affairs without the harsh, sardonic candor he had relied so heavily upon when he was younger. Snape knew so much more than he did about so many things, and while his view of the world was more cynical than Harry's, the Gryffindor missed being able to share a confidence and receive some insight or perspective he could not have come to on his own or through one of his friends.

And yet...

"You don't expect me to believe you would allow Malfoy's attempted murderer walk free just so we could be... friends?" he said, lacing his words with as much scorn as he could muster to bury the terrible eagerness he felt to accept the offer on blind faith alone. This was Snape after all. As much as he reluctantly admired the man, he was equally terrified of him.

He wasn't looking at his guardian directly, but in the reflection of the window pane he could see the man was smirking.

"I don't recall us ever being 'friends', Mr. Potter, but as with Lucius, you and I shared a rather special rapport. A confidence. There was a time when you would come to me whenever you were in need of guidance. I kept your secrets. I keep them still."

Harry shook his head.

"Those weren't secrets I gave you. Those were secrets we shared. Things you knew about already or figured out on your own. Mostly anyway. Besides, you only kept those because the Dark Lord wanted them kept or it suited you or you just didn't care. The same reasons behind everything you've done up to this point."

"Is that what you think?"

There wasn't hurt in man's voice or even surprise, but rather a sort of curious skepticism. It irritated Harry.

"I think the only reason you tolerate me or 'keep my secrets' is because of the Dark Lord. I think you'd betray me for exactly the same reason. Probably with considerably more enthusiasm."

"Hm."

Harry felt him move away, and while that should have left him feeling relieved, he simply felt cold. There was no adamant denials of his accusation, no evidence presented to the contrary, nothing but a slow retreat back to his desk where he sat himself once again.

"I can see why you would draw this conclusion. It is the foundation upon which our relationship was initially built. You are an obligation."

Just like the Dursleys, Harry thought bitterly. It was not the first time he had made the comparison.

"But then, the same can be said of my godchildren. Lucius gave me a responsibility to them, just as the Dark Lord gave me a responsibility to you. The obligations are very similar."

The young wizard frowned thoughtfully. What had Voldemort said about Snape's role as godfather? Something about defying Lucius for the role he had given his dour friend in the first place. Was his guardian saying he would defy the Dark Lord for Harry's sake? That seemed... unrealistic.

"It has unfortunately been more difficult to fulfill those obligations with you, given your unique circumstances and the ambiguity surrounding your 'best interests'. And the fact that you're an impossible little deviant half of the time."

Harry shrugged. That wasn't an unfair assessment.

"If I have made mistakes, it was not from lack trying and certainly not because of indifference. You have become too significant a part of my life for that to be the case. While it was not my intention, somewhere along the way I grew rather attached to you."

"Stop."

"You don't believe me?"

"I don't. I can't."

"Because it would be too dangerous to accept wouldn't it?" Snape said knowingly. "You can't afford to be wrong."

"... I'm not going to tell you who cursed Lucius. I'll fix him like I said I would, and I'll make sure it never happens again, but I won't say who it is. That's the best I can do."

Harry turned from the window and headed for the door. He needed to get out of there. Snape... gods and goddesses, what was the man trying to achieve? Every word he spoke could be a lie or a truth, and he was too terrified of the possibility of either. Their relationship through both good and bad had always held a veil of uncertainty to it, neither stating explicitly how much the other cared or hated the other. It had spared them from having to lie to each other and to themselves. Harry had been left to intuit exactly how things stood between them,

and as frustrating as that was he wasn't prepared to have it defined into explicit terms. Especially if it all turned out to be a lie.

He reached for the door handle but snatched back his hand as an electric shock zipped up his arm. The entire limb went numb. Alarms began screaming in his head. That was his wand hand! He spun around to face Snape, half-expecting him to already have his wand pointed at him, but he wasn't even looking at Harry. Instead, he was looking at where Harry had been standing and seemingly preoccupied.

"That was a rather curious turn of phrase you used," the dark wizard said after a moment, still not looking him.

"Let me out."

"You said I kept your secrets because of the Dark Lord, and that I would betray you because of him. That is an odd thing to say. Did you mean you thought the Dark Lord would ask me to betray you? That doesn't make much sense. Not under present circumstances, at least."

"I meant you would betray me if it were to the Dark Lord's benefit. Like telling him who cursed the leader of his armed forces," Harry snapped. "Just open the door."

"Mmm... I don't think that's what you meant. We were talking about secrets in general not about Lucius' curse specifically."

Harry attempted to wiggle his arm. It moved, but he could not feel it.

"Now you're just reading into it too much. Listen, I'm really tired. I'm sure you're really tired. Can't we just continue this tomorrow?"

"The Dark Lord's benefit... I wonder..."

Snape suddenly looked directly at him, and Harry's eyes darted around the room to look for a place to duck and cover.

"The Trelawney Prophecy."

Petrificus Totalus would not have had a stronger effect on Harry than those three words. He froze; limbs, lungs, and brain caught in a perfect paralysis. No, no, nononononono... wait... what? What did Snape know about it? His guardian had seen his reaction and was now massaging his temples like he did whenever Harry did something completely absurd.

"How long have you known it was you?"

Even if he had wanted to, he couldn't have answered. He needed air to form those words.

"It couldn't have been too terribly long. You never would have been able to... Potter, stop gawping like a fish and sit down before you keel over."

Somehow, he managed to do just that, half stumbling to the chair he had so carefully avoided across from the headmaster. His guardian did not look surprised. Concerned, perhaps, but not surprised. Snape couldn't have known, however. If he had known the truth, he would have told the Dark Lord... or the Dark Lord would have known already. And seeing as he was still alive, the Dark Lord definitely did not know.

"Potter, do you need a calming draught?"

Probably. He could feel his left hand trembling against his thigh, and he was starting to feel dizzy from lack of air. He was going to have a panic attack he thought, except this time it would kill him. Or maybe Snape would kill him. Maybe the calming draught was a poison.

"I'm not going to poison you," Snape snapped then muttered something under his breath. Harry couldn't be certain but it might have been 'I tried that already'. Snape stood and retrieved a vial from a cupboard, then looked back to Harry, frowned thoughtfully, and put it back and pulled out a decanter and two small glasses instead. He poured them both half a glass and set one in front of Harry.

"What is it?"

"Whiskey," he said and took a sip. Harry took the glass with his one good hand, and though it shook, he managed a sip without spilling any. The flavor was different than brandy and so was the burn as it slid down his throat. A little less refined, a bit earthier. He took a second sip and wasn't surprised it tasted a little better than the first.

"Better?" Snape asked. He ignored the question.

"How long have you known?"

"I believe I asked you that question first."

"Gulandri told me. I didn't believe him at first. Not until Bobby confirmed it."

"And you have reason to believe the creature because...?"

"He's my brother."

Snape looked at him blankly for a moment, then added a little more whiskey to his glass.

"I don't see the resemblance."

"He's the reincarnation of my previous incarnation's brother."

"Which makes things so much clearer."

"He used to be a man once. You saw his previous form walking with me that night in Ireland."

He could see Snape thinking, trying to recall the details. There probably hadn't been much to see. It had been dark, and his guardian hadn't moved in very close before he had stunned Bobby back into raven form.

"Interesting. Does the Dark Lord know?"

"No. It's complicated, but I'd rather he didn't."

Harry looked at him expectantly. Snape didn't say anything else, merely pondered this newest bit of curiousness. He quickly grew sick of waiting and broke the silence.

"So how long did you know about the prophecy?"

"The prophecy? I knew about that from the beginning. I was the one to witness it and the one who gave it to the Dark Lord in the first place. How long did I know it was referring to you? Almost a year now. Shortly before you were possessed by Greyback."

Now it was Harry's turn to think. Snape had only really known about his secret for a short time and yet plenty long enough to have reported him to the Dark Lord. Merlin, he had to have known when he had gone into the Berlin Underground and saved his life and even more recently when he headed for Hausteheim to rescue him. He had known and never told Harry of the danger he was in. Before he could stop himself, he looked up in search of Snape's eyes, hoping to find some sort of explanation there. The elder wizard met his gaze coolly, and as unreadable as only an occlumens can manage.

"I have always kept your secrets, Potter," he said by way of explanation. "Even from yourself."

"Why?"

That earned him an amused snort.

"Because you are a terrible liar. If I hadn't believed you were upset over the Dark Lord's dismemberment, I would have known something was wrong after coming back from Bristol."

Harry felt a swell of embarrassment. Why shouldn't he be upset that he's been told he's going to kill his mentor and ruler of wizarding Britain or else by murdered himself? It was horribly sad! Hermione would agree with him now that they weren't fighting and he had no intention of running off unannounced to kill the man or to avoid being killed or... when had he finished his glass? What had they been talking about?

"Why haven't you told Voldemort?" he asked once he had regained enough sense to think of something worth saying.

Snape poured him another glass. Not subtle of him in the least, but Harry accepted it anyway. He didn't think he could survive this conversation without it.

"Initially, it was out of self-preservation. You are familiar with the phrase 'don't shoot the messenger?'"

Harry nodded.

"The Dark Lord does not adhere to that particular philosophy. I had no intention of suffering the fallout of informing him that the boy he had taken under his wing and perhaps the only person he has demonstrated any genuine affection for would in fact grow up to attempt to usurp him. Men have died for far less. Men have faced worse than death for less."

"So you ignored it?"

Snape smirked, and it wasn't a pleasant expression.

"Not precisely. I did try to remedy the situation myself."

Harry gave him a confused look.

"I tried to kill you."

He stared at the man for a long moment, then took a long swig from his glass. He swallowed, squeezed his eyes shut as the burn brought tears to his eyes, and then managed to get out a raspy "when?"

"In the Berlin Underground. I had been looking for an opportunity to kill you without raising suspicions, and you presented the perfect opportunity. After the explosion, I was the one who found you. You were unconscious, nearly dead already. No one would have been the wiser had I slipped the poison down your throat then and there, and the Dark Lord's ire would have been directed at our enemies."

Merlin, he had survived not one but two attempts on his life that night, one of them he had been completely unaware of. A shiver ran up Harry's spine. Or was he starting to shake again? Feeling was slowly starting to return to his wand hand even as his thoughts grew more numb. He took another sip.

"So why didn't you? Kill me, I mean. You said you had the perfect opportunity."

"Yes. The perfect opportunity, but not the perfect will. I had the poison in my hand, your life in my hand, and I couldn't do it. I had spent so much time and energy on preserving your life, I couldn't bring myself to end it."

"... You were different after Germany. I thought you were angry with me then, but you kept getting more and more distant. Was that why?"

"One of many reasons, I suppose. You were becoming more distant yourself."

"Was I? I guess so. Hermione said something to that effect. So now what?"

"Firstly, you're going to tell me who cursed Lucius Malfoy."

"Why would-"

Snape leveled a glare at him.

"You owe it to me."

Harry grimaced. He emptied his glass and put it on the table. This time Snape didn't refill it.

"You promise not to tell anyone?"

"You have my word."

"Ronald Weasley."

The silence that followed was predictable. The sudden, gasping laughter that came after was not. The Gryffindor stared wide-eyed and slack-jawed as the headmaster burst out into peals of laughter. After a while, he felt his own amusement bubbling up from inside him as well, and pretty soon, they were both laughing long and hard over the absurdity of it.

They were so drunk.

Eventually, it died off, and after wiping tears from their eyes and regaining something of their composure they settled back down with just an occasional lip twitch and a hiccup or two on Harry's part.

"That," Snape began, "is strangely appropriate."

"Did you know Malfoy had Ron's father imprisoned? At least, he thinks he did. That's what his dad told him anyway, but the man was mad by then."

"Mad perhaps, but not wrong. Lucius despised Arthur. He tried to wipe out his entire family during the war, and when he failed at that he made him into an example after it."

"Why did he hate him?"

"He felt Arthur had betrayed the Pureblood credo. Which technically he had, but you know, after we won the war we all ended up betraying that credo anyway. The war was all about preserving the wizarding way of life, but no one really factored in how much of that struggle was a part of the very foundation of our society. After we became fully segregated from muggles and WYRA was founded, the defensive fanaticism with which Purebloods upheld the old traditions became redundant. Pureblood, half-blood, muggleborn... what was the difference when we were all brought up in the same traditions and life-styles? I'm a half-blood. I was raised as a muggle in my youth, just as you were. I should be peeling potatoes or making candles somewhere according to the Old Thought. Same for the Dark Lord as it were."

Harry blinked.

"Voldemort's not a Pureblood?"

Ah, that was right. Dumbledore had told him that, but like so much of what the old wizard had told he had shoved all to the back of his mind.

Snape blinked.

"That whiskey was stronger than I had anticipated. Hold that thought, Potter."

The headmaster picked up the decanter and put it back in his cabinet and pulled out a blue bottle. He brought it back and poured a small amount in each of their glasses. It glowed neon green in the lamplight. They both downed the Sobriety Draught in one hard shot. Snape grimaced so dramatically Harry would have laughed except he was bent over in a coughing fit. By far, it had a stronger kick than the whiskey.

"So, Ronald Weasley tried to killed Lucius Malfoy," Snape said once the potion had taken hold and he was once again sober.

"Ugh. Yes. Can you blame him?"

"I blame him completely, but I do understand him as well. What I don't understand is why you went to such efforts to protect him. He's never been a friend to you. In fact, I believed you had something of a rivalry going on."

Harry shrugged.

"It wasn't so much about him. I mean, we've gotten along better recently, but really it was about his family. Ginny and Fred and George are some of my best friends, and their family has been good to me. I didn't want them to be caught up in his mistake. It's not their fault he's an idiot."

Snape acknowledged this with a tilt of his head.

"You won't tell, will you?"

"I said I wouldn't."

"So what will you do?"

"Firstly, I am going to schedule some time for you to complete Lucius' cure. You did say you had one?"

"Yes. I was using it as a bargaining chip. Lucius was going to call off Hermione's betrothal for it. I don't know what's going to happen now that he thinks I'm the one who cursed him."

Snape looked intrigued. It was smart move on Harry's part, even if it seemed to have backfired on him. Perhaps Snape could figure a way to work this to similar ends. He hadn't had any time recently to resolve Hermione's problem, and time was running out.

"What are you going to do about Ron?"

"Mr. Weasley? At the moment, nothing. But do not think I will let him off the hook without compensation. His need for petty revenge put our entire nation at risk during a time of war."

"Don't be too hard on him?" Harry asked. "He's been suffering for it already. You've seen how sick he's been?"

Snape couldn't say he had seen it, but he had overheard Pomfrey's concerns over the boy often enough at the dinner table or in staff meetings. He nodded anyway. Harry explained how the curse had backfired on Ron, and how that was the only reason Harry had been looking for a cure even if he hadn't known the intended victim was Lucius until recently. The headmaster considered.

"I'll take that into account while designing an appropriate punishment. Does anyone else know about this?"

"Bobby, but he won't tell anyone."

"And where is he, precisely?"

"I don't know."

"Potter-"

"I really don't know. I told him not to follow me here, but he probably hasn't left the castle."

"Does anyone else know about him? Hermione?"

"No, I... I thought about introducing them. Not as my brother, mind. I don't think anyone would know how to handle that. Not without a little help." He nodded towards the cabinet where the whiskey was safely tucked away. "Anyway, leave him alone. He's harmless."

Snape gave him a skeptical look but didn't press it further. He would keep track of the raven. If he was anything like his 'brother' it was a reasonable precaution. There were other, more pressing concerns at the moment, however.

"Now that it is settled, we'll need to deal with the prophecy."

"I'm not going to kill Voldemort."

"... That shortens the discussion considerably, then. I don't suppose you're going to commit suicide by any chance?"

"..."

"I thought not. Then for the time being, it's all a matter of self-preservation. I understand this is not a subject you are particularly strong in, but I'm sure you understand the basics. No running with sharp objects, no sampling potions out of unmarked vials, and my personal favorite... do not let the Dark Lord know anything he might have reason to kill you over."

"That is sounding vaguely familiar," Harry said, going along with some amusement now that the soul-crushing terror had receded. He was feeling strangely giddy, and wondered if it was an aftereffect of the Sobriety Draught.

"To that end, we're going to have to erase your memory."

"... Um... huh? How does... why?"

"For the same reason I didn't tell you when I found out you were the child of prophecy... and had resolved not to kill you myself, of course."

He really should be more freaked out by that than he was, except there were so many more immediate and terrifying threats that the ones that had passed or never been realized were hardly worth the effort.

"Of course. And what was that reason again?"

"You're a horrible liar. And a worse occlumens. You'd best just get rid of the memory before you blurt it out or some legilimens finds it without you noticing."

"...Er... sir, no offense, but... it's kind of important. I don't think I should just be forgetting about that sort of thing. I mean, how can I stop it if I don't know about it?"

"How could you stop it if you did? Potter, you idiot, when has anyone ever defeated a prophecy by trying to defeat it? Anyone who ever tried to defeat a prophecy ended up fulfilling it in a roundabout way."

"Well, then what should I do? I won't kill Voldemort and I don't want to die. There has to be a way."

"I am certain there is a way, but you running off on some crusade isn't it. For now, you can only stall for time. Ensuring that no one else learns of this is the first step. To do that, we will need to remove the memory and keep it somewhere safe."

Harry wasn't so sure, but he did believe Snape was looking out for him, and he owed him a bit of faith. If he weren't, the Gryffindor would have been dead long before now. His guardian had taken a risk in shielding him from the Dark Lord, a risk Harry knew he only partly understood. He felt strangely nostalgic at being able to rely on him

again, even as another part of him feared involving him in his own precarious affairs. He looked to Snape, displaying more trust than was wise, but meeting his eyes directly nonetheless.

"What did you have in mind?"

Ron Weasley hated Harry Potter. He had hated the other boy the moment they had met, but that had been the irrational prejudice against muggleborns he had since abandoned in favor of the more reasonable dislike of everyone in general. Now, his reasons for hating him had crystallized into three simple facts. Firstly, Potter seem to have completely forgotten about Ron or the fact that he was SAVING HIS LIFE since he had come back from Bristol and turned into an angsty, self-centered berk. Secondly, Potter was an angsty, self-centered berk. And thirdly, Hermione seemed to be attracted to angsty, self-centered berks. (He had thought she was smart enough to avoid the lot after Krum, but girls were strange when it came to love).

Certainly there were plenty of other reasons to hate Potter, but those seemed to be the primary ones and really he had only ever needed one.

However many reasons he had to hate the Gryffindork, the simple fact remained there was nothing he could do about it. Not now anyway. He needed him to fix the curse and once that was done, he would owe him a Life Debt. Not something he could pay off by shoving him off the Astronomy Tower and running away with the girl.

Not that he would have shoved Potter off the Astronomy Tower anyway. He might hate Potter, but he wasn't a complete psycho. Lucius Malfoy had been a very special case, and that hadn't worked out liked he had hoped. It wasn't even like he hated Potter all that much. When he wasn't being an angsty, self-centered berk he was okay. A little weird... alright, really weird, but okay.

"Mr. Weasley," Slughorn's obsequious voice called, drawing his attention from his internal musings and back to the potions lab. "I would recommend stirring your potion before it starts to burn. The resulting aroma is less than pleasant. There's a good lad! Ah, Mr.

Malfoy, that's just the right hue! If anyone wants to reference it to know when their potion is ready, just look there. Do you have a question, Ms. Whitrow?"

Ron sighed as Slughorn moved off again and idly stirred his potion. Potions class was by far the most tedious class he had, and despite being a Slytherin, its professor was his least favorite. He glanced behind him, expecting to see Potter and Hermione leaning over their cauldrons, heads bent together, and talking too quietly for anyone else to hear.

Hermione was leaning over her cauldron and talking softly so that only Potter could hear, but to Ron's surprise the boy wasn't looking at his potion at all. He was staring back at Ron with an expression that suggested he was pissed off at him. This was strange for two reasons. One because Potter had been veritable zombie for the last week and hadn't so much as glanced in his direction, and the other because Ron couldn't think of anything he had done to deserve such a look. At least not recently. Maybe he knew about him peeking in on his little cuddle session with Hermione in the Astronomy Tower.

That was hardly his fault. Ron had almost completed gathering the necessary supplies to break the curse and had gone up to finalize plans with Harry. It's not like he had wanted to see them being absolute ninnies. He had been half tempted to call up Draco to find them.

Maybe he would have thrown Potter off the tower.

He turned away from the Gryffindor and let that particular thought amuse him for the remainder of the class period. Now that he was aware of it, he could feel the other boy's glare on the back of his neck. It made him feel warm and fuzzy inside.

Once class was over, he wasn't at all surprised when Potter stopped him in the hall.

"Weasley, I need to speak with you."

Ron was tempted to smirk. All this time he had been trying to get Potter's attention and now he needed to speak with him? He didn't of course. He couldn't afford to piss the other boy off, even if it seemed he had done so already.

"Okay," he said, blandly.

"Not here."

Potter turned and walked towards the stairs, and Ron rolled his eyes behind his back but followed dutifully after him. They headed toward the greenhouses, but rather than shuffle into Greenhouse number seven for Herbology, they turned into what had been unofficially dubbed 'Inana's Greenhouse' where Potter's pet cobra made its home, and no one else would dare bother them. Now Ron's curiosity was peaked. What was this all about?

The greenhouse was hot and humid after being in the cold potions lab and immediately uncomfortable. Even more so was Potter's toxic green eyes leveled at him with the definitive air of accusation.

"What?" Ron asked innocently... or some Slytherin equivalent.

"You absolute bastard."

"Eh?"

"You complete fucking moron!"

"What I'd do?"

"Lucius bloody Malfoy."

"Oh... heh."

Okay, this was definitely bad. He hadn't ever intended Harry to know, and really the other hadn't seemed to want to know. So how had he...?

"What the fuck were you thinking? Do you... You would have killed Draco's father?"

The Slytherin let out a disgusted snort and rolled his eyes.

"Of course I would have! I'd happily spit on the grave of my father's murderer. I would have thought you'd be happy to have let me! Come on, Potter, don't tell me you haven't wished the man would just... disappear. Everyone would be better off with him dead. Hermione not least among them."

Suddenly, Ron found himself grabbed by his cloak and pulled right off the floor. He could only stare wide-eyed as Potter held him inches above the ground, his face twisted in rage. It shouldn't have been possible, not without some sort of spell or potion. Potter was not only shorter than him but several pounds lighter (even after Ron has lost all that weight from being so sick). He shouldn't have had the strength to be able to do what he was doing.

"You fool!" he shouted at him, giving him a harsh shake. "It could have cost us the war!"

Ron was suddenly flying backwards and landing heavily in a pile of clay pots. They shattered underneath him, and he felt something wet bloom against his back followed by a wave of pain. Merlin, was Potter trying to kill him? He was already weak from the curse. He couldn't battle Potter full out and hope to win. In fact, he didn't know if he could get himself back up again.

"He's the leader of our armed forces, Weasley!" Potter was shouting at him. "And you were driving him insane! Do have any idea how much damage you could have done? How much damage you actually did?"

He blinked up at him. Oh. He hadn't actually thought about that. Or rather, he had thought Malfoy would simply have died sooner and been quickly replaced. It was government after all. Everyone was replaceable.

"How did you find out?" Ron asked instead, hoping to distract him from the fact that he had no good excuse to offer. It seemed to work because Potter started to pace and in doing so was ignoring his potential victim's prone form.

"General Malfoy knows he's dying, and he knows he's going insane. He came to me for a cure."

"Wait... what? Why would he...why wouldn't he go to Voldemort?"

"He thought Voldemort was the one who cursed him."

Ron couldn't help himself. He burst out laughing. And then had to stop and roll as Potter hurled a trowel at him.

"I said he thought it was Voldemort," he snarled. "Now he thinks I did it."

That sobered Ron up considerably. If Lucius suspected Potter, than he was getting a little too close to home, and there was no reason to think the Gryffindor wouldn't throw Ron to Lucius with the same vigor he had thrown him to the pots. He cleared his throat anxiously.

"So... um... what are you going to do?"

Potter spared him a glare.

"I'm going to fix your fuck up like I said I would, if only to protect Ginny and your brothers. Snape is working out the rest."

"Snape? You told Snape?"

"He thought I cursed Malfoy too. The general I can handle, but Snape? You're on your own."

Ron just gaped at him.

"He's going to report me!"

"He's not going to report you."

"Of course he is! Why wouldn't he?"

"Because he'd rather punish you himself," Potter said, a hint of amusement flitting across his features before he turned his hardened gaze back to him. Ron had always known Potter was crazy, but he hadn't realized how crazy until now. He was starting to fear for his life. The mad boy smirked down at him. "Don't look so alarmed. I doubt he'll cause any permanent damage. After all, as stupid and selfish as what you did was, you did it for family. We both understand the importance of something like that."

"You're crazy."

"Like a fox."

"What?"

"... I guess that's not a wizarding saying, is it? Anyway, like I said, I'm going to help you, but you're going to have to do something first."

Ron regarded him warily. He was still lying on the ground and was frankly afraid to get up and spook the mad wizard in any way. Unfortunately, he could also hear a slithering sound moving towards him from the other end of the greenhouse, and if it was what he thought it was, he didn't want to be eye-level with it when it reached him.

"Okay... uh... what do you want?"

"You're going to give me a wizarding oath never to attempt to harm Lucius Malfoy... or any of his family again."

"What? But..."

"Don't say anything that will make me think you too stupid to be allowed to live."

"... can we add a self-defense clause to that?"

Potter considered it for a moment.

"I guess," he said reluctantly.

"Okay. I guess I don't have much of a choice."

"I guess not. How are you coming with the supplies?"

"I have everything now. I've been trying to tell you that for days, but you've been all... 'woe is me' or whatever. What was that all about?"

"None of your business," he snapped, then turned thoughtful and started looking around the greenhouse. Ron had gotten up and moved to the other side to avoid exactly what the other boy seemed to be looking for. Inana slithered out from some withered foliage and onto Potter's open hand, up his arm, and settled herself around his neck while he curled her body loosely around his arm. The Slytherin shuddered slightly at the eerie sight. Snakes might be his house's totem, but it would be a lie to say he had ever been entirely comfortable with them.

"Meet me here Friday morning at nine o'clock. We'll finish it then."

"I have class. You have class for that matter."

"Snape will grant us permission. He wants this taken care of as quickly as possible."

"Then why not do it tomorrow?"

Harry gave him an irritated look.

"Did you even read the counter spell?"

"Er..."

"Moron."

"How did it go?" Snape asked without looking up from the letter he was composing as Harry slipped into his office. He noted to himself

that there seemed a little more pep to his ward's stride than there had been previously.

"Have I ever mentioned Ron is a moron?"

"I think you may have implied it from time to time."

"We should be able to complete the counter curse by Friday night. I'll need Ron with me for that, if you wouldn't mind writing us a note."

"Will you need me to supervise in case something goes wrong?"

"If something goes wrong, you're not going to want to be there when it happens. You might check in every once in a while."

Snape nodded, still not looking up.

"Have you seen your 'brother'?"

"I've glimpsed him here and there. I think he's having fun exploring the castle."

"And he hasn't set off any of the castle's defenses?"

He found that somewhat worrisome. Harry didn't.

"He specializes in magics that let him get in and out of places. It must have taken some very powerful or very special wards for Lord Voldemort to have held him as long as he did. You should have seen him in Hausteheim. He was brilliant. Well, brilliant and lucky."

Snape said nothing to this but filed it away for future consideration. If Bobby was going to continue to keep Harry's company, his skills and weaknesses needed to be understood and planned for. He set down his quill and set his letter aside to dry. He looked to Harry. Harry looked at his hands, his previous openness slipping away.

"Have you prepared yourself?" he asked.

The Gryffindor nodded without much enthusiasm. He didn't want to do this, even if he understood why it had to be done. He hated to make himself vulnerable, even to those he trusted. And his trust in Snape was not absolute. The potions master stood and went to one of his cabinets and pulled out a pensieve and an earthen jar. Harry was starting to wonder what the man kept in there.

"You may find yourself somewhat disoriented for the rest of the day," Snape said as he prepared the pensieve. "I can arrange for you to sleep it off here if you like."

"No thanks," he said. After they were done, he would probably want nothing but a lot of distance between them. Assuming Snape wasn't busy ringing his neck.

"It's ready."

Harry had never placed a memory in a pensieve before, and after Snape showed him how, he found he didn't much care for it. Removing the memories of Gulandri's revelation of the cursed prophecy and Bobby's confirmation was extremely disorienting, and he failed twice before he could keep himself calm enough to simply let the memories go. Even afterward, he knew what memories he had lost, but could not recall the details of the memories themselves, and his mind kept running around in circles looking for memories he knew should be there.

"Ugh," he groaned. "This isn't going to work. It's like having a song stuck in my head and not knowing the words. It's going to drive me crazy."

"Hmm," Snape replied, noncommittally. He was busy observing the memories playing out in the pensieve. There was a great deal more in that memory than Harry had warned him of. When he was done, he pulled back to glower at his ward.

"Carrigan?" he said. Harry looked at him, thought for a moment (it took longer to figure it out without his most relevant memory to reference), then ducked his head.

"Did you know him?"

"He called me a 'gloomy little brat' once."

Harry almost smiled but caught himself.

"Must have been a different Carrigan."

"No doubt." Snape wasn't quite sure what to make of this newest revelation, except that it added a curious new dimension to the Dark Lord and Harry's relationship. "Do you have any of his memories?"

"No. Nothing. I'm told I don't resemble his character very much either, except for my ability to get along with Voldemort."

"And who made this astute observation?"

"Bobby. Or rather Bobbitimus Carrigan IV, Seamus Carrigan's brother."

Snape began rubbing his temple. "Playwrights could not write a plot this absurd. Very well, I don't suppose it really matters."

"You don't think I would be in danger if Voldemort found out?"

"You may be in less danger than anything. Gulandri was a liar or perhaps simply ignorant. The Dark Lord never would have harmed Carrigan... you...Hhhmm..."

Harry gave him a stern look.

"Carrigan. We're not the same person even if we share a soul."

"Hhmm..."

"If it's any consolation, I don't think you're a 'gloomy little brat'."

Snape's glare told him it wasn't any consolation. The elder wizard pointed him to a stool, where Harry reluctantly sat himself and took a deep breath. This was the part he had been dreading, for the

pensieve was the simplest and least invasive part of a plan Snape had concocted to safeguard 'The Secret'. The initial revelation was tucked in an inconspicuously sealed vial identical to any of the anti-anxiety draughts he carried for his panic attacks, but there were any number of memories and thoughts that had occurred afterward that would reveal the contents of 'the Secret'. They could not all be removed without taking his memory of the entire week as well, and that simply wasn't going to work.

To solve the problem, Snape was going to have to put his considerable legilimency skills to use and perform what he called a 'Trigger-Tuck'. Legilimency could not be used to alter or erase memories, that required different sorts of spell crafts, but a skilled legilimens could hide memories, 'tucking' them away so that they could not be readily accessed. Harry would know he had forgotten something, but he wouldn't know precisely what. In order to remember clearly, he would have to be exposed to the 'trigger' memory. In this case, the memory so carefully stored in the potion's vial on Snape's desk.

Snape would have to rummage around in his mind for memories of the past week or so since Hausteheim. Harry would have to let him.

He would have no control over what Snape learned while he was inside his head. There were innumerable secrets and intimacies he had never intended to share except with those parties already involved, embarrassments he preferred forgotten, hopes he had abandoned, and vulnerabilities he had carefully hidden. Snape would have access, if not time or inclination, to examine any of them and inevitably he would see some Harry preferred he did not during his search.

But he didn't have much of a choice. His guardian had been right about Harry's life being at risk. How many times had he brushed death immediately after the return from Ireland, his mind vulnerable at the briefest meeting of eyes with either Voldemort or even more dangerously, Lucius Malfoy, who was already suspicious and looking for answers? Eventually, Harry's unease over the Prophecy would become apparent to one or both of them. Snape had proven already that he froze or folded when confronted with his own deceptions. It

would take Voldemort considerably less effort to render his protégé a tongue-tied, blathering fool or guilt-ridden, silent penitent, and Malfoy; savage, persistent, cunning; could not be resisted indefinitely.

Then there were the unknown dangers. Legilimens were rare, but they tended to accumulate in the upper crust of business and politics, where cutthroat competition had those of talent seeking any means possible to find advantage. Harry had met plenty of witches and wizards of this character, although he could not readily identify the legilimens and occlumens amongst them. Fortunately, he had already cultivated the practice of avoiding prolonged, direct eye contact (this was both to prevent someone from reading his mind and to keep from making others uncomfortable as he was well aware his eyes were unnerving to most) and he was rarely in unfamiliar company for extended periods of time. As he grew older and became increasingly active in both politics and society, he had been spending more and more time with those potentially dangerous individuals. Once he left the sanctuary of Hogwarts, the danger would increase exponentially.

Voldemort had already been toying with the idea of occlumency lessons, but given the sensitive nature of his mind's contents, not least amongst it his peculiar intimacies with the Dark Lord himself, an appropriate teacher (Snape too busy and perhaps too short tempered to do it himself) had been hard to come by. How long before the Dark Lord took it upon himself to teach Harry the necessary skill and in doing so uncovered the truth?

"One day, I suspect you will have obtained the necessary skills in occlumency and lying to maintain your secret yourself," Snape had said, after Harry had finally been convinced but still sullen after the agreement. "Until then, you must continue to rely on me."

And rely he would, even if he wasn't in the least bit happy about it.

Harry sat stiffly on the stool as Snape approached him. Despite the acquiescence to his logic, he could see the young man struggling to meet his eyes. Habit and anxiety were working against them, and Snape had to remain patient as the green orbs turned first to the ceiling then to the window and eventually to his chin. There was no rush. A mountain of paperwork was threatening to collapse off his

desk, his wife was due to walk through the door at any moment, and he was already ten minutes late for a meeting with Seitler, but none of that really mattered.

The world was chaos and calamity and stress, but his mind was still and calm and untouchable. If it did not matter within his own mind, it did not matter at all. This was the essential truth all legilimens and occlumens had to master.

Eventually, Harry's eyes finally settled on his own, and Snape slipped in without so much as blinking. Most legilimens never found reason to move beyond the surface thoughts and memories of their victims- the effort, skill, and risk of going deeper beyond them. Snape was not most legilimens, and like with potions he had sought to become a master of the art and the rewards of doing so had proven themselves time and time again.

Harry's mind was different from most others he had explored, as he had known it would have to be, but even he was little thrown by what he found. Snape had begun practicing legilimency while still at Hogwarts, hoping to learn a skill that would provide forewarning to the Marauders incessant pranking and eventually yield the ultimate humiliation and revenge against them. He had not gotten far enough along for it to be used in such a way until after they had graduated, but by the time he was twenty-six he had delved deeply into the minds of no less than fifty-five witches and wizards, often multiple times when given the opportunity. Each mind had been a little different, but most followed a certain schema whenever he delved beyond the shallow surface thoughts to the more interesting, long-term memories. Doors were the most common theme, as with Hermione, libraries were a close second, and followed distantly by galleries. Occasionally, something more unusual came along.

One of his early landladies had her memories stored as threads interwoven in a magnificent loom. His university guidance counselor's had been flowers and trees in a vast greenhouse.

Harry's memories were light bulbs.

Lamp bulbs, blacklight bulbs, Christmas light bulbs, flood lights, fluorescent lights, nightlights, electric lanterns, spherical bulbs, oblong bulbs, skinny bulbs, fat bulbs, bulbs that were blinding in their brightness and others flickering on and off erratically, bulbs of every color, bulbs that changed color, and some bulbs that could not have existed except through magic or in the imagination of a particularly strange child. The floor upon which he stood was mirrored, so that the radiant splendor shone from below just as it did from above. Snape took a moment to admire it all, for the lights stretched out in an endless sea of darkness to form constellations and galaxies of glittering reds and greens and teal blues that no man had seen the likes of while staring up at the stars from Earth. All of them hung from long black cords attached to a ceiling that despite the abundance of light, remained too high for Snape to make out himself. The cords themselves were unremarkable, except that while some seemed to hang straight down and unfettered, others were tangled together.

The significance of this, Snape didn't figure out until later.

The first memory bulb he examined was an innocuous white bulb any wizard or muggle might find hanging in their attic or basement. The bulb was warm, but no memory presented itself at first. He examined it but found no switch or string to activate it. After a moment, he unscrewed it.

The bulb dimmed for a moment but then lit again, this time revealing not a galaxy of light, but a small, cramped space. It would have been too small to accommodate a man of Snape's size, let alone a roommate, but the memory bent itself to allow him to observe the memory play itself out. Harry was there, younger than Snape has ever seen him, screaming bloody murder in German and kicking at the door viciously with his bare foot. Tears were running down his round little face, and despite how furiously as he was screaming it was clear to him that the child was more afraid than anything. What was this place, he wondered? Had Harry's large cousin perhaps locked him in a crawl space or cupboard as a prank?

Snape continued to watch for a while, strangely fascinated despite himself. It seemed Harry had had a penchant for trouble even before

he had learned he was a wizard. He was curious to see if he might somehow find a way to sneak his way out of this one.

He didn't have to wait long before the door was suddenly thrown open to reveal Vernon Dursley's red face. Snape sighed. It seemed the adventure was over. His uncle had come to call off the prank and let Harry out.

Except that he didn't.

"Listen, you little ingrate," Vernon growled, pointing a pudgy finger at him. "If you don't stop that racket this instant, you're going to be sorry. Do you understand me? I've got an early morning tomorrow and I am sick of your caterwauling. Go to sleep!"*

Harry said nothing, merely glowered back as tears continued to fall. The door was slammed shut, a latch clicked into place, and Snape listened as heavy footsteps trod away down the hall and then overhead. He felt a swell of disgust for the muggle. What sort of punishment was this? Forcing a child to sleep in a cupboard like a boggart?

Snape continued to watch. Little Harry burst out into sobs, not the brattish temper-throwing crocodile tears he had familiarized himself with throughout his time as a professor, but true heartbroken tears of grief and misery and despair. Snape wondered how long it had been since his parents' death. It couldn't have been more than year. His disgust for Vernon solidified into hatred.

Yet something of his ward's notorious resilience surfaced, and soon he was screaming and kicking at the door even louder than before. When Vernon appeared a second time, it was with a belt. Snape would have killed the man if he were able.

Harry cried more after this but only briefly, and Vernon had not even made it up the stairs before the child was at it again, screaming and beating the walls with his little fists as well as his feet now. On and on and on...

When Vernon came a third time, Snape thought irrationally that he meant to kill Harry. Indeed, he looked very much like he wanted to, his face nearly purple and a vein pulsing on his forehead. Instead, he merely shouted, "Fine! You can sleep on the couch!" then trudged off, leaving the door open this time.

Harry did not immediately move. He stared wide-eyed and shaking at the open hatch, as if its existence was incomprehensible. Perhaps he too had thought Vernon Dursley would kill him this time. Certainly, he couldn't have thought he would win. Finally, the child, still sniffing and rubbing his wet eyes, gathered up his blanket and pillow and crawled out. Snape attempted to follow but found only an infinite darkness beyond the little space.

The memory was over.

After some time wasted fumbling back inside the cupboard looking for a means of returning to the entry point, he screwed the light bulb back into the empty socket which hung from the low ceiling. The bulb dimmed and then re-lit.

Snape was back at the bulb galaxy.

The entire memory had probably lasted thirty minutes. It didn't matter. Time moved differently in the mind, particularly within memories.

He continued peeking into memories after this, but forced himself not to linger in any as long as he had the first. Normally, Snape would not have found this difficult, as memory searches were usually rather tedious in his experience, composed mostly of things mundane or meaningful only to the person involved. Harry's were not unlike that, as many things he came across were insignificant.

A quidditch match. An argument with that Cypher girl. A Durmstrang teacher briskly shearing his wild raven hair into scalp-hugging buzz cut. Hermione giving him his pocket watch. The full moon rising over the lake.

There were other memories, however, that involved himself or in some way were related to him and revealed things about Harry or his

seemingly irrational behavior Snape had not understood at the time. Even more things that didn't involve him in any way and yet he felt drawn to watch.

Biting Voldemort on the hand in the midst of being smothered. A conversation between them over what to plant in their garden before they left for Hogwarts. Black lying on the ground, Harry holding his guts inside his body with his bare hands and Greyback and Voldemort hovering over them both. Snape, completely unaware of being observed, kissing the back of Ira's neck before slipping on a necklace. Lily reciting the capitols of Europe over the dinner table, a radio playing in the background. Vesper's lifeless body slipping from Harry's fingers and falling... falling... falling...

Snape looked in on far more memories than he should have, but it took longer for him to determine the logic behind Harry's memory schema than any other he had wandered through before. Most people had a sort of order to their memories, part chronology and part subject matter, but Harry's seemed to fall randomly across time and space. It wasn't until Snape started paying attention to the cords, rather than the bulbs, that some sense of order began to form.

The bulbs that hung from unfettered cords were generally unimportant; events or impressions that for one reason or another, his brain had recorded without much in the way of context. Merely random facts or impressions waiting to be applied to more complicated thoughts or decisions. The tangled cords, however, contained related memories, some of them even overlapping, but all related to each other.

In one tangle he followed Harry's most recent trip to France, from the tedious train ride, to the request of Queen Ophelia, and to his brazen, childish game with the Dark Lord through the palace gardens. In another tangle, he watched as Harry met Luna, was courted by Luna, held her ravaged lupine form in his arms, grieved the death of their clan members, fell in love, was betrayed by thought if not deed, and then parted.

Most tangles led to other tangles, the triumphs and tragedies of Harry's life intertwining, sometimes to the point Snape could not tell

where one cord started and another ended. It was fascinating, and if he hadn't such an important purpose already in place he might have taken additional liberties and explored further into his oftentimes perplexing ward's mind. However, when he finally stumbled upon an already empty socket, he knew he had found the memory they had removed, and from here he would find all the other memories he would need to 'tuck'.

'Tucking' was not difficult but not something Snape did very often. There was nothing subtle about it, and the 'victim' could easily discover such tampering. He had only ever done it twice before and both times at the Dark Lord's behest. He examined each memory, more than fifty altogether, judged each one's relevance to the Prophecy, and 'made adjustments'. Harry's memories proved quite simple to handle. Being in the mind, he merely had to imagine some form of appropriate concealment and exert his will, however briefly, over the memory itself.

Whenever he came across a memory, or a segment of a memory relating to that taboo subject, he would concentrate deeply for a moment, and the bulb would dim until barely anything could be seen and sound faded away with the light. Thus, the memory was 'tucked'. 'Triggering' was even simpler, and merely involved tying the cords of the tucked memories directly to the cord with the empty socket. If or when the trigger memory was reinserted, all of the dimmed memories would be illuminated once again.

Once he was done, he did another thorough examination of each memory and several surrounding memories, just to be certain. Exhausted but satisfied, he released his hold on Harry's mind and slipped back into his own.

Green eyes greeted him with some consternation.

"I forgot something," Harry said, frowning. "Am I supposed to know I forgot something?"

Snape blinked and pulled away, rubbing his forehead. His head ached from the undivided concentration he had been forced to exert for what had seemed like hours, although in reality it could only have

been a few minutes. He moved to his desk and settled himself back into his chair.

"Yes," Snape said, at last. "I wanted to make you safe, not ignorant. Now, even if you don't know why you had to remove the memory, you will know it was important and you'll eventually want it back."

Harry nodded but still didn't seem satisfied.

"Merlin, this is going to bug me," he said.

Snape wasn't impressed or particularly interested. The boy suddenly turned shy, fidgeting with his robes and looking everywhere else in the room except at his guardian.

"So... um... am I in trouble?" he asked, after a moment.

Snape regarded him blandly.

"Should you be?"

"Er... well, that's a matter of opinion."

"Mmm... I don't suppose you thought to mention that you are now an animagus? An unregistered animagus?"

"Well... ah... Technically, I haven't figured out how to control the transformation yet, so I don't think that qualifies."

"And how about smuggling my goddaughter to France?"

"Hey! I'm not smuggling her to France!" he protested, then thought a moment. "Unless absolutely necessary."

"Only if your attempt to blackmail Lucius backfires?"

"Yeah, pretty much."

"The likelihood of which has increased considerably since he now believes you are the one who cursed him in the first place," he said, a

touch of frustration seeping into his voice. "If you wanted to have her emancipated, you should have come to me first."

"You might have said no."

"Of course I would have said 'no'! And then I would have given you ten good reasons why not and then ten other better ideas."

Harry's expression turned mutinous.

"That's funny, since I didn't hear you coming up with anything in the last five months!"

Snape had no comeback to that.

"I... am not going to get into a pointless argument with you. I frankly don't have the time right now. I expect you, Hermione, and Draco this Saturday for afternoon tea."

"You mean for an afternoon inquisition?"

"It's a little late to try and be clever, Potter. Now get out of my office, I'm late for a meeting."

Despite the magnitude of what had just transpired, the Gryffindor still had the gall to act the wronged teenager and stalked out of the office in a huff, slamming the door behind him. Snape smirked to himself. It seemed Harry and he were now locked once again in eternal frustration with one another.

All was now right with the world.

A moment later, the door opened again and Harry popped his head in.

"Er... Thanks... you know, for whatever you did."

Snape sighed. So much for the world.

"Please go away."

The door shut, quietly this time.

Lucius reclined on the sofa in his study, reading a letter he had received that afternoon from Severus by the light of the burning fireplace. A small bundle of dried herbs that had been included in the envelope rested on the mantel. He had been forced to delay opening it until that evening, Narcissa being unusually bothersome that day. His recovery from the Dark Lord's ire had been unusually slow, and she was adamant that he follow the instructions of the medi-witches and wizards who insisted he refrain from anything stressful or strenuous. He had been banned from his office, official and unofficial visitors alike had been turned away, and she had him spied upon by his own house elves to ensure he did not attempt anything other sitting or lying somewhere gathering dust. The only reason he had been allowed Severus' letter was because he had threatened the elves with clothes if they didn't hand anything by him or Lord Voldemort over immediately, and even then he had been forced to wait or else risk his devoted and harping wife's wrath if she caught him with it.

The letter was brief and written in a polite, vague way that no one else would be able to accurately decipher.

Lucius,

I hope this letter finds you in recovery, though I know good health will elude you for some time yet. I bear news that may at least put you in better spirits. A solution has been found for the problem you apprised me of in October. Our young friend has proved instrumental in this and despite your concerns, was not a contributor to the problem itself. The matter shall be resolved by this Friday.

However, there is still the matter of compensation. Although our young friend is under my supervision, there are certain matters I lack the authority to command him. Charity being one such matter, and one I neither encourage nor expect that you would accept. The price he has demanded I believe is one he has already made known to you, and given the circumstances, not an unfair one.

I await your reply.

Sincerely,

S.S.

P.S. The sage will help assist in your recovery. Burn 6oz every three hours.

Lucius crumpled the letter in his fist and threw it in the fire. His hands were shaking, and for once it was not from shock or pain. He mentally cursed Severus and Potter to the devil and entertained several colorful methods of death upon them both. Eventually, however, this grew tiresome and only served to feed the headache he had been sporting all day.

"Ebbi!"

A house elf popped into existence before him, kowtowing before him in worshipful reverence.

"I am here, Master!" she squeaked.

He snatched the bundle of sage from the mantle and tossed it at her. It bounced off her head and landed on the floor, where she quickly gathered it back up.

"Find an incense burner and place six oz of that inside."

Regardless of his anger, he was not going to ignore Severus's remedies when presented. The house elf left and returned with the necessary items a moment later and placed the elaborately gilded dish beside his chair. A fragrant smoke rose up from the grated slots. True to Severus' word, Lucius felt his headache recede immediately and some small portion of his strength return to him. With this renewed vigor, some of his venom left him.

At least in regards to Severus. The man had been more than generous, he finally acknowledged to himself, even if the 'solution' he had so far presented had been difficult to swallow. The pain and degradation he had suffered at the Dark Lord's hands were not his

fault, and if not for his friend's assistance it could have been far worse than it was. The matter with Hermione's betrothal...well, that was hardly surprising. Severus had never liked the idea of Crouch marrying his goddaughter, but even if he had he likely would have upheld Potter's price being worth the cost. Lucius had done so already.

If he had anything to be angry with Severus over, it was his belief that Potter was not a 'contributor'. Was the man a fool? Or had he merely been blinded by the child's seeming naiveté? Had he not witnessed for himself the depths of his manipulations, the extent of his ambition? Would the boy not be satisfied until they were all either in his debt or under his spell?

If Potter was not somehow the cause of the curse, then he was, at the very least, using it to further his own ends. Saving Hermione could not be his only intention despite what he claimed. He had made a fool of Lucius, and he had lowered his position in the Dark Lord's eyes. The fact that Potter had walked away from this incident he had been a more than equal 'contributor' to without punishment from the Dark Lord or at least nothing nearing the severity of his own punishment was something that inspired no little amount of bitterness.

Potter could not be allowed to win. If left unchecked, he would continue to manipulate everyone around him, including the Dark Lord himself, and play all the country like a fiddle. He needed to be taught some humility. He needed to be controlled.

Unfortunately, he could not do so by continuing the betrothal to Crouch. That was a battle he had lost, and to continue it would put his life at risk and alienate Snape from any further alliances. In the future, he wanted the potions master firmly in his corner. While his friend might be fooled to some extent by Potter, he was not enamored of him in the same way the Dark Lord was and could be relied upon to see reason. If he could find some means of earning Severus's support while antagonizing his ward at the same time, a wedge could be driven between them that Lucius could take advantage of.

Then there was Crouch. This might serve him in making Crouch an enemy of Potter, who would now have reason to turn his neutral

regard into animosity for once again reviving the financial debt he owed to Lucius at the dissolution of the betrothal. Crouch was a devious bastard. If he decided to take revenge on Potter, the boy would not walk away unscathed.

He smiled to himself. Plans were already starting to form, and with his thoughts clearing with every breath of smoky air he was feeling increasingly confident of them. When the curse was lifted on Saturday and his mind and body freed from its corruption, he would decide which of the plans held the most merit.

For now, however, he could only let his dark imaginings wrap around him like a warm blanket and comfort his black heart.

Author's Notes:

1. Vernon Dursley does not know that Harry can understand English. He's like someone who rants at a dog for pissing on the rug or their computer for getting a glitch, too angry and irrational to accept that they can't understand what he's saying.

Book VI

Chapter 21: Raveling and Unraveling Plots

"What do you means he knows?" Draco yelled, causing Harry to bank his shot on the pool table and send his eight ball (which was 'in fact' magic for the purposes of wizarding pool) to leap over the side of the table. The ball smacked the ground with a harsh clatter and burst into eight exact replicas that proceeded to roll away in every direction. Natalie, Clyde, and Ginny, who had all been waiting their turn off to the side, hurried to collect them before they ran into something else and multiplied yet again. Hermione stood stock still, her jaw hanging open in stunned speechlessness.

Harry himself was attempting to hide his sheepish expression by pretending to look for balls under the table. He had put off telling his friends about Snape knowing their little scheme for the last two days, but they had pulled him down into the Hogsmeade Hall Rec room for some much needed down-time, and with Saturday's tea time appointment drawing nearer he couldn't justify keeping them in the dark any longer.

The Rec Room was luckily deserted. The residents had reduced to a quarter of their initial population; having either constructed shelters back in Hogsmeade or else left the area in search of work. With fewer and fewer villagers residing in the Hall, students had taken to visiting the various rooms that had served for entertainment and leisure. This was technically against current school policy, but since it presented a preferable alternative to mischief-making, no one had enforced the rule.

"Well," Harry began, his eyes glued to the floor, pretending to search for the escaped balls as well, "he sort of... found out about it a few days ago."

"How the hell did that happen?" Draco shouted. He was getting louder and more accusatory by the second.

"Hmmm..." Harry tried to think how to explain what had happened but couldn't decide what he should tell and what he should leave out. "Hmmm... OW! OW! HERMIONE, STOP THAT!"

He ducked behind the table and out of the line of fire of Hermione's Stinging Hex. She looked utterly furious.

"Hey, now," Clyde protested weakly. "Let him explain at least."

"What kind of explanation could he give for not telling us for days?"

"Er..."

Harry dared to show enough of his head in search of possible allies. Draco. Nope. Clyde. Already surrendered. Ginny. Not exactly a sympathetic look on her face. Natalie! Surely, Natalie would...

"That's kind of funny," the Slytherin girl said, looking entirely too amused for anyone's liking. "Didn't your mood improve considerably just a 'few days ago'?"

He really should have known better.

"Thank you!" Harry muttered, and ducked down again to avoid another hex. "Will you stop that, Hermione? It wasn't my fault! I was legilimized!"

"What?"

"Whoa! No way!" Clyde said.

"Oh, Harry, are you alright?" Ginny asked, suddenly all sympathy when he no longer needed it.

Natalie rolled her eyes. "Still doesn't explain you going from Mr. Mopey to Mr. Sunshine."

"What happened, Harry?" Hermione demanded. "And stop trying to think up some sort of story. I can tell when you're hiding something."

"Fine, fine, just stop throwing hexes at me. It really wasn't my fault."

"Perish the thought," Natalie laughed.

Despite Hermione's insistence that she knew when he was hiding something, he was able to conjure a story close enough to the truth that even she seemed satisfied. He told her that while in Bristol he had seen the Dark Lord come back from Germany and that his wounds had been so horrific and the things said to him during the Dark Lord's moments of agony had been so hurtful, he had been feeling extremely depressed. Snape had taken notice and tried to figure out what was wrong with him... with unexpected results. So now Snape knew about Hermione's emancipation plot, and while he didn't seem particularly enthused about it, he hadn't decided to put an end to it either. He did, however, want to speak with them that Saturday.

Draco groaned. Hermione refrained, but her expression looked decidedly pinched.

"This isn't necessarily a bad thing," Harry tried to assure them. "If we can convince him that this is a good plan, then maybe he'll go along with it. He might be Lucius' friend, but he takes his responsibility as your godfather very seriously and we already know he was against the betrothal. It would be good to have someone on our side who is able to think on the same level as the General."

There were mixed feelings about this. Clyde readily agreed, and Ginny was tentatively optimistic. Draco was noncommittal. Hermione was too busy trying to think of all the pros and cons to do more than pace back and forth anxiously. Natalie, unfortunately, decided she was his arch-nemesis that day.

"I don't like it," she said bluntly. "When it was just us, we could change our minds and our plans however we liked. Hermione got to decide for herself what was in her best interest, and we got to decide how far or what actions we would take to uphold her decision. But now? Now it's in an adult's hands. A very strong-willed, opinionated adult. What are we going to do if he decides he doesn't like our plan?"

Harry's heart sank. He hadn't thought of that. All he had been preoccupied with was the fact that he and Snape were once again on relatively good terms and that they had a strong alliance once again. He hadn't considered the consequences of the fickleness of Snape's indulgences or how easily and often they struggled with each other over matters of mutual importance. And now he had pulled his friends into their battle of wills, and there was no telling how it would all turn out in the end.

"... I'm sorry," he said. "I really didn't mean for him to find out, but I didn't think it was a bad thing for him to know since he seemed willing to go along with the plan. If Snape thinks it's a workable plan, then I have that much more confidence in it. I hadn't thought about... I mean... I'm sorry."

Hermione stopped pacing for a moment to spare him a kind and somewhat exasperated look.

"Harry, I don't blame you for Uncle Severus finding out. That was an accident. But why didn't you tell us that he knew sooner? I can't understand your logic there at all."

"Oh... that," he said. He felt suddenly embarrassed. "Well, you know how you thought I seemed so much happier the last couple of days?"

Ginny giggled. Harry had indeed been strangely cheerful recently. While he wasn't particularly moody by nature, his recent bout of depression notwithstanding, as a rule he wasn't prone towards general silliness either. And lately, he had been bordering on nonsensical. All the school work and activities he had been neglecting over the last week, he suddenly threw himself into with more zeal than sense. He had been turning in homework assignments to the wrong instructors, reading the wrong chapters, pairing up duelists in Dueling Club in rather terrifying combinations, and Charms and Transfiguration practicals had been... curious. For nearly a day, he hadn't even been able to locate his wand. The entire time he had treated it all like one big joke.

The school was now floating with rumors that Snape had him on anti-depressant potions, and Ginny had almost been willing to believe it herself except that he had steadily leveled off in his strange behavior until he was as close to normal as he had ever been.

He laughed a little himself, although with some embarrassment. He hadn't been entirely unaware to his own weirdness either.

"Okay, so... I told you that Snape was worried about my depression, right? He didn't exactly get distracted even after he found out about the emancipation. He still went ahead and... sort of 'tweaked' my brain a bit."

There was a stunned silence. Clyde dropped all the balls he had picked up, causing them explode yet again into several multiples of eight.

"Shit."

"Oh my God," Natalie gasped. "You let Snape tweak your brain? Ugh!"

"It was just a memory suppression!" he protested, "It's not like he rearranged things!"

"That you know of."

He rolled his eyes.

"Anyway, I was a little... weird afterward. I didn't want to have to explain what had happened when I wasn't thinking clearly."

"You are sure he didn't rearrange anything?" Natalie asked.

"Legilimency doesn't work that way. If he'd rearranged something, I would know. I can tell already he suppressed a memory, even if I don't know exactly what it was."

It had something to do with his time in Hausteheim, but he knew nothing more than that. He had driven himself half-crazy trying to

distract himself from the niggling feeling that he was forgetting something, hence his earlier erratic behavior. The only thing it had achieved was making him exhausted and delaying a conversation he should have had a lot sooner.

Natalie made a show of shuddering.

"It's just as well Snape knows," Harry said, partly just to annoy her and partly because there was something that had been bothering him for a while now. "I've gotten over my head with Lucius. He seems to think I've been trying to kill him."

"Ha!" Draco laughed. Harry frowned at him. Draco's eyes widened. "You're serious?"

Harry nodded.

"I can't go into details, but he has accused me of it."

"Harry..." Hermione started but bit her lip. She didn't know what to say. If her foster father truly believed her friend had tried to harm him, she feared for him. More so than Harry seemed to have the sense to fear for himself. Even Natalie couldn't seem to find any humor in it.

"Well, bother," Draco muttered. "And we're going to be getting Christmas Ball invitations soon. We're hosting this year. I guess you'll just have to fake the flu or something."

Harry shrugged.

"That won't be necessary."

Hermione scowled at his nonchalance.

"Harry, don't be reckless. The Manor is his home turf and if he suspects you of something, then the whole property could be set against you at his whim!"

"Listen, I'm not looking forward to it, but running away isn't going to convince him of my innocence. We'll face each other. We'll have it out.

We'll move on. It's not like he can seriously harm me during a party and with the Dark Lord around. I'd rather get it over with than wait for him to sneak up behind me when I'm not ready for him."

"Hey!" Draco objected, "My father does not sneak... Well, except for that one time, but-"

"Harry," Hermione interrupted, "Think about this logically. If Lucius thinks you are trying to kill him, really believes it, then you are not safe from him. Even if he can't kill you or seriously hurt you, he's not going to let you go until he's absolutely sure you can't hurt him anymore. Do you have any idea how easy it would be for him to separate you from the party in Malfoy Manor without anyone realizing you are gone? Or what he could do to you that wouldn't leave any obvious signs?"

"She's right," Draco said, his expression unusually solemn. "Facing him, facing any wizard, in his ancestral home is never a good idea."

Harry looked between them both, reading their genuine concern. He wasn't exactly expecting a walk in the park either, but he was starting to get the idea that walking into Malfoy Manor held as many sinister possibilities as walking into Hausteheim. Perhaps he should rethink his strategy.

"Okay," he relinquished. "I'll try to sort this out with him before the party. Any ideas?"

"Why does he think you're trying to kill him anyway?" Ginny asked.

"Because..." He stopped. He couldn't actually explain that to them. It was a huge convoluted mess, and in order for it to make sense he would have to reveal far more than Snape or the Dark Lord would be pleased with. Not to mention Ron's involvement. "Never mind. I'll ask Snape."

"And that wasn't insulting at all," Natalie muttered.

"It's complicated," he objected.

"So of course we wouldn't understand. Just keep digging that hole deeper, Harry."

"Give him a break. I still get a headache just thinking about the last time he tried to explain an entire situation," Clyde objected, referring to Harry's possession by a dead man and his subsequent rampage through Germany with his werewolf horde. "And then Snape gave me the Evil Eye for a month."

Draco wasn't as lenient regarding explanations, even though he too had been similarly baffled.

"Well, I still want to know why my father thinks you have it in for him. More importantly, I think I have a right to know, especially if you expect me to continue conspiring behind his back."

Harry frowned but acknowledged the point. He just wasn't certain how much he should say. Whatever he told Draco, the Slytherin was likely to be angry with him afterward. His father had been deathly sick and Harry hadn't been able to bring himself around to telling him about it. At least, not until he was certain he could save the troublesome man first. The weight of Draco's expectations would have been more than he could have handled during an already stressful time.

Now he could save Lucius and that spared him a lot of worry over his friend's reaction, but he didn't wish to reveal his intention to cure his father before he had done so. There was still a chance of failure, but a more serious risk was Draco's insistence to either participate or at least observe the breaking of the curse. If he did that, he would know about Ron, which would give rise to questions Harry wasn't prepared to answer. It would be better if he waited until after the curse was broken.

"Okay, but I think we should wait until afternoon tea with your godfather. I have a general idea of why he thinks I have it in for him, but Snape is the one who knows the facts behind his reasoning. I don't know how serious of a threat Lucius actually considers me or if it's just a suspicion."

There, that gave him a legitimate excuse to delay the discussion, although it would no doubt make Draco even angrier at him later. He was looking more than a little peeved already, but a look from Hermione made him drop the discussion for now. Like Harry, they too needed to gather their thoughts so that when the time for answers came they would know what questions to ask.

Thursday morning, Draco and Hermione were still annoyed with him, but that was to be expected. At least they weren't tossing hexes at him. The giddiness that had plagued him had dissipated completely even if the aggravating feeling of having forgotten something had not. He was learning to live with it. For the first time in a long time, things felt... normal. Manageable. Once he sorted things out with Lucius Malfoy, all his major problems would be settled and he could once again start looking ahead to the future rather than trying to keep the present from falling down around him.

And despite his friends' concern, he didn't think it would be difficult to work things out with Lucius. Once his curse was lifted, he would be thinking more clearly and realize Harry had no real reason to want him dead.

But that was something that he would start worrying about on Friday, after the curse was broken. For now, he was happy to just wallow in this feeling of... well... happiness. And today, the universe was accommodating him, irritated best friends aside.

"You are such a geek," Natalie accused as she followed him up to the Astronomy Tower from the Great Hall. No doubt there were would whispers around the school of a secret tryst by lunch.

"How am I a geek?" he asked. He couldn't help but smile even though he could practically feel her scowling at him.

"No one should be this happy about receiving mail from five-year-olds."

"For your information, Alyssa is ten and Morgana is eight. Besides, something from their fathers is probably included as well."

"And that's a reason to be happy, why?"

"It's like getting a letter from relatives. Ones I actually like, and who like me back."

She remained silent for a moment.

"Oh."

"Yeah."

"You're still a geek."

He didn't bother arguing with her. They reached the Astronomy Tower and ducked inside. There was a sentry stationed there like always but the Sentinel was happy enough to give them privacy so that she could warm up in the castle interior. The tower was still cold, but most of the glass had been replaced and blocked out the worst of the wind. He cast a warming charm on Natalie and then himself. She looked startled, then pleased at his consideration. Her tone was less antagonistic afterward.

"So what did they say? And why did it warrant a trip all the way up here? The Great Hall is warmer."

"I don't open my mail in there anymore. People are always trying to read over my shoulder or pestering me about what I received. It's really annoying." Not to mention risky.

"Ah... should I go then?" she asked neutrally. He smiled at her.

"You're not 'people', Natalie. You're much too clever to be lumped with the masses," he replied with a wicked smile. One she returned.

"I don't know what Snape did exactly, but perhaps it wasn't as bad as I had thought."

"Why do all your compliments have to be double-edged?"

"I don't know. Maybe I'm just ambiguous."

Harry snorted. Aside from Lord Voldemort, Natalie was the most self-certain person he knew. More than her soft, blond hair or her full Cupid's bow lips, it was what had made her so attractive to him in the first place. Whoever had gotten the idea that Slytherins were cowardly had never met a Slytherin like her. Before he had panicked and pushed her away, he had believed she was the one person who would never be afraid of him or the life he lived. She had never shied away from him, never judged him for his misadventures and eccentricities. Even now, the more intense and strange his life became the less inclined she seemed to be to walk away.

The realization that he was alone with her suddenly struck him. She was standing next to him, smiling at him, almost touching. He could kiss her, he realized, and she would let him. He suspected she wanted him to. She had never had a boyfriend after him and had never shown interest in anyone else. She had turned him down when he had attempted to make up the first time, but even he had to admit he hadn't been ready to open up to her the way she deserved.

Was he any more prepared now? He didn't know, but he wanted to. He wanted to if only so he could kiss her lips and stroke the soft skin of her arms, her hips, her...

He quickly turned his attention back to his letter. He prayed to Madris that she hadn't caught him ogling her, or if she had she would the decency not to call him on it. She wasn't usually the type to cut him any slack regardless of teenage hormones.

It took him a few moments of blankly staring at the letter in front of him before anything resembling comprehension seeped in, but when it did he was pleased amusement quickly replaced arousal. Alyssa and Morgana were excited to tell him about a school trip to a dragon sanctuary and the meeting of Hagrid, who had said they were friends. They were very taken with the half-giant and thought Harry had some of the coolest friends in the world. On the back of the letter was a rather impressive picture of Hagrid throwing dead chickens at a juvenile Chinese Red, while Alyssa and Morgana stood smiling nearby and the rest of their class ran away in terror. Harry could very

easily imagine just such a scene playing out where the dragon-loving man was concerned.

Natalie moved to look over his shoulder, her hand pressing lightly against him. She let out a laugh, and he felt himself flush at her proximity. She was making it very difficult to concentrate.

As he had suspected, included in the envelope was a letter from the girls' fathers. Or at least Kyle, the one who wasn't bound under attorney-client privilege. It was considerably longer than his daughters' letter, and went into several different subjects; the trials and benefits of country living, how the girls were doing in school, holiday plans, hopes that he was doing well and would come visit soon, and congratulations for somehow outwitting Lucius Malfoy, and a request for a detailed explanation of how he did so.

Harry smiled. So Malfoy had already called off the proposal, even before he had been cured. That was a good sign. Perhaps he was already reconsidering Harry's involvement in the curse, or else hadn't been as convinced as he had let on. He told Natalie the betrothal was already broken.

"So it would seem all this planning was for nothing," she said, sounding genuinely disappointed.

"I wouldn't say that. Just because this betrothal's broken, doesn't mean Hermione's going to want to stick around waiting for his next attempt to ruin her life. She might still want to be emancipated."

"But Snape probably won't go for it if there isn't an immediate threat."

"Well, then, Snape doesn't have to know we're going to go ahead with it anyway," he pointed out. That thought made him feel rather guilty, but he no more thought Snape had no more right to rule Hermione's life than Lucius did. Hermione's life was Hermione's life. She was smart and capable. Left to her own devices, she could turn herself into something truly great.

Thoughts of Hermione were quickly banished when Natalie suddenly leaned forward and kissed his cheek. His ears were instantly burning,

and the confused and embarrassed look he gave the girl was met with one of devious glee.

"I love it when you're conniving."

She hurried towards the door, while Harry remained rooted to the spot.

"Aren't you coming? We should tell Hermione immediately. You know how she feels about procrastination," she said, her tone touched with irony.

"Er... yeah, you go on ahead and tell her. I'm going to write a reply to the letter."

"You're going to be late for class."

"I have art next. The teacher doesn't care if I'm late as long as I get my assignments completed."

She rolled her eyes.

"Alright, suit yourself."

She closed the doors, and he let out the breath he had been holding. That girl was going to be the death of him one day.

"You know, if she didn't frighten me so much, I might actually like that girl."

Harry looked up into the support beams to see Bobby looking down at him. He felt another flush of embarrassment. Oh, Merlin, he had nearly started snogging with Natalie in front of his brother. Ugh.

"Hey," he greeted, trying nonchalant. "Where have you been?"

"Exploring, of course. It's in my nature, and this is one of the most magical places in all the mortal realms."

"And did you find anything interesting?"

"Absolutely, but perhaps nothing you don't know about yourself."

"Just try to avoid the Chamber of Secrets. There's a basilisk in there."

"Not to mention the killer tree on the lawn."

"The Whomping Willow? Pfft. We used to play around with it when the weather was good. Back when they let out on the grounds, that is."

"It's a wonder any of the students survive to graduation here."

"It's wonderful preparation for the real world. How are you feeling? You look... healthier than when I last saw you."

He fluffed his feathers and started to preen.

"Much better, thank you. You look to be in better spirits as well. Did something happen after I left you with the headmaster?" Although he had been keeping a close eye on his reincarnated brother, he could detect nothing amiss.

Harry told him what he could remember of his visit with Snape, how he had already known some great secret and how to protect him, Snape had hidden the secret so that Harry himself could not remember it, yet could still draw it up with the use of the pensieve. Bobby didn't know whether to be horrified or relieved. It seemed they had an ally in the formidable Severus Snape and for now he thought it best to go along with his plan. And yet, could the headmaster be entirely trusted? He was protecting Harry's secret, but for what reason? And how far would such loyalty extend?

He would have to keep a close watch on the man.

In the meantime, however, he saw no reason to ruin the young wizard's good humor with these foreboding thoughts. He had been so depressed before, and that sort of malaise could rob one of their quick thinking and motivation. Neither of which someone in Harry's

position could afford to. Letting the young wizard stumble around in ignorance wasn't ideal, but it was definitely safer.

For now.

Viktor scanned the headlines of the papers resting inside the newspaper stand, heedless of the cold rain seeping into the thick wool of his cloak as he read one cover after another. Despite boasting over twenty titles, three in different languages and half originating from somewhere other than Paris, a majority of them involved the same story: Voldemort's sudden public reappearance in Britain after his disappearance from Germany and voluntary isolation on his estate, appearing none the worse for wear. There were a hundred theories regarding his withdrawal from the fighting, the possible consequences of this ill-timed retreat, and what it meant for him to suddenly reappear. Some said he had been savagely injured, others that he had chickened out, and still others agreed with the official story that General Malfoy had fallen gravely ill and his duties required the Dark Lord's attention. There were stories circulating that the Dark Lord was either dead or still very ill and the man seen in public was an imposter using Polyjuice, that the Polish mercenaries had somehow offended him or were so incompetent that he had abandoned them, and even that he left to foil an attempted coup d'état by Malfoy himself. There were even rumors that Harry Potter had gone to visit Voldemort on his sick bed, the possibility of death had been so narrowly avoided.

Whatever the reason, it was clear to Viktor that the people of France were unhealthily obsessed with a leader of a nation not their own. Obsessed enough that, even as a vampire standing so boldly out in the open, customers still braved his dangerous scrutiny to purchase print after print of the rubbish from a rather harried-looking vendor. Not to mention the rain.

"Looking for some light reading?"

Viktor didn't even turn to acknowledge Goethe as he sidled up behind. The rain above him suddenly ceased, and he knew his insufferable companion carried an umbrella. He glanced up and wasn't surprised to find it was blue with yellow duckies on it. He really hated Goethe.

"It's ridiculous, isn't it?" the other vampire continued, ignoring his Master's silence. "These mortal curiosities? So tedious and petty. Almost morbid."

"Are vampire concerns so much better? We are entirely selfish," Viktor pointed out. Goethe chuckled.

"Absolutely. Vampires are only concerned with things that affect them. But doesn't such selfishness speak of a lack of pretentiousness?"

"I fail to see how one vice exchanged for another makes us in anyway superior."

"Even if you feel it does."

Viktor closed his eyes and took a breath he didn't need. Trust this savage clown to lay open his carefully hidden vulnerabilities with a twisted joke. He did feel superior to humans, wizarding and muggle alike. Ever since he had been turned, he had felt a slowly descending contempt for the mortals that surrounded him and the man that he had been. It all seemed so stupid to him now, his life wasted following the guidance of an old man at war with yet another old man over things that had always been and always would be.

But it was a delusion. An innate psychology all vampires were born into. They were convinced of their own superiority, because to kill an equal in their need for sustenance would inevitably lead to guilt, insanity, or sociopathy. It was a daily struggle to remind himself that he, even as he was now more than he had been, was also less. There were things in his life he would get to see and do and understand that his mortal self never would have, but a terrible price had been exacted for it.

A thousand sensual and spiritual pleasures and knowledge lost. Food, drink, and sunlight were only the most obvious, but not necessarily enough to lure most away from immortality. Magic was lost to him as well, a million doors now closed to him. All the various pleasures and cruelties of aging and the curious rituals that marked the passage of time; birthdays and Christmases and family vacations. A thousand

others things, small and sublime and now unreachable. Gone and gone, and he didn't even have enough of his soul left to miss them.

"You did not come to ramble philosophy at me, Goethe. What do you want?"

"I came to warn you. Several of your minions have been followed recently. I've observed it myself."

Viktor turned his attention back to the newspapers, searching for anything in the sea of words not having to do with the Dark Lord.

"The Master of the City is just making himself a nuisance. Tell them to be cautious but ignore them."

"The Master is making himself a nuisance, but it is not simply his people he has sent out to follow us."

Reluctantly, he drew his attention back to the other vampire.

"They were French Aurors," Goethe clarified once he knew he had the other's attention. "Perhaps even a Musketeer, I am not certain. It seems you've become a threat he can't ignore and he has sought out allies against you."

Viktor sighed. He had figured something like this would happen, but he hadn't anticipated the Master of the City involving mortals.

"Have they found our lair?"

"I don't believe so, but there's no way to be certain."

"We will move tonight then. Tomorrow, I'll see what I can do about the aurors."

"As you wish, Master."

Goethe turned to go, but when Viktor didn't follow he paused and looked back. His young Master was once again looking at the newspapers, or rather at the various witches and wizards purchasing

them and their eager, intent faces as they perused their contents. He touched his shoulder.

"It's no longer your responsibility to save them, Viktor."

The body under his hand tensed, and Goethe wondered if he wasn't about to be struck. It wouldn't be the first time his masters had taken their frustration out on him, but Viktor was exceptional in his self-control. It had become a game of his over the centuries to see how close to the edge he could push things with his masters before stepping back. But he never knew when he was approaching the line that was not to be crossed with Viktor until he had already stepped over it. It made things deliciously exciting.

His master did not strike him, however. He merely turned around and walked past his elder minion. After a moment of curious study, Goethe grinned and followed, abandoning his ridiculous umbrella in the gutter.

Friday morning, Harry and Ron were in the greenhouse working to tidy the space. They had skipped dinner the night before and breakfast that morning, the spell requiring a brief fast. Ron, who was not used to fasting, however briefly, had not taken to it well.

"God, I'm starving," he whined for the thirtieth time in the last hour.

Harry was unsympathetic. He was also hungry, but he had learned not to be overly distressed by the sensation.

"Less complaining, more working."

"Can't I have just a little-"

"No. You can drink sugar-water for energy and to keep hydrated, but that's it. The sooner we get done, the sooner we can eat."

"Do we really have to clean the entire greenhouse before we do this? And why are you planting those anyway? What does that have to do with curse-breaking?"

"Ron, just SHUT UP! You fucked up your spell, and I'm fixing it. So stop whining, asking questions, and generally pissing me off."

"How the hell am I supposed to do that? My existence pisses you off!"

"That's a question! Go over there and clean the cobwebs out of the corners."

The petulant Slytherin grumbled but did as he was told. Harry turned away to hide a grin. Truthfully, cleaning the greenhouse had absolutely nothing to do with the ritual. They could have done it in a landfill with equal effectiveness. However, Harry had seen the benefit of squeezing some extra work out of Ron. Since no one really used the greenhouse except Harry himself and occasionally Professor Sprout, it had been steadily falling into neglect. Inana was becoming temperamental about it, and Professor Sprout had insinuated responsibility in the upkeep of the enclosure she had rather generously offered him also belonged to him. So the greenhouse got cleaned, Harry only had to do half the work and he got to torment Ron a little in the process. Not exactly a Gryffindor way of handling things, but hardly unfair under the circumstances.

They worked quietly for a few more minutes. Inana slithered by, gracing him with a few words of approval and a 'you missed a spot', before moving imperiously towards her freshly dusted basket where she could oversee their progress with regal disinterest.

"So..." Ron started. Harry sighed audibly but let him continue. "How is Hermione's betrothal thing working out? You manage to get it called off yet?"

He paused midway through covering a young mulberry sprout with fresh potting soil and considered if he should answer. He decided he shouldn't discourage Ron's very few moments of unselfishness.

"We managed to get it called off, but I wouldn't call the situation settled. Actually, it was the curse that made it possible. I exchanged the cure for her release from the contract."

"Really?" Ron sounded rather pleased. "So it wasn't for nothing after all."

Harry's knee-jerk response was to yell at him again, but then realized in a twisted way the words displayed a genuine concern for Hermione. Perhaps the Slytherin deviant didn't value her happiness as much as his revenge, but he did value it enough for it to be considered a consolation prize. He still had no intention of telling Ron about Hermione's emancipation. He honestly didn't want the other boy involved, even if it were as an ally, but more importantly he didn't want to make the decision without Hermione's approval. He had decided that from here on out, it would be her decisions that determined who was involved and what was done about the emancipation and anything relating to her life thereafter.

"I guess not."

"So... do you think it's enough to make her forgive me?"

Harry snorted.

"And reveal that you're a would-be murderer? Hardly your most attractive feature, Weasley. Not to mention Draco would consider it a point of honor to throw you from a tower window."

"He'd try you mean, but fine, so that won't work. So what should I do?"

"I believe I've already suggested public self-humiliation."

"..."

"Or you could just grovel. Eventually she may become annoyed enough to forgive you just to make you stop."

"... I could probably do that."

Harry didn't comment, and continued to finish up his chore. Ron wasn't all bad, but he certainly wasn't up to the standard of what Hermione deserved. If his best friend wanted to forgive the idiot then

that was her business, but he hoped she had seen what everyone else had known all along and given up on him.

"Alright," he said, changing the subject, "I think that will do it. Let's move that table out of the way and I can start with the ward."

After that, not much more was said. Harry needed to concentrate on the ritual, and Ron wasn't about to sabotage his own self-interests. And really, it was interesting enough to watch that the need to ask questions or complain all but vanished. Ron had believed his attempt at the curse had been very impressive, and it was only the fatal error of letting the sacrificial cat escape that had ruined the spell. Now, watching Potter, he knew he had been completely and utterly inept from beginning to end. Where his ritual diagram had taken nearly an hour and still only been a close approximation to the illustration in the book, Harry knew magical and mundane techniques to draw extremely complicated images perfectly and in only a few minutes so that they appeared beautiful works of art. Where Ron had followed each step exactly, reading one instruction after another as if from a potion's book, Harry knew the spell by heart and did not stop to reference the book even once. In fact, he knew so much about the ritual, he was able to alter it somewhat to better suit his intention. He knew exactly what words to speak, in what cadence, and with perfect pronunciation.

The more Ron watched, the more like a fool he felt. How could have he thought himself equal to this? How had Harry learned it so quickly? Surely it wasn't something mastered in just a few short years, with irregular study and only one inconsistent teacher? Could what he was seeing, what impressed him so much, be the work of an apprentice, as far from the skill and the competence of a master as his own attempts had been from Harry's?

"Take off your shirt, Ron, and lay down in the circle, your head towards me and your arms pointing towards the blood root."

He did as he was told, but a sense of uneasiness overcame him. He had read the ritual a few times, and though he couldn't say he had memorized it, he knew this wasn't part of the process.

"Er... what are you doing?" he couldn't help but ask, even as he obeyed. The lines of chalk and charcoal that composed the ward were hot again his skin, and the air was thickening with fragrant smoke as the herbs smoldered in their earthen bowls. He felt himself start to sweat and shiver at the same time.

"You know the breaking of this ritual requires another sacrifice?" Harry explained, his face completely blank and unyielding. Ron immediately tried to sit up, but found he couldn't. He tried to scream, but Harry's hand covered his mouth, muffling his cries. "If you had performed the ritual properly, the curse would be anchored in the cat you intended to use. Once the curse had been fully executed, the cat would have died. To break the curse early, you merely would have had to kill the cat and the curse... it just would have gone with the cat. However, since the curse is now anchored in you, that creates something of a dilemma. Stop screaming, I'm not going to kill you. Idiot."

The familiar endearment silenced Ron.

"We'll just have to untether the curse from you. A little more complicated, and a lot more painful for you, I'm afraid. Sorry. Don't panic. There shouldn't be any permanent damage... at least, I don't think so."

Harry removed his hand, and Ron gasped for air.

"Jesus, Mary, and Merlin, Potter, what are you going to do?"

The insane young wizard began checking his pockets, searching for something. A minute later he seemed to have found it, and pulled out a pendulum. The silver cone dangled from a delicate silver chain, swinging from side to side. Ron had seen them before, even used a few in Curse Breaking. They were used to detect strong concentrations of magical energy.

"First? I need to find where in your body the curse is anchored. It's probably spread because of how long it's been left unattended, but it should still be concentrated around one chakra point in particular."

"Chakra point? What the hell is a chakra point?"

"Now is not the time for lessons in magic. Quiet please, I need to concentrate. Trust me when I tell you, you're not going to want me to have to do this twice."

Ron gulped but did as instructed. His shaking was becoming worse.

Harry moved up and down his body, dangling the pendulum. Ron could not see it from his prone position but eventually Harry settled back towards his head.

"It seems to be concentrated in the Vishuddha, the throat chakra point."

"Okay, is that good?"

"Considering I thought it would be in the Swadhisthana*, then yes, I suppose you could call it 'good'. At least, it's a lot less awkward."

"Fuck, I have no idea what you're talking about. Just get it over with!"

"Yes," he agreed, although suddenly he looked hesitant. "Yes," he repeated, as if to convince himself. He stood and retrieved two of the bowls of burning herbs, snuffing out the flames by pressing the bowls together so that their contents mixed and quickly smothered each other. Ron watched as he poured the herbs into a mortar resting on the table they had moved, and then crushed the remaining brittle timbers into ash with a pestle. He returned to him, sticking his thumb into the ashes and rubbing them over Ron's throat. There was a strange tingling sensation, and he began to shake so harshly it seemed as if he were having convulsions.

"Merlin, Potter, hurry up."

He didn't know how much more of this he could take.

He regretted his haste, however, when the next item Harry pulled out the knife. A long, slender blade he had seen Harry use once before. A sacrificial blade.

"W-what are you go-going to do with th-that?"

He received no reply. Harry wasn't listening anymore. He had begun chanting softly, in a language that seemed almost familiar and yet not. Whatever it was, it wasn't Latin. Ron didn't know how long it all lasted, but he could feel something happening around him. The ward was scorching against his skull, and the tingling in his throat had spread. Words, even screams, suddenly became impossible as his trembling turned into true seizures and he lost control of his body. Harry left for a moment, only to return with a stick to place between his teeth so Ron didn't bite off his own tongue, but then continued chanting.

By now, even Harry was starting to tremble and sweat and the fear Ron had been feeling was becoming a full blown terror. What was happening? Was it going right or wrong? What was he going to do? He'd been promised pain.

Harry's left hand went to his throat and holding it firmly, he leveled the blade directly above his spread fingers. Oh, God, he was going to stab him in the neck!

He had barely a moment to contemplate his own bloody, meaningless death when the blade suddenly slid home.

There was an instant feeling of pain, but it was not the pain of being stabbed. It was as if his skin had suddenly dried out and shrank around him, crushing his insides until they threaten to tear him open from the inside and push themselves out. It lasted for only seconds, although it could have been hours for all Ron would have known, and then it all changed and he felt as if someone had thrown ice water over him. The shock alone sent him into unconsciousness.

When he woke next, he was still in the greenhouse, although he had been laid out on a table and his school robe draped over him for warmth. There was a sense of disorientation, and yet he could tell something was different. Something important. He took a deep breath and realized what it was.

He felt clean. Not well, as he was exhausted and sore and his eyes stung, but still somehow better than he had been in months. The burning sage had nothing on this. He took another deep breath, savored it, and let it go.

The curse was broken.

He opened his eyes and flinched against the sunlight streaming down from above, then closing them again. He opted instead to listen, and once he tried he could make out voices. One of them was Harry and other was... Snape.

Shit.

"So it's over?" the headmaster was asking. "General Malfoy will recover?"

"Yes, he should be fine," Harry said, his voice hoarse and laced with exhaustion. "It may take a while for the lei lines around him to return to normal. I should probably run a few tests during the holiday break to make sure they're progressing as they should, but he shouldn't be in danger of dying anymore. The worst of his symptoms should be gone by tonight."

"Hhmmm... I will bring him a tonic. It would be best if he didn't question the method behind your curse-breaking too closely."

"What if he tests the potion and finds out it's bogus?"

"I will simply instruct him to drink it immediately, as the active ingredients become inert after a short period of time. He will not have the time to summon someone and test its contents. Nor would he risk insulting me by doing so in my presence."

There was a long silence after that. One Ron had no intention of breaking. He rather hoped Snape would leave now rather than force an awkward confrontation between them.

"Do you need medical assistance?" the headmaster asked after a moment.

"No, I'm okay. Ron too. Just tired. If you could have one of the house elves bring us something to eat and a pepper-up potion, we should be fine."

"I doubt pepper-up is going to cut it in this case, Mr. Potter."

"No, but it'll be enough to get us to our dormitories, through a quick shower, and into bed, I think. We need rest more than anything."

"Very well, I will see you are not disturbed."

"Thank you, sir." There was silence, and then Harry spoke again. "You can open your eyes now. He's gone."

Ron did so, turning his head towards the other boy. He looked almost as bad as Ron felt. Pale, sweaty, and wilted. Ron tried to sit up, but quickly found it took too much effort and caused too much pain to do so. How was he supposed to get back to his dorm like this?

"You stabbed me in the neck," he said.

"You're welcome."

"In the neck! What the fuck, Potter?"

Despite his exhaustion, Harry actually laughed a little at that.

"Have you always been such a crybaby?"

Ron laughed too, although it wasn't really that funny, but once they had started neither of them could stop. It was over. Finally, it was over.

Tom pored over file after file, leaning comfortably against Lucius Malfoy's chair. With the general 'indispose', he had taken over many of the man's responsibilities (not that he hadn't been doing his job for him long before now) and he didn't think it inappropriate to borrow the man's work station too. Currently, he was sorting through a personnel shortage in managing a small but troublesome wizarding village

twenty miles south of Hanover. It seemed rebels had managed to kill the Culties' captain and his lieutenants, leaving the ranks in chaos and the threat of losing control of the village a palpable threat. He would need to find replacements from elsewhere in the ranks, people with talent and the necessary ruthlessness to quash the persistent insurrection. And that was only item #116 he had to deal with today.

He sighed, but it was not a sound of displeasure. Indeed, he was rather enjoying himself. While this was all a bit more bureaucratic of a method of controlling life and death, it nevertheless held its own sort of charm. From this office, and with only pen and paper, he could alter the course of thousands of lives. If he so chose, he could order an entire legion to its death or burn an entire city to the ground.

Not that he would. That would be wasteful. But it was nice to know he could if he really wanted to. There were other benefits as well. Without the general occupying the office, he now had full access to scores of files hitherto inaccessible and was making full use of the opportunity.

Sitting on the corner of his desk was a small mountain of dossiers of enemies and potential allies. Lucius, it seemed, had adhered to the philosophy of 'know your enemy' and then promptly assumed that included everyone in existence, living and dead, and it was proving very convenient for Tom. Lord Voldemort, Severus Snape, Seamus Morgan, Albus Dumbledore... their lives, their ambitions, failures and vulnerabilities laid out in neatly typed black and white. And Harry Potter's too, although his file was disappointingly incomplete, even more so than Lord Voldemort's spotty record.

Well, it was better he learned about the boy first hand than from Lucius' ignorant and biased little spies anyway.

As he started narrowing down the list of applicants to replace the deceased captain, a disturbance started outside his door. The receptionist was protesting loudly, and there sounded like a scuffle. Tom quickly banished the files he took personal interest in from the desk. He doubted he would have enough time to clear off everything and move back to his own work space, but using his superior officer's

desk was merely an impertinent indulgence where as looking through files he had no business with could easily be viewed as treason.

He half expected Lucius to come storming through the door in one of his mad rampages, possibly drunk and insensible. That was impossible, of course. His poisonings, on top of Voldemort's curses, should have ensured Lucius never left his sick bed alive. What he got, however, was a tall, skinny gentleman with straw-colored hair and eyes simultaneously playful and cruel.

"Lord Crouch," Tom greeted cautiously, scanning the room quickly to make sure he had not left out anything valuable that could be filched. Bartemius Crouch was head of the Court of Foreign Intelligence Department. Despite its name, the CoFID spent most of its time and resources gathering information on domestic threats rather than foreign ones, and Crouch wasn't above getting his hands dirty to do so. Malfoy and he had been playing games of intelligence and counter-intelligence, sabotage, and one-upmanship against each other for years.

His presence here, in the heart of his rival's stronghold, did not bode well. He must have sensed blood in the water.

"Lt. Stratus. No need to get up on my account, Old Boy," the wizard said pleasantly. "You looked so comfortable sitting there."

"Is there something I can do for you, sir?" he asked. He did not sit down, despite Crouch quickly making himself comfortable in a guest chair across from him. "I am afraid General Malfoy is on sick leave, and I don't know when he will be back."

"I imagine he'll be back in the next thirty minutes or so," he replied pleasantly, practically grinning, in fact. Tom stiffened. What did he mean by that?

"Then by all means, you are welcome to wait for him. I can have the receptionist fetch you some tea if you like," he offered and very carefully began to clean off his desk. Perhaps Crouch was teasing him, but he would rather be safe than sorry.

Crouch chuckled, a grating, high-pitched sound. "That's very considerate of you, but your receptionist is enjoying some fresh air and I did not come here to speak with Lucius. You see, I just spoke with him a few minutes ago."

Tom frowned. How was that possible? Had Lucius somehow discovered his condition and counteracted it? No, that was impossible. He had been subtle, and even if he hadn't had time to dose the general recently, he had already been declining rapidly. He shouldn't have needed to do anything further. Not unless Voldemort had noticed and chosen to interfere, which seemed unlikely given recent events.

"Does that disturb you for some reason?" Crouch asked innocently. Tom looked at him cautiously, keeping his mind carefully shielded. He was clearly up to something.

"Of course I am disturbed. General Malfoy should be recovering at home. He was still very ill last time I saw him," he said shortly, intending his annoyance to be taken for genuine concern.

Crouch's grin grew even wider and he gave him a little applause.

"Encore, encore! A masterful performance. You could have had a career in theatre... or the CoFID for that matter. Although, if you had tried to kill me I would have had you skinned alive and drowned in lemon juice."

"E-excuse me?"

This was not good. Of all the possible people to discover the truth, Bartemius Crouch was the one he least wanted to know, just after Lord Voldemort and Lucius Malfoy himself of course. But no, it was too early to be sure. He might just suspect it, and was trying to trick him into a confession. It was a common enough trick.

"Now, now, no need to be coy. I can hardly blame you for wanting the man dead. He must be an absolute bear to work for."

"I am afraid I have no idea what you are referring to, and I resent the insinuation. Please leave."

"You know, I can almost see how he would have overlooked you. You're very convincing. Very earnest. But you know what your mistake was? You didn't let him suspect you. Not even a little. I mean, he knew he was sick. He saw plenty of doctors. He knew he was being poisoned. He dismissed half a dozen receptionists and accused everyone from the lunch lady to the Dark Lord for having a hand in it. But not you. Why was that? I mean, you had access and opportunity. He barely knows you, why so much trust?"

So he didn't have evidence. It was just the deductive reasoning of a sharp and twisted mind. That, and a legion of spies to feed his paranoia.

"I believe the thing missing would be motive, sir. And to my knowledge, General Malfoy has been under a lot of stress, but I would hardly call that the equivalent of poisoning. If you know something to the contrary you are obligated to report what you know immediately."

"Yes, yes. Very good. Don't worry; I have no intention of telling Lucius your little secret. Kill the bastard if you have your little black heart set on it. No one will be sorry to see the pompous ass go, but I would consider it a personal favor if you would make certain considerations before sending him to his untimely demise."

Tom took a deep breath, adopting an attitude of long suffering.

"I am not poisoning General Malfoy and he is not going to die. Retire maybe, but not die."

"Ah, so that is your objective? That's... rather disappointing to be honest, but no matter. In the next few minutes, General Malfoy is going to walk in here and make you an offer. An offer I would be most appreciative if you accepted."

"And what offer is that?" he asked disinterestedly. In truth, he was starting to become intrigued. He was going to have to kill Crouch

regardless of what he said or did after this point, but it was not something he could do here and now. No doubt Crouch had told someone of his hypothesis in case something should happen to him. It might prove worthwhile to humor him for the time being.

"He's going to ask you to marry his foster daughter, Hermione Granger of Malfoy. You know, the mudblood."

Tom's eyes widened. He didn't even have to fake his surprise.

"I don't... I am sorry, but... isn't she your fiancé?"

"Not anymore, thank Merlin. Like I said, Lucius came to speak to me just a short while ago. He's called off the engagement. Wouldn't give a reason, but he hasn't given up on the idea of marriage for her. He seemed to think you were somehow the more appropriate choice. I was almost offended."

"... I am sorry, but you must be mistaken. You seem to be mistaken about a lot today, in fact. I've never even been introduced to Miss Granger, and I've expressed no interest to the General in seeking out a bride this early in my career."

"My good man, don't sell yourself short. You come from a long, somewhat spotted pureblood line. Respectable, if not necessarily wealthy or ambitious. You're a rising star in the Culties but you can only go so far on such limited income and influence. Allying yourself with the Malfoys could certainly prove beneficial to you. Lucius might not care for the girl, but his wife and heir are quite fond of her, and then of course there is her friendship with Ambassador Potter. If you can stomach to marry the witch and keep her reasonably satisfied, you could find yourself in a very enviable position indeed."

"And of course, you'd be most appreciative."

"You catch on quickly. Very impressive for a Hufflepuff."

"And what do you get out of this?"

"The satisfaction of knowing I helped talent find its way into the world."

"You have wasted enough of my time as it is, sir, please do not waste anymore."

He just grinned.

"I'm afraid we haven't the time to discuss that now. Lucius will arrive at any moment and it's best he not see us together. He might get the wrong impression."

Or the right one, which is likely worse, Tom mused.

"We will talk again soon. After you've seen I have been honest with you. The Malfoy Christmas party perhaps?"

Tom acknowledged he would be there with a nod, but didn't agree to speak with him. He would have to see how much of what Crouch said was true and how much a ruse to reveal his guilt before he would consider indulging him any further. While it was perfectly possible that Crouch would let him kill Lucius to further his own ambitions, it was equally possible would attempt to extract a life debt from the general by saving him from his would-be murderer. Even if Crouch knew for certain Stratus was guilty and still intended to let him get away with it, it would be for a price. Extortion in the form of money, knowledge from within the Culties, or any number of distasteful errands. Perhaps all of these things.

Without demonstrating any proof of the master spy's suspicions, however, Tom suspected he was relatively safe for the time being.

"It's been a delight speaking with you, Lieutenant. We should really do it more often. You have a nice afternoon," Crouch said pleasantly, making his way towards the door. Tom walked him there, opening the door for him politely.

"Likewise," he said blandly. "Good day."

He barely gave the obnoxious man time enough to cross the threshold before he slammed the door behind him. He smirked. Despite not caring much for surprises, he had to admit that was interesting. Not interesting enough for him not to kill Crouch, but interesting enough to see how it would play out.

For the next couple of minutes, he spent his time moving files back to his work station and settling Malfoy's desk back into order. He had just finished putting the borrowed dossiers back into their filing cabinet when the general came striding into the office.

"Where is that blasted receptionist, Stratus? Anyone could have walked in here," he demanded.

"Cigarette break, sir," he offered and put on a face of surprised pleasure. "It is good to see you back, General. I had not expected you to recover so quickly."

This last part was entirely true, but he certainly wasn't entirely pleased. The general still looked pale and wane, but his eyes were sharp and clear, blazing with a fierce energy he had exhibited before he had been subjected to dark magic. It seemed somehow and in some way, Malfoy had broken its hold on him. He would have to tread very carefully around the man from now on.

"I am not here for long, Stratus," the man said, ignoring his pleasantries. "I have not been cleared for active duty yet, but there is something of a more... private nature I need to discuss with you."

Tom blinked, feigning yet more surprise.

It would seem Bartemius Crouch had been honest about one thing at least.

Dumbledore remained silent as witches and wizards moved about, dishing out reports, theories, accusations, predictions, and rumors in a tumultuous chaos that these 'tactical meetings' had gradually spiraled into over the last month or so. The terse, military discipline and ambiguous jargon had given way to civilian passions and colloquialisms just as their military ranks had given way to the rough

and rowdy civilian militias that had quickly become the major fighting forces across Germany.

Aurors, stretched too thin and pushed too far during the beginnings of the invasion, were dwindling now. Many were dead, but most abandoned their rank and its suicidally strict adherence to following orders and either disappeared completely or left to form the innumerable guerrilla factions scattered throughout Germany. Now the majority of the nation's defense depended upon civilian volunteers. Uncoordinated, undisciplined, and often fighting with different end goals in mind, they were not as strong as was needed, but unlike their previous national defenders, they were not nearly as easily routed either.

Aurors were easy to spot. They were registered for Merlin's sake, and since the invasion of Berlin their names and faces had been plastered across wanted posters and printed in military hit lists. Their tactics were known, predictable, and limited. Civilian rebels were harder to distinguish from the subdued civilians, and in fact these roles were often reversed in a single witch or wizard several times, sometimes multiple times a day. They spent their days running businesses, raising children, and going to school and their nights raiding enemy supply warehouses and ambushing patrols.

Dumbledore had done his best to bring the more productive of these rebel factions into these meetings, hoping to create a more unified defense against the enemy. They were nowhere near where they needed to be, but gradually leaders had begun to emerge with the will and ambition to see the war out to its conclusion and face the consequences, whatever they might be. His own role in these planning sessions had evolved from ringmaster to mediator and coordinator, ensuring cool heads prevailed where tempers were short and the pressure was high, but even here his interference was becoming less and less necessary.

"The Snake Bastard is gone for now, but he'll be back!" a witch snarled. Her name was Stottenger, he recalled. She had been an auror-in-training before the war broke out and her mentor was killed in action. "There's uncertainty in the British ranks and the Poles are still angry for the lack of explanation. We need to make some

progress now before he can return to rally his forces again. Look how much damaged he did in the few weeks he was here! And he wasn't even leading his own people! Just a bunch of stupid gypsies!"

"What do you want us to do, then?" another witch named Mencken asked sharply, her matronly features pinched and haughty. She had been a teacher at a finishing school of all places. Sometimes it showed at the most inopportune moments. "Where would you have us strike? We've got a line going from one end of the country to the other. Supposing we could gather the necessary numbers for a major offensive, we would essentially have to abandon the defense of the line and then what? They would simply push through where we're most weakened."

A burly, red-faced wizard interjected.

"We cannot stay as we are. The longer that line you speak of holds, the stronger the enemy defenses become and the harder it will be to oust them. Let them push the line! Stretch them as thin as we can, and then go back and tear them apart. Push them even further back than from where they progressed!"

"And let them raze every village and slaughter every muggleborn and halfblood they find in the meantime?" Mencken practically screeched in indignation.

Albus refrained from pointing out that there had been relatively little village burning (with a few notable exceptions) and little evidence that the Culties were targeting muggleborns and halfbloods. At least, they were not systematically butchering them as many assumed. It was true that this particular group had suffered the most during the invasion, but he suspected it had far more to do with their unfortunate tendency to live along the borders dividing wizarding and muggle parts of cities and towns, the first place the Culties set up their defenses to keep their battles and their enemies sequestered within. That, and their eagerness to escape occupied territories and to seek sanctuary within the homes of muggle relatives and friends often put them directly in the line of fire in their desperation to flee. It seemed an insignificant detail. He doubted the victims cared about the particulars behind their murders.

"Ladies and gentlemen, please settle down," he finally interjected before things got out of hand. While there was not nearly as much hex-tossing as there had been a few months ago, he still had to keep on his toes. There was some grumbling, but the witches and wizards settled back to listen to him. He had lost some traction with the military for his inability to miraculously turn the tide of the war, but he maintained a modicum of respect for rallying Germany's defenses when the Dark Lord and his Culties had seemed unstoppable in their relentless march across the country. "We all want to take advantage of this brief turn of fortune. It cannot last for long. Already, the Dark Lord has returned to the public eye, and whatever drew him away in the first place seems to have passed."

He was not the only one deeply intrigued with the possible reasons behind said disappearance.

"Your plans and observations each have merit. Your eagerness and your caution respectively do you all credit. Every action we take leaves us in some way vulnerable, and yet we cannot avoid taking action without losing something in the process. We are faced with terrible questions. What are we willing to sacrifice for victory? And how great of a victory must we attain for that sacrifice to be worth the cost?"

"Enough with your sentiment, Dumbledore," the wizard said impatiently. "If you have an idea about what to do, just say it already."

Rather than get defensive, the elder wizard merely nodded and gesture to a guard at the door, who moved to open it.

"If you will pardon my presumption, I've taken the liberty of inviting a guest. Someone who has firsthand understanding of what I intend."

There were murmurs of confusions, which soon fell into a stunned silence as his 'guest' limped through the door, leaning heavily on a cane. He was uniformed, this in and of itself an oddity since they had all foregone the use of such things from nearly the beginning, but more significantly was that it was readily recognizable as Italian. The wizard himself, a middle-aged man, bore a proud and regal posture

despite his heavy limp and monstrous scar running the entire left side of his body and face. The scar had clearly been left as the result of a curse, and not one of the garden-variety hexes either but something truly diabolical. It was a cluster of hideous, red varicose veins that seemed to pulse in time to an unheard heartbeat and the longer one looked at it the more one got the impression that it was somehow growing. Mencken turned away with a shudder.

"This is Captain Mandrani. I am sure you are all familiar with the name."

The silence suddenly burst into cries of excitement, confusion, and outrage. The Italian captain had stopped just short of the entrance and stood patiently and without expression at the chaos his presence had created. It was not unexpected. His name had become infamous, as had his spectacular failure in losing not only the Battle of Hogwarts but then London shortly after. Italy had retreated almost completely from the war because of it, ashamed for having their righteousness proven little more than foolish arrogance. Captain Mandrani had not been welcomed back to his homeland, and truthfully he had no intention of hiding behind his country's borders while they built up their defenses in order to lock themselves into cages they built for themselves. He had made a mistake, some sort of wrongful assumption, and God had punished him for his arrogance.

But He had not killed him.

All his men, his soldiers, had been taken to the Kingdom, for despite their misunderstanding, they were true children of God. Of this, he had no doubt. Mandrani had been left behind, the sole survivor, and he knew there had to be a reason for this.

In the months it had taken him to recover... as much as he would ever recover, he had wondered what that reason was. Why he had been both punished and spared. He had prayed on it endlessly. He had written trusted colleagues and teachers, but none could offer him an explanation worth entertaining. It had not been until Dumbledore, a man he had been taught to regard as an only slightly lesser evil than the Dark Lord himself, had visited his hospital room and given his

own theory that he had been able to see any sort of purpose to the continuation of his scarred and painful existence.

"Please allow me to explain." Dumbledore's voice broke through the ruckus, although he made no effort to raise his voice. The gathered witches and wizards settled back again, reluctantly, distrustfully. Italy had turned his back on Germany even as it had waged its war against Britain, and it was not a slight easily forgiven or forgotten. "Captain Mandrani is here upon my request. We have been in contact over the last several weeks and spoken extensively of his campaign in London and at Hogwarts. Despite having been forced out from London, it cannot be ignored that he and his people managed to take control and maintain their hold on the city for nearly three months. Something none of us here have had the ability to do ourselves."

All settled back to listen. It was true. They were all so focused on ousting their enemies from their homeland, they had never attempted to use the same tactics against them. They had neither the resources nor the manpower to sustain such an effort. It was baffling to them how Britain, with its smaller population and fewer resources, had been so successful in doing so thus far.

Once Dumbledore was certain he had everyone's attention, he gestured for Mandrani to speak.

"London was meaningless," Mandrani stated plainly, startling his audience. "It was a meatless bone thrown to distract the wolves. We razed the city to the ground and the Dark Lord didn't even blink. He knew it was a target from the beginning and had already been prepared to sacrifice it. He had emptied the city of its treasures and dispersed the government across the country... no, even before then it had ceased to be the true capital."

There were was considerable skepticism in several faces at this, but others didn't seem so certain.

"To be blunt, there is no long-term advantage of occupying any city in Britain. Its infrastructure is too dispersed, its resources too evenly distributed, and the population... unpredictable, to speak nothing of the proximity of the Dark Lord himself. Even the military headquarters

in Bristol can be sacrificed if necessary, although the price would make it a Stygian victory at best. There is, in fact, only one target in all of Britain that might give the Dark Lord and his people pause."

"You're speaking of Hogwarts," Mencken said evenly. "A target you failed to secure."

"And the only target that truly motivated the Dark Lord to drive us out of Britain once and for all."

Silence reigned for several minutes with the announcement of this singularly simple yet profound statement.

Author's notes:

1. The Swadhisthana is 'the Sacral Chakra' point, which is located around the genitals. Harry thought this is where the curse would be concentrated because it is generally thought to be the area that governs, among various other things, violence.

Book VI

Chapter 22: Debts

Saturday morning tea was a predictably awkward and tense affair. Hermione and Draco were at their Malfoy best, their expressions bland with just a hint of aristocratic arrogance as they sat across the table from Snape and his icy stare. Harry and Ira weren't as well-versed in the subtle art of 'combat by silence' and spent several minutes after the initial pleasantries (and he used that word lightly since Slytherins tended to make such a term ironic) fidgeting awkwardly and giving each other concerned looks.

No one had spoken in over five minutes. Only Harry had the nerve to actually take a sip of his tea. If nothing happened in another five minutes, he resolved to invite Ira to a game of cards.

Snape broke the silence first, closing his eyes and letting out a sigh. Harry wasn't sure if this qualified as defeat in some sort of battle or if he had simply finished assessing the enemy's strength... and wow he was being overdramatic.

"While I can appreciate your efforts to maintain some sort of control over the current situation," Snape began, "and I agree emancipation is not without its merits, did you really believe that the singer of a rock band was the most appropriate choice of sponsorship?"

"Of course not," Hermione said. If she felt in any way insulted she kept it carefully hidden. "You would have been the most appropriate choice, Uncle Severus, and I would have gladly come to you except that if I did and you had accepted there would have been a feud between Lucius and you. You already had enough to worry about."

That was an understatement. Between trying to repair and keep Hogwarts running on limited resources, half-managing a town in the West wing of the castle, a new bride who was only now starting to pull herself out of a crippling depression, dealing with a half-crazed Lucius, and, of course, Harry's inevitable misadventures, there was hardly enough time to sleep (and even here he was learning to

function on a very minimal amount) let alone sort out someone else's problems. Although he could have tried. He should have tried.

"And what about the feud you were creating between Lucius and yourself? Not to mention Narcissa. Could you not foresee the problems you were creating for yourself?" were creating for yourself, he said, because Snape didn't know they still intended to go through with the emancipation. It wasn't an error any of them intended to correct. "You are an extremely talented witch, but your brilliance lies in your intelligence and discipline towards your studies. In raw magical ability, you tested only a little above average, and if not for the Malfoy's insistence to the contrary you would have been sent to Rookbridge. Narcissa is on the school board. If you offend her, she may request you be removed, and if that happens there isn't going to be a school in all of Britain willing to risk the Malfoys' wrath to take you in. Even if they do not insist on your removal from Hogwarts or I were in some way able to prevent it, there is still the matter of school supplies and boarding expenses. Have you thought about how you were going to pay for all of this? Scholarships are not plentiful these days."

Hermione let out a sigh herself and took a sip of her tea. At her left, Draco gave her a reassuring look and squeezed her hand comfortingly. She spared him a smile before turning back to Snape.

"I understood from the beginning that I was going to create problems for myself. I knew I was risking my education here at Hogwarts and my chances of getting into a university here in Britain, but those were risks I was willing to take. If I were married to Crouch I would have been pulled from school anyway, and I doubt I would ever have been given the chance to finish my education or even to work. You are aware of his reputation?"

The grimace Snape let slip through suggested that he did, in fact, know Crouch's reputation and probably a great deal more than was public knowledge.

"Then you know it would have been unsafe for me to marry him. Besides, I had considered what I would do. Scholarships are not plentiful, but they are still out there, and I think I have written

applications for every single one currently in existence. If I had to switch schools, I was willing to do that. If I had to finish my schooling through independent study, my sponsor had agreed to let me stay at her London flat. I would have access to the library there, and there are tutors and correspondence courses. I would have made it work. They might keep me out of school, but they can't stop me from taking the Newts."

Snape could argue that. If Lucius felt vexed enough, he could find ways of preventing it. Or, more to his style, ruin her reputation by accusing her of cheating or bribing someone to alter her test results. It didn't really matter. She had made her point with Crouch. Anything would have been better than being forced to put her future in his hands.

He had another point to make, however.

"And Narcissa? She wouldn't understand why you had done this. Have you even tried to make her understand? She loves you, my dear. She would not have allowed you to be miserable."

Hermione's neutral expression suddenly twisted into anger.

"She's done nothing to stop it in the last twelve years."

"Hermione!" Draco objected, "What is that supposed to mean?"

"What do you think it means? Do you really think she loves me? Sure, I suppose she does, but its not the same way she loves you. She loves you like a son. She loves me like a pet poodle."

Snape and Draco were looking at her now with something akin to genuine horror. Hadn't they realized? Even the few times he had seen Narcissa and Hermione together, he had caught on that the Malfoy matriarch's affection was of a condescending kind. She cared about Hermione, just not about what her adopted daughter thought or felt.

"That, young lady, was entirely uncalled for. Narcissa has never been anything but generous with you."

"Except when she thought to marry me off to a known muggleborn hater?"

"Whatever her faulty reason for that, there was no malice-"

"Was I supposed to just smile and nod my way into the Crouch marriage bed just so I didn't hurt her feelings?" she practically shouted. Things were getting out of hand. They had come here to give explanations and come to an understanding, not to open up Hermione's emotional wounds and insecurities. Not to offend Draco, who had never seen anything in his mother's behavior beyond the same expressions of affection and attachment he felt himself. Not to anger Snape and his belief that parents should be respected and appreciated for the guidance they provided a child rather than the depth of their affections. Guidance which he felt Narcissa had done a masterful job of until her most recent lapse in judgment.

"You ungrateful-" Snape began. Already Harry felt his own anger rising to meet his and he prepared himself to defend Hermione from a completely unfair chastisement. He was just about to rise from his chair, but Ira surprised them all by beating them to it. She rose and moved around the table, away from Snape and around Draco, and finally knelt beside Hermione's chair.

Hermione looked as shocked as anyone to see her there with tears in her eyes.

"It's okay," Ira said. "I know what it's like. God, I know what it's like more than anyone to have to go through what you did. That feeling of betrayal, as if all the love you thought was there was a ruse, just a scheme to placate you until their real plans for you came through. They made you feel less than human. They made you doubt yourself and your feelings about everything and everyone. It was terrifying, wasn't it?"

Hermione made a choked sound but didn't answer. Didn't have to answer because Ira stood and pulled her into her arms, hugging her tightly. Without hesitating, Hermione hugged her back. She didn't cry, not as far as anyone could see with her face buried in Ira's bosom,

but her grip on the other woman was so fierce, Harry was certain Ira would have bruises later. She didn't seem to mind in the least. She just held her and stroked her hair, making soothing sounds and shot her husband a warning look over her shoulder.

Harry was rather embarrassed. Not so much for himself, but rather for Snape and Draco who looked genuinely mortified and, dare he say it, a bit ashamed? Certainly, Snape couldn't go through with his intention to scold Hermione. Not unless he wanted to scold his own wife by proxy and over something she had far more understanding than he could ever claim to, and Harry didn't see that going over well. Draco... well, Draco had always deemed the responsibility of comforting his adopted sister his and his alone, despite her willingness to find reassurance elsewhere when necessary. That a relative stranger had so quickly and easily taken his post was rather shameful. Even if he were still smarting from the perceived insult to his mother.

"But you're such a lucky girl," Ira continued. "You had something I didn't. You had friends and family who genuinely care about you and wanted you to be happy. You had the confidence to demand more than what was being offered you. You poor, brave creature. I don't know if what you did was the right thing and I don't know if it's fair for you to judge Lady Malfoy so harshly, but I can say I genuinely admire you standing up for yourself. I believe, whatever happens now, you'll be okay."

Harry had always liked Ira. It was hard not to like someone so gentle and sweet, if overly timid and too easily impressed. After he learned more about her, he had admired her ability to quietly persevere against terrible circumstances without letting bitterness touch her. But it wasn't until that day, with her ignoring every sense of propriety and her formidable husband's personal opinion in order to comfort a girl she barely knew, that Harry felt such swell of deep affection for her.

Snape's gentle cough interrupted the moment. Sort of. Hermione's hold loosened and she lifted her head to look at her godfather over the woman's shoulder but didn't actually let go.

"I do not believe we will get any further on the subject tonight. It's rather a moot point now and not worth arguing over. There's no urgency. We will continue at another time."

Draco objected. "Wait! What about my father thinking Harry's trying to kill him? We haven't talked about that!"

Ah, hell. For a moment, Harry had thought he had managed to dodge that hex.

"A change of subject then," Snape agreed. "Your father's paranoia is likely the result of the curse's affect upon the mind and the curse's unusually esoteric nature of which he assumed Harry was knowledgeable. However, the curse has been lifted and he is recovering swiftly. Now that he's thinking rationally, I am sure he will see the error in logic of Mr. Potter attempting to kill him, particularly when his own efforts provided the cure."

Draco gave his schoolmate a surprised looked. "Your efforts? What did you do?"

"Er..."

Snape smirked.

"You mean Mr. Potter has refrained from gloating? It was entirely through his own efforts that the cure was found. Although, I will confess my own hand in the actual brewing of the cure itself."

"Potter, what is he talking about? How would you know...? You bastard! Why didn't you tell me my father was cursed? What was he cursed with?"

"Er... Sorry. I didn't want you to worry, especially since I didn't know if the cure would work or not."

For a moment, Harry was afraid Draco was going to pick up the tea pot and hurl it at his head.

"How long have you known? How did you find out?"

"Ah... when I went to Bristol to confront him about that attack on the werewolf village. He accused me of trying to kill him and told me about the curse."

"And you didn't think this was something you should have mentioned to me?"

"Um..."

"Potter, we're going straight to the dueling platform after this."

"Huh?"

"Shut up!"

That was pretty much how the rest of tea went. Snape providing well-scripted lies to all of Draco's questions which served to reassure him of his father's good health (relatively speaking) while stoking the flames of his ire towards Harry and resulting in several reiterations of 'shut up, Potter'. This was just as well, because Harry's usual cleverness had completely deserted him. Plus, as always, he was a terrible liar. He suspected his required muteness had somehow been planned by Snape. He wasn't entirely sure whether he should thank him for it later or not.

Ira and Hermione moved off to a settee near the window, less interested in the conversation than they were in each other's sympathy. It seemed Hermione had found a mentor in a completely unexpected place.

Harry suffered Draco's annoyance for the better part of a week. He could not recall a time he had been so tense for so long within the school premises since the basilisk incident nor so paranoid about the possibility of attack. He had avoided several minor hexes in the corridors and a cursed plate in the Great Hall, not to mention a rather savage rivalry in the classroom that had him fearing for his chances of passing History of Magic and Arithmancy. While he didn't think Draco would seriously hurt him intentionally, he had been around the

Slytherin long enough to know that he could be rather careless with his magic when he was angry and accidents happened.

Hermione was not proving to be very helpful in deterring him either. While her annoyance with Harry for his secret-keeping had cooled somewhat, she was treating his situation as a learning experience and keeping well out of it. Harry could honestly state he had learned his lesson. He would be a much more considerate friend in the future and, of course, avoid letting Snape lie on his behalf in the future.

At the end of the week, Draco's feud with him hadn't ended so much as it was delayed. Christmas break had arrived. Harry said his goodbyes the night before and slept through the chaos and security nightmare that resulted from hundreds of students and their subsequent luggage being loaded onto Knight Buses- the Hogwarts Express had been forced to make its stopping point fifteen miles south in Wittenbiddy while the platform and tracks around Hogsmeade underwent repairs.

He woke up to Lord Voldemort hovering over him.

"Are you still sleeping, you lazy thing?" he asked, his crimson eyes bright with sinister amusement. Harry wondered for a split second if he had just let Nagini loose under his covers. Nothing slithered around his legs though so he simply yawned, stretched, and sat up.

"I wasn't expecting company. You look well, my Lord."

And he did. Voldemort looked completely recovered, in fact, and in surprisingly good spirits. He was dressed in a black woolen cloak with a green scarf and a black fedora. Clothes for traveling, and not all of it inside one of his heated cars or through his private floo into the headmaster's office. His clothes were still lightly sprinkled with snow and his normally pale cheeks slightly flushed from the winter wind. Harry's gaze inevitably found its way to Voldemort's arm.

The one that shouldn't have been there.

Voldemort caught his look and removed a glove in order to better lend itself to Harry's inspection. Embarrassed and yet incredibly

curious, he took the hand and studied it curiously. Then he quickly dropped it.

"It's not your hand!"

"You spotted the difference that quickly? Very good. How could you tell? The magus hypersentia?"

Harry shook his head and unconsciously rubbed his hands against his blankets as if to wipe them clean.

"No. The magic is yours, but... it's definitely not your hand. Yours are..."

Prettier? More elegant?

"Better taken care of," he finished lamely.

"I'm flattered you noticed," he replied mercilessly, chuckling at his protégé's obvious embarrassment.

"Where did it come from?" he asked, because clearly it had belonged to someone.

"A prisoner. A dead prisoner," he said, refraining from pointing out that said prisoner was dead after he had cut off his arm. One could never be certain where Harry's sensitivities lay. "Anyway, I didn't come here to regale you with this minor parlor trick. Get dressed. We're going out."

Harry stretched and climbed out of bed. He checked the wall clock. It read a quarter to ten. He felt smugly satisfied about that for some reason. When was the last time he had slept in while not horribly injured?

"Where are we going?" he asked as he searched through his drawers for something clean and relatively unwrinkled.

"London for shopping and lunch- a gesture of support for the community, you understand. Coventry to visit the military hospital.

Maybe the history museum if there is time. Bristol for a press conference and to finish some unofficial business. Then to the lodge."

The lodge could only mean the Sianach Lodge. The winter solstice was only three days away. He wondered what his mentor had in mind this year.

Harry spent the next three days running at Voldemort's heels and trying to keep up. The first day, they had indeed gone to London, Bristol, and Coventry, but they had also stopped in Kent and Edinburgh and two small wizarding villages called Lotis Gringe and Pellisbery both in Wales. The next day it had been seven wizarding villages, back to Kent, Cardill in Wales, later Bristol again, then Aberdeen and Liverpool, and a very, very brief visit to Belfast. The third day had been spent in Bristol, but seemingly through the entirety of Bristol, from the military facilities to the textile mills to the community theater house.

This broad range of visitation was trumped by an even broader range of activities the Dark Lord had set out to accomplish.

There was shopping in London like he had said, but also in Coventry, Kent, and Cardill and they were followed doggedly (but at a respectful distance) by the press at every turn. Harry would have had no idea where to go in these places where there were innumerable shops but also innumerable 'closed' or 'closed for repair' signs, the economy having suffered after raids by the only recently ousted Italian army. Voldemort obviously knew where he was going, leading Harry purposefully from one shop to another, rarely stopping more than ten minutes while Harry could have spent hours in fruitless exploration. There were bookstores Voldemort practically ransacked (he had recently bought a new house and was working to fill the currently empty library), clothing stores that specialized in fur or leathers or the color black, art stores for moving portraits and statues, a clock and watch store that made him incredibly depressed about having left his pocket watch in Hausteheim, an art supply store he practically went mad in, furniture stores, candy stores, herbalists and apothecaries, an armory where he was fitted for new dueling protective gear and where Voldemort had the mithral sword taken from Hausteheim assessed for value by a goblin literally salivating over it. Then there

were the restaurants and cafés. Harry was happy to discover at least one Chinese restaurant in Wizarding Great Britain.

The most interesting place they shopped was 'The Shadow Store', a book store dedicated solely to selling Books of Shadows, books filled with spells created and coveted by a single witch, wizard, or wizarding family and never passed on to any other. The dark little shop practically hummed with magic, and he ran his fingers over the glass cases and felt them tingle pleasantly. Voldemort took him to the back of the store first and showed him an enormous tapestry three stories high and nearly as wide. It contained the largest and most comprehensive family tree of wizarding kind going back three hundred years before Merlin himself. They spent nearly an hour there, locating and tracking their own family tree and finding where they had eventually intersected with Phillip Marie Potter, son to one Lord Balthazar Mendel Potter and one Lady Solenacia Marie Gaunt, two hundred and twenty years and eight generations removed. Eight generations of Potters carrying the parseltongue ability off and on before falling to Harry.

The tapestry was for more than mere show, however, and amongst the names listed there occasionally appeared one or more little red stars. Voldemort explained these stars indicated a Books of Shadows written by this person was located in the store. There were no stars along the Slytherin line or even the major branches of that line, nor were there any amongst the various Potters. They were too coveted by their respected pureblood families to be given up easily. and those that had been were quickly snatched up by the richest of purebloods who could afford to collect such things. Most of what was in store belonged to family lines that had ended abruptly or those desperate enough to sell. After considerable searching, Harry found the Prince line and two Books of Shadows from the Prince family. He asked the anxious and hopeful store owner to look at them.

"I think I want to give this one to Snape," he had said, selecting the smaller and cheaper of two, which was nevertheless seventy galleons. He flinched a little to think about it. Nevertheless, the idea of it belonging to anyone other than Snape somehow made him feel uneasy inside.

"These books are worthy of being more than mere Christmas presents," Voldemort chastised, encompassing his hatred of both gifts and Christmas in one sentence. Harry smiled at him.

"You should give him that one," he said, pointing to the larger volume. The Dark Lord looked as if he had been asked to eat a worm. "As a reward. He's been working his arse off for you, you know."

"I can think of better rewards than a book."

"It's more than a book," Harry pointed out. "It's his heritage. There aren't a lot of things he values more than that." Voldemort had turned thoughtful. After a little more needling, he gave in and bought it, much to the delight of the store owner.

Shopping, despite how much of it they did, did not constitute a majority of their errands. They did go to the museum in Coventry where a new exhibit on pre-historic and early wizarding tribes had just opened, and he wanted to personally provide publicity and compliment the director and his staff in person. The displays unnerved Harry. The primitive weaponry and magical artifacts, the almost pack-like structure, and their savage rituals reminded him in many ways of Greyback. The moving paintings of shamans calling on their gods to speak through them left him faintly ill. Voldemort did not force him to linger longer than necessary before moving on.

They visited nearly a dozen villages to pay their respects to historical sites, industrious business owners, schools (the primary schools served the village children and therefore were closed later since extensive travel was unnecessary), and persons of renown and scholarly accomplishments.

They visited the military hospital and spoke with the injured soldiers and the medical staff. Harry finally found a talent he exceeded the Dark Lord in and that was making people feel at ease. He had to interrupt a comment or series of questions by the Dark Lord with a 'You are not helping!' more than once.

This proved especially true when they visited the Children's Hospital in Edinburgh.

There was a ribbon-cutting ceremony for a factory in Kent. A memorial ceremony there a few hours later. A press release in Bristol about the course of the war, another release about current trade possibilities with France in Liverpool, and still another (albeit very brief) talk in Belfast about financial support for restorations of those villages attacked by Germans months before. There was a charity dinner for what Harry still didn't know, where the courses were tiny, numerous, and not at all appetizing.

There was a tour of eight different government buildings around Bristol, with the Dark Lord making sure his personnel hadn't neglected their responsibilities in their eagerness to begin their holiday plans. Several hours in between the chaos was spent writing Christmas Cards that never technically used the word 'Christmas' to an endless number of people who had voluntarily (more or less) given money or time or expertise to various government (Dark Lord) sanctioned projects.

During and between all this there was endless amount of handshaking and formal introductions and elbow rubbing with people he had never met but occasionally recognized from the newspaper. There were conversations he only half understood and conversations he had quickly taken over within moments. There was entirely too much flattery, followed by sudden, disorienting moments of brutal honesty. There was handholding and shoulder patting. There were fake smiles, fake laughter, and fake sympathy. There was just as much of it genuine. There were cameras flashing and reporters shouting questions and people clapping in the crowds and pointing in the streets. There was desperate hunger and being entirely too full.

Harry felt like a foot soldier following his commander into battle.

Harry had followed Voldemort through whirlwind tours of publicity before, but he had never been so much a part of his campaign. When he was younger he had neither the experience nor the celebrity he did now and his presence was more a curiosity than anything. He knew he was technically the Dark Lord's protégé, but he had always

thought of that in more of a personal sense. Their bond existed primarily through practices of paganism and genuine enjoyment of each other's company. Now, however, it had taken on a new dimension. He could see the future Voldemort was grooming him for. More than being the ambassador to the werewolves, he was being educated to act as a representative of the Dark Lord himself in those times and situations he could not be present.

This should have disturbed Harry. Voldemort had essentially decided Harry's future career, perhaps even his whole way of life. It didn't though. Not yet at least. It seemed perfectly natural. He had no desire to rule, but more than anything he wanted to make his country a prosperous and happy one and there was no better place to do that from than at the Dark Lord's side. The Courts were full of Lucius Malfoys and Bartemius Crouches, full of power-seekers and the selfishly ambitious, focusing only on their present satisfactions at the expense of the country's long-term well-being. Voldemort was an amoral tyrant much of the time, but that wasn't all he was. He promoted education, art, appreciation of nature, and the pursuit of knowledge. He genuinely wanted Britain to reach her greatest potential by embracing the past and striving for a better future. The same thing Harry wanted.

If that meant his life would be forever bound to the Dark Lord's, well... so be it. It was inevitable anyway and, while it was a dangerous sort of life, it did have its rewards.

"And I thought trying to escape Hausteheim was difficult," Harry said as he collapsed onto the sofa. "It was nothing compared to getting away from Lord and Lady Pinchkin."

The Dark Lord chuckled and settled himself behind his desk. Despite all they had accomplished that day, he was still intent on squeezing in just a little bit more before they retired for the evening. They were back at the lodge for the rest of the night and all through the solstice the next day. Out of honor for the occasion, he had cleared their schedule so that their full attention would be spent honoring their respective gods.

"Yes, I was very close to gnawing off my arm again in an attempt to flee."

Harry flinched despite the cheerful tone. This hadn't been the first time he had nearly forgotten about the sacrificed appendage and been quickly reminded. He knew it was deliberate, but he could not determine why the matter was being kept in a sort of limbo, neither a subject worth lengthy discussion nor something that could be overlooked.

"They seemed rather adamant in their belief you would like their granddaughter. Rather impertinent of them to attempt to invite her as your date to the Malfoy Christmas Ball," Voldemort continued as if nothing were amiss.

"They might have done a better job of it if they hadn't suggested her pursuit of the humane treatment of familiars was somehow in the same line as my work with werewolves," he said, letting a little of his remembered anger seep into his voice. Protecting animal rights were important, he agreed, but to suggest they were in any way similar to defending werewolf rights wasn't only ignorant, it was insulting.

"And if they hadn't made that particular gaffe, would you have agreed to bring the so far unknown Miss Bertula Pinchkin?"

Voldemort seemed genuinely curious here.

"If it would have loosened their pocket strings a little more for the hospital fund, I suppose so. I still would have preferred to invite Natalie or Ginny."

"You have no lady fair in particular to hold your attentions these days?"

"I think my problem is I have too many 'lady fair's at the moment."

"Ah. It is always better to have options."

Harry let out a tired little laugh at that and closed his eyes. He really was exhausted. If left where he was, he was certain he would fall

asleep in a matter of minutes and wake up the next morning in a truly uncomfortable position.

"You should get some sleep. I will be waking you before dawn tomorrow," Voldemort cautioned. Reluctantly, Harry sat up, stretched, and made his way towards the door.

"Mmm... yeah, okay. You should get some sleep too."

"I rarely sleep," he reminded Harry.

"You should tonight," his protégé insisted. "It's the eve of the Solstice. You might get a Visitation."

Voldemort gave him a surprised look. He hadn't thought of that. He could not recall ever having a dream that seemed particularly prophetic or conversed directly with the divine visage of his patron gods in the past, but since his ascension into near-immortality he had little need for sleep and had never thought to indulge based on a schedule of astronomical significance or felicity.

And it had only been recently that he had regained a mostly complete soul and the ability to dream at all.

"Perhaps in a little while. There are still one or two things I must finish before I retire."

Harry didn't push any further, merely yawned and wished him a goodnight.

A few hours later, he made his way to his own bed. He passed Harry's bedroom on the way just as Victoria was slipping out. He gave her a rather nasty start.

"Is everything alright?" he asked.

"Oh, yes, everything is fine. Just making sure he hadn't fallen asleep in his clothes before I go out to finish my rounds."

"And did he make it to bed in the appropriate nightly attire?"

"Yes, My Lord."

"Did he appear to be dreaming?"

Because now that Harry had suggested the possibility of a Visitation, he couldn't help but wonder if the boy had previous experience with such things. True Visitations almost always involved speaking in one's sleep, being so much closer to consciousness than dreaming. A one-sided conversation he was not the least bit ashamed to eavesdrop on.

"He sleeps like the dead, my Lord."

"Oh, well," he said slightly disappointed and earned himself a slightly confused look from the young witch.

Voldemort did not receive a Visitation that night, but he did dream. He dreamed that all the witches and wizards in the world turned into faeries, that he became their king, and he went to war with Gulandri. In the dream, he challenged Gulandri to single armed combat with the winner becoming king of both their realms, but he was not sure of his own victory. He cut out his own heart and gave it to Harry to hide where no one else could find it, so that he would not die even if he were cut down. He won the duel, but when he asked for his heart back, Harry refused to tell him where it was hidden.

So he cut out Harry's heart and ate it.

It didn't seem to have bothered the boy so much in the dream.

It did seem to bother him considerably when he told Harry about it over the breakfast table.

"That's... ugh. I don't even want to try to untangle the symbolism in all of that."

Voldemort suspected it had something to do with horcruxes, but wasn't about to mention that to Harry.

"That's reassuring. What did you dream of?"

"I dreamed I was walking with you around Hogwarts, but after a while I started to realize I was walking on one side of a mirror and you were on the other, and I couldn't cross over. There were a lot of other people, and I kept asking them how to get to the other side but nobody knew. Until I met Moody, and he said I would have to drown myself. Then he threw me off the tower and into the moat."

"And did you reach me on the other side of the mirror?"

"I don't know. I woke up."

"Then Moody was right. For here we are, having breakfast together."

Harry found this observation rather clever.

After eating a modest breakfast, they dressed in their warmest clothes and went outside. In the pre-dawn light the sky was painted blues and greens and golds, but clouds hung in the north and a harsh wind was blowing them in their direction. It was cold. Colder than Harry could ever remember it being in December, and he dreaded the possibility of spending even hour let alone most of the day out in it.

They went to the barn and there gathered milk, eggs, blood, and clay bowls to make offerings then went out into the maze. They cast charms to keep the wind from destroying their altars, perform the necessary rites, and moved on, one after the other. Further into the maze new statues had been created so that Harry's own patron gods might be given their proper respects. Blood, milk, mead, wine, honey, grain, vegetables, meat, eggs, dried flowers, sprigs of evergreens, silver coins, arrowheads, obsidian knives, and polished stones. All of it laid out, given freely, given gratefully. And they didn't rush, not for a single one, even as their fingers and toes grew numb and their prayers came through cracked, bleeding lips.

When at last they were done, Voldemort led Harry out of the maze and the younger wizard thought they were going to head to the house to warm up before they completed whatever ritual the Dark Lord had

been so tight-lipped about for the last three days. Instead, the Dark Lord turned towards the woods.

"Where are we going?" he asked, trying very hard not to sound like he was whining. He was cold, tired, hungry, and wanted nothing more than to sit by the fire and drink something hot.

"We are going up to the conservatory."

"The conservatory? In the woods?"

"Through the woods. I wanted it to be as secluded as possible and still be on the property."

"You never told me you had a conservatory."

"I didn't until about two months ago. It has just been completed. I think you'll like it."

Harry couldn't muster the enthusiasm the Dark Lord seemed to expect. Despite how frequently he visited the Astronomy tower, he couldn't say he particularly cared for astronomy as a subject all that much. He could admire a sky full of stars as much as the next fellow, but to look off at those flecks of light his muggle upbringing had taught him were billions of miles away and believe they somehow held sway over human affairs? Unlikely. Anything beyond the Earth's sun and moon seemed rather superfluous to him.

And he didn't feel like hiking unknown miles to look at something superfluous. Especially since it was the daytime and clouds had started to roll in with the damnable wind and nothing would be visible anyway.

"Don't look so miserable, Harry. There will be a hot meal waiting for us when we get there."

"We can't apparate?"

"Protective wards. To prevent thieves."

"The car? Horses?"

"No road and no place to shelter the horses. It's going to snow soon."

"We could be trapped there."

"You're whining."

"Mmphf... What about sianach?"

The man-eating deer should not be underestimated, especially in winter when they were most hungry for meat.

"I'll protect you," the Dark Lord said condescendingly. Harry sighed. There was no point questioning further. They were now inside the woods following a narrow footpath lined with dark, circular stones on either side. In the forest, the wind wasn't as bad and the warming charms on his clothes had a greater effect. He was still tired and hungry but those things he could push through on stubbornness.

And it took a lot of stubbornness to follow after Voldemort for three miles through an eerie, silent wood on a path at times only distinguished by the little black stones and under a sky that was growing darker by the minute. He was beginning to become uneasy. If it stormed, how would they get back? Why were they going somewhere so remote to begin with?

"Snow's coming. How much further?" he asked. It had been nearly an hour since they had left the maze, and he finally felt he had waited long enough that it was safe to speak without being considered a nag.

"We're almost there."

The last quarter mile was the hardest on Harry's nerves. The ground rose up in an ever increasing incline and became slippery with leaves and moss. The trees became thinner and the wind became stronger, and with it came the first fat flakes of snow.

They passed the carcass of a boar along the way, its half-frozen body feeding a murder of crows. A grim reminder they were not the only predators out there.

But the journey did end, and so abruptly Harry could hardly believe it. In the blink of an eye, the conservatory was just there, looming over them from its perch at the top of the hill. He didn't have long to study it from the outside before Voldemort was ushering him in through a pair of black doors decorated with a golden sun. Inside, the sudden change of temperature left him dizzy, and he scrambled out of his outer layers in search of relief.

"We should have everything we need for the night in the residence quarters. You're welcome to take a nap until I have finished preparations," the Dark Lord offered with just a touch of superiority that Harry chose to ignore.

"We're staying the night?"

"Not much choice now."

The residence quarters were directly off the entryway and was a simultaneously small and lavish little apartment. A fire burned in a sandstone fireplace, providing the only illumination for the furniture and art, a play of shadows and flickering gold. From what Harry could make out, the little shoebox of a space held a distinctly Middle Eastern style from the rugs, to the vases, to the motif of the tiles along the walls. All of it beautiful and all of it undoubtedly genuine and expensive. He just barely remembered to take off his boots before climbing under the covers.

He woke up not only warm but over-heated and threw off the blankets. He still felt sleepy, but no longer exhausted and a genuine curiosity about the conservatory was starting to manifest. Not bothering with his boots, he went out to explore. The hallway, he now noticed, had a Middle Eastern feel as well. Tall, curved ceilings and doorways, graceful columns, brightly colored decorative tiles in geometric patterns everywhere. Suns, moons, and six-pointed stars featured prominently. There was a palace-like elegance to the place and a sense of displacement in time and space.

He opened a set of double doors and found himself in a large, open room. Harry's first instinct was to call a ballroom due to its clean marble flooring and then a solarium because of the domed glass ceiling. His third instinct was to balk at any attempt at classifying the room at all. It had to be the conservatory's observation room, but there was no telescope. In fact, there wasn't any sort of equipment or furniture at all that he could see. The marble floor was so dark and clean it was mirror-like, but for the curving, patternless golden lines that arched and circled and wound themselves in a seeming randomness that, nevertheless, held a sort of beauty. The walls were divided into twelve sections and decorated in star charts behind glass cases. As he studied the charts he could see the stars themselves were very slowly moving across their pages. The dome was supported by twelve arches, also gilded in gold but otherwise unadorned. At the moment, he could only see a darkening sky and snow coming down and sliding off the sides.

"What do you think?" Voldemort asked once Harry had a chance to peruse the room. He had been there when Harry walked in and was pouring out lines of salt in a Star of David in the center of the room. At each point was a wide, shallow bowl of water and a floating candle moving lazily about its confines. Harry had never seen a ritual that used a Star of David. Perhaps it was a ritual from the Book of Solomon?

"It's beautiful." It was beautiful. Beautiful and cold and not a place he would feel comfortable alone in for a long period of time.

"It's far more than that, Harry. Let me show you."

He was led to one of the star charts, which on closer inspection proved not to be a star chart at all but a sort of control panel. The glass case was grooved with a series of circular indentations, and some of the stars could be moved along sliders and portions of the sky turned in complete circles. Voldemort turned one of these portions and room suddenly darkened and brightened simultaneously, the sky in the dome having turned from a blanket of clouds into a perfectly clear night sky blanketed in stars. Harry couldn't help the startled gasp that escaped him as Voldemort slid two star switches

and suddenly the universe closed in on them, and scattered amongst the billion burning suns he could now make out the distinct shape of spiral galaxies, comets, and even the planets Venus and Jupiter with its painted rings.

"By the Goddess."

Voldemort gave a satisfied smile. It seemed he finally got the response he had been looking for and launched into an explanation.

"Magnificent, isn't it? This is the only conservatory in the world of its kind. No telescopes, no waiting for the right weather or the right time of year or even for night. Just a series of coordinates and you can see the sky as it would appear anywhere in the world. Watch this."

Voldemort did another series of adjustments, and the sky above them was suddenly filled, not with stars but with massive ribbons of light undulating across the sky. Brilliant green edged with red slithered about, cloud-like one moment then river-like the next.

"Aurora borealis..."

"Aurora australis, actually," the Dark Lord corrected. "Along the coast of New Zealand, June 28th, 1938."

"How?"

"I don't know. I purchased the design for this conservatory from the family of a great Iranian astronomer and magi. The design was genius, but astronomy has lost favor since the fall of the Persian Empire and no one was willing to commission it. I got it for a steal. The construction... considerably less so. I can manage the controls, but the magic behind it? Quite beyond me. I intend to hire a full-time astronomer to conduct research here soon."

"It's brilliant. I'm sorry I doubted you."

"Hhmmm..."

The aurora disappeared and returned back a more familiar sky of celestial bodies he now understood as more than just stars but could no longer differentiate.

"This is the sky above us right now," Voldemort explained. "The stars are in a very favorable position for what I want to try."

"And what do you want to try? Why the big secret?"

"I didn't want to scare you."

"... I'm feeling rather alarmed now."

"It's perfectly safe. Not painful in the least."

"Still not feeling any better."

"I just need you to drink something."

"I just need you to tell me what you're doing."

"An experiment."

"I am not drinking anything experimental."

"The potion is not the experiment. The potion is a means to an end."

"What end?"

"I wish to see if I have a 'soul space' or limbo, Harry. With the soul you so foolishly inflicted on me, I might now have one."

"Oh..." He came up completely blank on how to respond to that.
"Um... how?"

"There is a ritual that allows one to purposely enter one's own soul space, which is itself a manifestation of one's soul. By this means I can examine the extent to which I am able to compare how similar or different from a mortal soul it has become."

"Okay, I guess that makes sense, but what do you need me for?"

"I don't know for certain that I have a soul space. My soul is not natural. I cannot know which characteristics it maintains and which it does not. If I attempt to enter a limbo that does not exist, my consciousness could be lost forever. That is why I need you. I can link our souls temporarily and bring you into my soul space with me, or if I do not have one then we will fall safely back into yours. You have already proven to have one."

"I don't... I'm not comfortable with this."

"Nevertheless," Voldemort said, his expression darkening. "You owe it to me."

Harry turned away. It suddenly became clear why the Dark Lord had not let him forget the debt ... the debts he had acquired to his patron. He felt scared, angry, guilty, and vaguely sick. He didn't know what to do. What could he do? He was trapped here. Voldemort had planned it. He would not let him simply walk away.

"This is dangerous," he said sharply.

"Less than you might think. We cannot disrupt a soul space nor can we be trapped there indefinitely. We will observe and then we will leave."

Rather than reassure Harry, it made him even more reluctant to go. He had been in a limbo before, and he knew pain and dangers could exist there. Voldemort didn't understand that their magic would be useless and that put him at a considerable disadvantage. Harry doubted he would appreciate this pointed out to him and hedged the subject.

"And you're okay with that? Me seeing your soul?"

"You've seen far more than that. Or don't you remember?"

How could he possibly forget?

That first Solstice ritual, the potency of the magic, the mind-altering revelations. He had seen Voldemort then, from the shredded corruption of his mutilated spirit to the mesmerizing beauty of the Earth's love and the Dark Lord's own unbending will. Whatever he would see now, it could not be any more terrifying or personal than what he had seen then.

He must have sensed Harry's resistance was wavering, because Voldemort moved closer and slipped an arm around his shoulder to lead him towards the star.

"Don't be so nervous. I am hardly likely to risk either of us or do something unforgivable. You have trusted me with your life; certainly you can trust me with this."

Harry wasn't so sure of that either, but he did not resist or say anything further. He sensed he could not win this argument and to persist would cause more harm than good. He did not know how far Voldemort would go to get his way. So he let himself be settled on a cushion, his legs folded underneath him, and accepted the tiny porcelain cup when it was handed to him.

It looked like water. It tasted like water, albeit unpleasantly warm.

It made him instantly dizzy, and he was only halfway through the cup before he felt the Dark Lord catch him as he fell over and then the strange warmth of floor beneath him as he was laid down.

Harry did not wake up. He did not open his eyes. He did not blink. There was simply a moment where he was in the conservatory and another where he was not. What there was, however, was a moment of disorientation as if he had apparated a great distance to a place with different elevation and weather. Darkness and the dull roar and sudden snap of fire dominated his senses, but these were not the only things that drew his awareness. There was the sound and smell of water, the creak of wood, and the feel of a balmy breezy against his skin.

His first thought was that he was on a ship, but as he sat up he realized he was on a pier of some kind. At least, something like a pier.

A walkway about five feet across and made of heavy wood timbers stretched out before him and behind him, but how far he couldn't say. It was dark, the sky empty or perhaps not even there, and a haze surrounded everything, but lay particularly thick beneath the walkway where the sound of water lapping against the support columns could be heard. The only light was a series of torches every eight feet or so that faded behind the thickening haze and disappeared in the distance. The air was thick with humidity and the dull droning of insects, broken by the cry of some strange animal call or a splash of water from down below.

Harry thought of places he had read about in story books and watched on television as a child. Pirate coves and swamps and exotic places where the snakes and crocodiles were as great a danger as murderers and bandits.

Not that he expected to be attacked by a pirate or even a crocodile. If this place were anything like his own soul space, it was not intended to alarm or frighten. The danger came from falling into a sense of complacency.

"It's dark."

Harry spun around. The Dark Lord stood behind him as if he had been there the entire time. Harry didn't question it.

"You are most comfortable in dark places," Harry said knowingly, although Voldemort had never said or implied such a thing. Voldemort turned from surveying what little could be made out in the gloom to Harry.

"Why do you say that?"

"This place is intended to make you comfortable. It's a waiting place."

"Ah, that is true," Voldemort acknowledged and went back to looking around. Harry climbed to his feet and felt a swell of unease as the wood creaked loudly under his weight.

"I shouldn't be here," he said with certainty. "How do I leave?"

"Why in such a hurry? Are you afraid of what you might find?"

Harry ignored the suggestion of his cowardice.

"You know you have a soul space now. You don't need me here. Just let me out."

"You will go when I say you may go and not before. I wish to explore this place. Come."

The Dark Lord moved away and within moments became little more than a vague shadow against the gloom and then disappeared altogether. Harry hurried after him and nearly ran into his back, his appearance even more sudden than his disappearance. Voldemort gave him an amused smile which was met with nothing but an intensely irritated look. They walked along quietly for a long time, exploring the walkway which proved to branch out in different routes in different places, turning their path into a labyrinth. Sometimes the paths lead to dead ends, sometimes to open platforms, sometimes in loops, and others just kept going on indefinitely until they narrowed unexpectedly or started to rot beneath their feet and they were forced to turn around. Shapes formed and disintegrated against the fog, never quite close enough to be distinguished before fading away again. The insect drone was joined by bird calls and the growls of unseen beasts, the balmy wind rustling unseen vegetation and the water below.

The Dark Lord seemed to find the atmosphere soothing.

Harry did not.

The longer they stayed, the further they went and the more uneasy he became. The muggy air left him unable to determine if he felt too hot or too cold, and his eyes began to ache from trying to make out shapes and dangers in the gloom. Although they intended to go nowhere in particular, he couldn't help but feel they were getting increasingly lost. The world, dark and alive, seemed to be closing in around him in a claustrophobic collapse.

"Please, can we go now?" he asked. His voice sounded strangely breathless, as if he had been running and was exhausted and he realized he was exhausted, but he didn't know why.

"Go? We've barely looked around."

"We could spend eternity 'looking around' and never be done. Please, I shouldn't be here."

"Being where you're not supposed to be seems to be a common enough occurrence that I should not think you would be bothered by it overly much," Voldemort said idly.

"Don't even go there. Those were accidents."

The Dark Lord snorted.

"Your 'accidents' tend to come down on my head. I think you can tough it out yourself for a while."

Normally, Harry would have taken these comments in stride and perhaps even laughed a little, but circumstances were not normal and the pervading sense of 'wrongness' had made him edgy. It didn't help that he had begun to realize that Voldemort had manipulated him into his current situation. He had played on Harry's trust and his guilt in order to get him here, and now that he had him where he wanted, the Dark Lord was bullying him shamelessly. Harry had caused a lot of problems, but those problems had almost all stemmed from his relationship with the Dark Lord and the baggage that inevitably followed such an association. He had suffered just as much, no... He had suffered more than the Dark Lord as a direct result of their association, and he didn't appreciate it being dismissed or forgotten as some sort of triviality.

"Fuck you!"

Voldemort's blinked. It seemed to take a moment for Harry's words to sink in.

"What... did you just say?"

There was still more shock there than anger, but the anger was coming. Harry could feel it, but he didn't care. He was scared, sick, and Voldemort had run slipshod over him one too many times today. He was tired of being the only one who was sorry about anything and everything.

"I said 'fuck' and 'you'. As in 'fuck you, you selfish prick'. What will it take for you to be satisfied? Do you truly believe I owe you something or is it just a convenient excuse to get your way?"

Voldemort's hand twitched, and Harry saw it. Let him know he saw it and smirked with a level of vitriol he'd rarely ever directed at his mentor. There were no wands here, no magic except in the place itself. If it came down to a fight, they were not too unevenly matched.

"You little brat... after everything I've given you."

Harry barked out a laugh without humor.

"Given me? You don't give me anything I don't have to pay for one way or another. You don't give gifts, remember?"

The Dark Lord stared at him, his anger disappearing into an unreadable blankness. Harry had either caught him off guard or else his anger had deepened into something truly dangerous, hidden until the moment of attack. The younger wizard felt his uneasiness growing, the claustrophobic darkness closing in even tighter now that his mentor was firmly on the other side of a battle Harry had started. Battles, however, were something he knew and understood and rather than back down or clam up he found his own anger and defiance merely growing.

"Gifts," Voldemort began, his tone cold, "are for friends and family, of which we are neither, but do not assume there are no debts owed between us. How have you been tallying them so that you believe them settled?"

Harry felt his anger grow but under that anger was a fierce and piercing pain at the Dark Lord's words. Not friends? Not family?

Perhaps not in the strictest sense, but there was a kinship there that had come close. Something that bordered on both.

But apparently he had been deluding himself. Or the Dark Lord had misled him. Probably both.

"Sorry," Harry said, matching his tone even if his face revealed everything. "I never did anything because I thought I owed it to you. Keeping track just seemed... trivial. My mistake."

He turned on his heels and started to walk away. It was stupid and reckless, but he didn't want... no, he couldn't stand to be near Voldemort at the moment. He felt himself unraveling. This place, this awful place was making him sick. Irrational. He would rather suffer it alone though. The Dark Lord was making it worse.

"Where are you going?" the elder wizard asked. His voice was still cold, but was that a touch of concern he heard? No. It was just another delusion or a trick. He didn't turn around.

"To find a way out of here. It'll be one less debt I owe you," he snarled, quickening his pace now that he felt the other was following him.

"Harry, stop! We can't separate here. You'll be stuck."

Harry laughed, continuing to walk... stumble. Was it getting darker? The torches running low? The distance between the two wizards was increasing and a glance over his shoulder revealed the Dark Lord was little more than a shadow against the gloom and fading fast. "Not too much fun from the other end of things, is it? What will you give me to turn around? Will we be even yet? Or will-"

The walkway disappeared beneath his feet. He did not have time to decide if it was merely his own inattention or whether the wooden beams simply decided not exist from one moment to the next. He fell into the wet darkness beneath him or perhaps it rose up to ensnare him and for a moment he wondered if he would fall straight through the fog and just keep going, falling and falling for all of eternity. The wondering moment ended with him slamming face-first into water.

The impact was jarring. His back and neck felt as if they'd shattered, but he didn't have time to find out if it they had.

Water had already lodged itself up his nose and into his lungs, and he was drowning almost immediately. He flailed to the surface instinctively and coughed up a vile broth of swamp muck and struggled to keep his head atop the water. Panic filled him.

He was hydrophobic. A not unreasonable fear of drowning had developed after several close calls both in the real world and in his own soul space, and now he was surrounded by the element which seemed most intent on destroying him and in the darkness he could see nothing but the glow of torches against the fog nearly thirty feet above him. He could not see land or the support beams of the walkway (if there even were any) or a boat or anything he might use to escape drowning.

"Harry?" he heard from somewhere above him. Voldemort. He was still looking for him. Of course he was, he couldn't leave without him, now could he? Who knew what damage he could do wandering around this place?

This depressing and somewhat aggravating thought was met with a considerably more heartening discovery as his foot brushed something solid beneath him. He felt around a bit more, and feeling like an idiot, stood up. The water only reached about midway up his chest.

It was something. He couldn't say he was happy yet, but at least drowning didn't seem imminent.

That left whatever delightful beasties that roamed the Dark Lord's inner world to worry about.

"Harry? Where are you?"

"I'm down here!" he shouted back. The words echoed heavily, and Harry wasn't entirely certain where exactly they came from and where exactly they went. Was the Dark Lord right above him or had he moved further off, not realizing where exactly Harry had fallen or that

he had fallen at all? Merlin, he felt like a fool. He was going to have to ask for help. Another thing he would owe the Dark Lord for.

"Where? Harry?"

The voice was getting further away, and Harry shouted after him again. He waited for a reply. Nothing. He tried again. Still nothing. It was official.

Harry had misplaced himself yet again.

He felt another swell of irrational anger. Anger at his situation, anger at himself for not paying attention, anger at Voldemort for bringing him here in the first place. He let out a scream of frustration and listened to it shatter into a hundred echoes and scatter into the balmy night, sending birds flying and little animals scurrying in fright.

He hoped Voldemort heard it. He hoped he heard it and it scared him.

Not that he thought it would.

There was no point to waiting around to find out. Waiting wasn't in his nature. He started to walk, sticking his arms out around him. It was difficult. He was blind, the water was relatively warm but dragged at his clothes and body, and the ground beneath his feet was sandy and shifting. He continued anyway, fed by anger and his intense desire to escape the water somehow.

Eventually he found a support beam and from then on it was fairly easy to move from one beam to another, and while he didn't know where he was going he at least knew wasn't wandering away into an abyss. Every so often he would call out. If the Dark Lord did hear him, Harry didn't hear him shout back.

Harry wasn't sure how long he wandered blindly. It could have been minutes or hours or an entire day. The nature of the place made it difficult to grasp time. It was a place meant for waiting without feeling as if you were waiting. A supposedly safe place, but not for Harry. He thought about it long and hard, and even as irrational as he knew he was, he felt at least part of it was because of this place and that there

might be reasons for that. He was not supposed to be here. No one but Voldemort was ever supposed to be here.

Time passed and Harry kept moving. He began to feel more tired than angry and his mind started to wander to random things. He wondered what had become of his watch back in Hausteheim and the little box of Carrigan's unseen treasures. He wondered about Hermione and how she was managing her time back at Malfoy Manor, locked in with the man she most hated and a mother she felt so betrayed by. He thought about the friends he had made and hadn't seen in forever. Fleur, Hagrid, Alyssa and Morgana, Tom, McGunny...

His foot suddenly caught on something, causing him to trip and come up sputtering. Once he had regained his balance, he felt around with his foot to see what was responsible. He found a root firmly planted in the ground on one end and wandering off in another direction. He considered for a few moments and then followed it. Following the walkway had led him nowhere. If he found a tree, perhaps he would at least be able to climb out of the water and rest.

The root was longer than he had anticipated. It seemed to go on and on and on, growing gradually thicker but never really reaching its source. And then the darkness around him seemed to lessen, first becoming a dark gray fog, then slightly less dark gray fog so that he could make out the shape of his hand in front of his face. Then the air around him began to take on an amber hue and in the distance he could make out the familiar warm glow of fire.

Closer and closer he came to the blaze which was growing larger and larger before his eyes until the heat of it had burned away the fog entirely and left him looking up in stunned awe.

Before him stood a tree, but not a tree like any he had seen before. Its trunk and branches were massive and black as pitch as they stretched up into the sky and down into the swamp like a thousand gnarled, skeletal hands. The leaves, if they could, in fact, be called leaves, were shaped like maple's and burned like hot coals, glowing brilliant orange in the darkness and then bright yellow whenever a breeze stroked the embers. And yet the tree was not consumed. It did not dissolve into ash or snap into kindling.

It was made of fire itself.

It was beautiful.

Very carefully, Harry reached out to touch it. It was hot against his hand, but it did not burn him. He climbed out of the water, and once out he found the branches seemed to be made for climbing, and he went even further up into his new sanctuary. He tested the heat of the leaves, and while they were even hotter than the trunk and branches, they didn't burn him either.

He stripped down to his underclothes and left them to dry and found himself a comfortable place in a natural niche against the trunk to rest. He sighed and prepared himself to sleep. He was so tired, and for the first time since he had arrived in this strange place, he felt safe. The animal sounds were distant here, the water safely below, and even the fog seemed to have fled from this sanctuary. For a while, he stared up into the canopy, admired the lines of black against the burning glow, and listened to the mixture of lapping water and rustling leaves in the breeze.

He was so tired...

He couldn't say that he slept. If he had, there had been no dream, and from one waking moment to the next he had seen only the slow dance of fire leaves above him and heard a monotonous 'ssshhh' around him. He thought of nothing and no one. His mind was comfortably blank. Time was meaningless here, whether he was moving or resting.

But when a hand touched his face and a voice whispered his name, he knew he had been there a long time. Longer than he should have been.

"Harry, wake up."

"I'm not asleep," he murmured and tried to look from the mesmerizing dance of light and darkness above him to the man he knew was in front of him. However, the only thing he could move was his eyes,

and they landed on Voldemort, whose expression was such that he knew something had gone very wrong. "I can't move."

"It's the tree. It's grown up around you."

The Dark Lord was kneeling in front of him, braced between the thick branches but looking vaguely distressed. Harry tried to move again, this time more vigorously. He met with slightly more success, but there was a stabbing sensation for every centimeter he managed followed by the feeling of his own blood spilling free.

"Don't move," Voldemort warned belatedly.

"Get me out of here... please," he begged, panic rising even as he felt himself growing even more tired.

"Just don't move. I don't think it's intentionally trying to hurt you."

Even as he said this, Harry could feel his mentor's hands clawing the wooden tendrils encasing him, splintering them beneath his hands. But there was so much of it and it seemed to keep growing around him.

"Not hurt me? It's trying to fucking eat me," he said desperately, even as his eyes started to slip shut. "I can't stay awake."

"You have to. Just a little while longer and I'll have you out of there."

There was a touch of desperation in Voldemort's voice that Harry had never heard before, and he opened his eyes again to look at the other curiously.

"Why do you even care? We're not family. Not even friends."

The man grimaced.

"A misleading choice of words on my part."

Harry felt himself nodding off again.

"So we are friends?"

"No. Whatever we are, we could never be friends."

He fell silent, the previous hurt and disappointment returning. He closed his eyes. He was so tired and he didn't want to feel that way anymore. There was a sharp slap to his cheek, snapping him awake.

"Ow! What was that for?"

"Stay awake. It grows faster when you surrender your will to it."

"Again, why do you even care?"

Voldemort leveled a glare at him that Harry had once seen make a grown wizard piss himself. Harry found it interesting enough to muster up the will to glare back.

"Stupid child. We are not family and we are not friends," the Dark Lord said curtly. "Whatever we are, only the gods might have a word for. What we've done to one another, for each other, against each other... the most passionate of lovers and the most vicious of enemies would not have conceived of attempting. We are beyond mortal understanding or sentiment. We are beyond their pale and paltry labels."

Harry could only stare back at him, a lump forming in his throat. He was suddenly terrified and relieved and overwhelmed.

But he was no longer tired.

Slowly but steadily the Dark Lord tore the wood away, until eventually Harry could move his arms and help him. Their hands became bloodied with splinters and their sweat stung their own wounds, but they did not stop, and with Harry's rebellious spirit fanned once again the fire tree finally gave way and released him. Voldemort neatly caught him as he fell free and settled him safely beside him. They sat there for a moment, heaving from exertion.

"Can we go yet?" Harry panted.

Voldemort nodded. He too seemed to have seen enough. From his boot, the Dark Lord pulled out a large hunting knife. Harry gave it a curious look and started to ask what it was for, when he suddenly found it plunged into his chest.

Harry woke with a gasp and a choke and found himself staring up at Voldemort's face, framed by the starry sky of the conservatory's ceiling. The man's crimson eyes were open, but they were empty and unseeing. He sat up, displacing the hands that had been holding his head steady. He had barely righted himself when Voldemort gave a jerk, blinked once, and looked around.

Harry gave him an annoyed look and rubbed the soreness in his chest. A memory of being stabbed lingered.

"What was that with the knife?"

The Dark Lord smirked.

"Didn't you know killing yourself in a soul space is the only way to force yourself out of it?"

Harry had been to his own limbo once and had managed to find a way to escape. By drowning, unfortunately. He hadn't realized the metaphorical death had been a necessity, but now he could sort of understand it.

"You might have mentioned it before."

"I am fortunate you did not break your neck falling off the pier. It would have made my own return extremely difficult."

"Not a part of your grand master plan?" Harry said. He was going for sardonic, but it came off as petulant.

"A great deal of what happened did not go according to plan. I hadn't realized taking you into my soul space would have such a negative effect on you. I hadn't even realized anything was wrong until you became so hostile and stormed off."

This answer did not impress Harry but he decided to let it go. It wasn't as if he had any right to judge. He had made his own colossal mistakes with magic, spiritually based magic in particular. He tried to climb to his feet but found he could barely move. Looking to Voldemort, he expected to see the same weakness, but the man got to his feet easily, even energetically.

The discrepancy became even more obvious when the Dark Lord attempted to help him to his feet and Harry's magus hypersentia went crazy, tingling along his skin like electricity.

"What the hell?"

Voldemort carefully laid him back down and Harry had to let him. He didn't know if he could even sit up now.

"Ugh, what's wrong with me?"

For a while, the Dark Lord did not answer him. He drew out his wand and cast several spells Harry didn't recognize and cautiously prodded at him with one of his fingers. The younger wizard was getting increasingly worried. Then, in an alarming turn, Voldemort took the glove from his false arm and examined it as well. Harry couldn't see it all from where he was laying, but he knew whatever the other man saw disturbed him.

"It seems... there was another side affect I had not anticipated. I appear to have drained your magic."

Voldemort let his fake arm hover over Harry's face so he could see. The limb, previously rough and miscolored from the Dark Lord's natural one, now appeared elegant and perfectly matched.

Harry, near-paralyzed from magic deprivation shock, glared at him.

"You so owe me for this."

"Do not allow yourself to be discouraged, Commander Mandalari. They do not doubt your plan so much as they doubt their own

strength to execute it," Dumbledore said, pouring his guest a glass of amber liquor and sliding it across the table. Mandalari accepted the offering with a nod, but did not appear appeased. He had been quartered in a private tent and had waited there patiently as the leaders of the rebellion gathered to discuss his plan, only leaving occasionally to answer questions or smoke a cigarette. Finally, the rebellion leaders had come to a decision.

And Mandalari hadn't cared for it one little bit.

"If we can recruit more fighters or even if we land a few more decisive victories, I do not doubt that they will wish to hear your plan again," Dumbledore reassured him. The Italian scowled into his drink.

"There will be no more fighters and there will be no decisive victories. The Dark Lord is too strong. Too smart. If they don't do it soon, they will not have another chance."

"Even Voldemort-"

Mandalari flinched. He had not used to flinch at that name. He had not known it was the true name of the devil before.

"- cannot plan for everything. His sudden withdrawal to Britain is proof of that."

"We do not know what caused that."

"I have a few suspicions," he said, with a touch of humor. He suspected Harry, even though there was not a shred of proof to support the idea and he had even less understanding of what the boy might have done. The Italian gave him an expectant look, but he did not elaborate. He doubted the man would appreciate him bringing Harry into the conversation.

"I don't have the influence I once had," Dumbledore said instead. "I cannot force their hands. I wouldn't want to in this case. They must believe they can succeed before going through with it. For now, we must do what we can in Germany. Grow the resistance, destabilize the invaders, and wait for the opportunity to present itself again."

"And if it doesn't?"

Dumbledore merely chuckled.

"My dear friend, I thought you were a man of faith?"

Fleur stumbled into Bill's apartment at a quarter to one, cold and tired and desperate not to be alone. Bill, because he was somehow perfect in all the ways she needed him to be, was still up and waiting for her. He took one look at her and ushered her into his tiny bathroom for a hot shower. When she got out, he dressed her in his ugliest Weasley sweater and gave her a sugar cookie and a glass of red wine. It was all so ridiculously mismatched, she couldn't help but smile a little in spite of everything.

They cuddled on his bed, sitting up against a pile of cushions and looking out the adjacent window to the city glimmering outside. Finally, she allowed herself to relax and enjoy her cookie and her wine (it had to have been a gift because it was actually decent) and softness of the over-sized sweater wrapped around her and Bill's warm body pressed against her. She could almost be happy right then. She could almost be happy if she could only stop thinking.

"What happened?" he asked finally.

"It was just... a really bad day."

"How bad?" He knew her 'bad days' were not like his bad days or an average person's bad day. Her line of work put 'bad days' on a completely different level.

"We lost two of our own today. Well, not musketeers, but Aurors. Good guys. I 'ad met zem once before."

He kissed her hair and squeezed her tighter. She squeezed him back, and being not entirely human, bruised a few ribs in the process.

"God, Avers 'ad a wife. We 'ad to go and deliver ze news. Nearly Christmas and we've got to go and tell 'er 'e wasn't coming 'ome. I zought she was going to die right zere on ze doorstep. It was awful."

He nodded but didn't say he understood even though he did. He had thought the same thing would happen to his mother when his father had been sentenced to Azkaban, a death sentence that lingered for years. He had seen more than his fair share of widows and widowers in England, but this was France and these things were a rarity.

"What happened to them?" he asked, because talking about the dead was always somehow easier than talking about those left behind.

"I saw ze crime scene, but I don't know ze details. Zey were... torn to pieces, but I don't zink it was a spell. Whatever did zat to zem was not 'uman."

That did not narrow things down particularly. Paris was a hotspot for various races and mix-bloods. Fleur, herself, was part veela and strong enough to kill a man with her bare hands if necessary. There were a host of other beings capable of the same thing.

"Do you have any ideas?" he asked.

"I don't know, but I doubt it was random. Balthus is trying to track down zer supervisor to find out what zer assignment was. The necrotists* haven't even touched the bodies yet. I'll find out tomorrow."

"Tomorrow or today? It's Christmas Eve now."

She blinked and smiled but there were tears in her eyes.

"Merry Christmas."

He hugged her tightly and let her bury her face into his neck.

"Sssshhh... it's okay. It's okay. It doesn't last. Tonight, cry it all out, sleep, and when the sun comes up we'll go spend the morning with

your family, and then you will go out with Balthus and you'll catch the son-of-a-bitch who did this."

She nodded against his shoulder.

"Oui, zat is ze plan."

"It's a great plan."

Snape agreed to meet Lucius a few days before Christmas, but only on the condition that they not do so at the manor. There were a variety of reasons for this, and he wasn't afraid to let Lucius know them either but didn't have to because they understood each other very well. So they had opted for a shopping excursion in Coventry. This was the first Christmas in a long time that Snape had anyone to shop for, and he wasn't above taking advantage of his friend's expertise on finding a suitable gift for one's wife while they discussed whatever it was the general wanted to discuss.

"Mr. Potter decided not to join us?" Lucius asked idly, as they perused a small jewelry store beneath Lucius' interest but within range for his more modest friend. Ira did not have a lot of jewelry, but she wore the butterfly brooch Snape had given her almost every day, and he thought she might appreciate a little variety. His friend had agreed to his logic. "I do hope he will be available for the Christmas Party. Hermione would be so disappointed if he did not come."

"Hermione or yourself? Looking for an opportunity to drown him in the punchbowl?"

Lucius put on a look of mock insult. Snape felt amused despite himself. The Malfoy patriarch had been in surprisingly good humor, perhaps a result of his return to good health if not good standing. Optimism was for idiots, but Snape thought things might turn out alright just this once.

"I'm terribly offended you would think so ill of me," Lucius said, continuing his charade of hurt. "I merely wanted to thank the boy properly. It seems I owe him a debt of gratitude."

"Or rather a life debt."

Snape didn't like to ruin the congenial mood, but he had a greater responsibility to both his ward and his friend than pandering to their good graces. He needed to keep the peace, even if it was only a stalemate. Lucius grimaced a bit but continued as if unaffected.

"A minor disparity in rank that I am sure will be quickly resolved. These are dangerous times we live in, after all, and he's so talented at getting himself into situations. We may yet start our association anew now that the primary cause of contention between us is dissolved."

"The betrothal?" Snape asked rhetorically. "How did Crouch take it?"

"With his usual venom, I would say. Do not worry; his anger is directed entirely at me. I doubt he will even glance at the girl again."

This was good. Crouch was from a very proud family with a long history of vendettas and a very short list of grudges left unsatisfied. Hermione was a bright girl, but she would not have been prepared if he had directed his revenge at her. It was a piece of information Lucius would not have been required to give and that could easily have created unnecessary worry for Snape. He decided to return the gesture.

"Harry is still with the Dark Lord, but has expressed that he will be attending either with myself or in our master's company."

"He is still with the Dark Lord? I had not heard he was seen with him since Tuesday."

"Mmmm, yes, it seems there was some sort of... accident. He has not been up to traveling as extensively as our master requires."

"An accident? He was not hurt?"

Snape tried to detect any trace of eagerness in his friend's tone, but there was only general curiosity. He didn't even try to fake sympathy.

"Only his pride. His letter was rather terse. I imagine the Dark Lord bested him in some way. What about that one?"

Lucius looked at the necklace Snape had pointed out and shook his head.

"Not with her hair color. You might try a cameo. They are a few over there," he suggested, and they moved to another corner of the store. Once there, Lucius continued. "Despite what you may think, I did not invite you here to talk about Harry. There's something I needed to discuss with you before the party so that we don't have any sort of misunderstanding."

Snape abandoned the cameos and turned his attention fully to Lucius.

"I have found another fiancé for Hermione. Don't give me that look, Severus! It wasn't my idea!"

He was still giving Lucius 'that look' which was commonly interpreted as 'oh, really' but really meant 'you're full of shit'.

"Do you have any idea of the grief Narcissa gave me after I called off the betrothal with Crouch? I haven't had a minute's peace since I told her."

Alright, he had not considered that, but he could definitely believe it. The esteemed Lady Malfoy was more than a match for her husband, and she had been the only enthusiastic supporter of his little scheme. He doubted she would have been satisfied with any answer he gave her for suddenly changing it.

"So you decided to start the same scheme over again?"

"Of course not. This fellow isn't anything like Crouch. You might even like him."

"Hardly indicative of good character, Lucius."

"Fine, Hermione might even like him, if you somehow interpret that as a good indicator. Harry seemed to like him well enough."

Now Snape was curious. He was not an opponent to betrothals in general, and he believed they had many good qualities as long as the match was suitable. If Narcissa had approved his choice, the gentleman had to be of good social standing, and if Harry had approved, he was probably of agreeable temperament. Not that he fully trusted either of their judgments on the matter of suitable husband material for his goddaughter.

"Have I met him?" he asked.

"Sort of. Briefly. His name is Reginald Stratus. He was in charge of protecting Harry during his visit to Ireland. He's also my personal assistant."

Snape thought back on the day. There had been very few survivors, but none of them had particularly stood out to him at the time. He had been more concerned about Harry and then the Dark Lord after his amputation. He thought he might remember Harry discussing the man briefly as he explained what had happened. He seemed to think Stratus had been very brave. This would normally count against him in Snape's estimation, but since the man had managed to survive the faerie attack and the Dark Lord's anger at his initial failure to protect his protégé, he was clearly more resourceful than foolish. That he was Lucius' personal assistant was a bit concerning, but that also suggested that the man was at least competent.

"I would like to meet him," Snape asked.

"Of course. He'll be at the Christmas Ball. You can grill him there."

Snape nodded in acknowledgment. He fully intended to do just that.

"Do you still intend to cut Hermione's schooling short?"

Lucius sighed.

"No. Stratus expressed the desire to have a fully educated wife. Secondary and University. It's going to be a long engagement."

The headmaster was already starting to like the man. Hermione would not be happy to learn she was once again betrothed, but perhaps the long engagement would allow her to warm up to the idea. She was not a silly romantic after all. Even if this Stratus were not the love of her life, she might be willing to settle down with him if he offered her the respect and the freedom she deserved.

"Have you told her yet?"

"Not yet. Narcissa thought it might be a good idea for Stratus to strike up a courtship with her first before suggesting marriage. She seemed to think Hermione was somehow prejudiced against Crouch because of how they were introduced."

They both shared a look. Snape let out a snort. However, Narcissa did have a good idea. It would perhaps be best to see how they got along before he decided to offer his own stamp of approval. It would also give him the opportunity to do a thorough background check.

"And what does Stratus get out of this?"

"A dowry of course," Lucius said bluntly. "And a rather large number of influential people to count amongst his acquaintances, myself and the Dark Lord's protégé not least among them. He's a pureblood and from a respectable family, but he's a third son. His marriage prospects were slim so he joined the military and focused on building his career. He's done quite well for himself considering."

A self-made man then. Another point in his favor, but Lucius was hardly going to point out the negatives. He seemed to want Snape's approval for this. Perhaps it was his way of mending fences between them. It would be nice if it were true, but he was not an optimist any more than he was a fool.

"Very well, I will meet this man and try to keep an open mind."

"Thank you, Severus. That is all I ask."

"I believe I figured it out," Voldemort said as he entered the study. Harry was right where he had left him that morning, curled up on the

sofa and glaring death as he entered. "The tree is an aspect of my soul and was absorbing your magic and filtering it, allowing my own body to safely take it into itself and use that extra magic to heal itself. The soul is the source of magic, after all, so it makes sense that it might have the ability to do something with magic that the body cannot."

Harry gave him an odd look.

"If the soul is the source of magic, then why are most magic users born into magical families? If it was merely a magical soul wandering around in search of a body, shouldn't it be a lot more random?"

"Not necessarily. Magic is attracted to magic. Would it be that strange if a soul, capable of magic, was attracted to a fetus within a magical parent? Muggleborns and squibs are merely a sort of accident."

"But if magical inheritance isn't involved, what about magical traits that only run in families? Like Parseltongue?"

Voldemort stopped to consider.

"That's a good question. Perhaps the soul is a source of magic, but the body might define certain limitations and potentials on how that magic is expressed."

Harry wasn't sure what to make of that and frankly was too tired to care very much.

"I don't suppose you could give my magic back? Since you were able to absorb it," Harry asked peevishly. Magic deprivation was unpleasant enough as it was, but having the cause of that deprivation practically skipping around him with excess energy was exceptionally aggravating. It didn't help that Voldemort seemed to find his surliness hilarious.

"No," Voldemort said. "It's already been converted into something I can use. If I could somehow give you my excess magic, it would kill you. Probably. Although... Where did you put the book?"

Harry pulled a small journal out from the cushions and hurled it at the man, who caught it easily.

"Careful, Harry, this belongs to you as much as it does to me," he said and went to his desk for a pen. He had been carefully documenting 'the experiment' and had even let Harry read through his notes and add comments of his own. He briefly skimmed some of the comments and found they were not very flattering. Oh well, it was only a rough draft.

"What are you writing now?"

"Possible future experiments."

"Count me out."

Voldemort just smiled to himself. Harry would feel better soon enough, and then he might be more open-minded. After finishing his notation, he closed the book and set it on the shelf for later. He would rather Harry not read it just yet.

"I dropped by Hogwarts and got something for you," he said to his protégé. "I think it will make you feel better."

He pulled something out of his pocket and handed it to Harry. The boy blinked, then relaxed, his irritated expression melting away.

"I hadn't thought about this," he said, holding his keystone tightly in his hands. He had left the keystone at Hogwarts, safely tucked under his pillow, afraid he would forget it or lose it in the house. He brought it to rest against his chest. It felt cool against his skin, but left him feeling warm as his magic flowed back into him. He felt immediately stronger, if not fully recovered.

"Better?" Voldemort asked.

"Much."

"Good. You have an appointment with a tailor today, and then Lucius' party tomorrow."

Harry let out an exhausted huff. He had forgotten about the party. While he was recovering he had a legitimate reason not to go, and even now he wasn't certain he was up to facing the general, but he had little choice in the matter, it seemed. He would just have to find a reason to stick close to Voldemort or perhaps Snape. He could fake a dizzy spell if necessary and cut out early.

Nevertheless, after three days cooped up with nothing to do, Harry was looking forward to going out and doing something. Anything.

It turned out that his appointment with the tailor did not include the Dark Lord, who had engagements elsewhere and left him in Victoria's capable hands. Harry was glad of this, for in addition to catching up with her he was able to set his own pace rather than try to keep up with his mentor's. The tailor was one he had visited a few times before and already knew his preferences but insisted on another round of measurements.

"Young men are so elastic," the tailor had laughed. "I never know what shape they'll come in from one week to the next." Victoria was sent to look at materials in the shop while Harry stripped down to his skivvies to be measured and was shortly left alone altogether while the tailor went out to gather some samples.

"Well, haven't you grown up."

Harry nearly jumped out of skin and spun around to see who or what had somehow snuck into a room with only one door. A door he happened to be facing almost the entire time.

"Skeeter!" he hissed, feeling himself flush with embarrassment. Of all the people he didn't want to be caught with in only his underwear, Rita Skeeter ranked second in the world, right after Lestrage. "What are you doing in here?"

She had the audacity to leer at him, and if he hadn't left his wand with Victoria he would have cast a blinding curse the reporter on principle alone.

"Oh, Harry-dear, there's no need to be shy. You have nothing to be ashamed of."

He could feel himself turn redder by the second and that was no doubt her intention. She thrived on making people uncomfortable, and she was very good at it. However, he didn't believe she had transfigured herself and followed him just to ogle his teenage body. At least, he hoped not.

"What do you want?"

Her smile was all shiny red plastic and hard to look at directly without thinking of poisonous things.

"I heard you were going to Malfoy's Christmas Ball again this year."

His discomfort took on a sharper edge of wariness.

"Yeah? And?"

"Weeeellll... I was wondering if I could ask a teeny tiny, itsy bitsy little favor..."

Necrotist: a wizarding medical examiner/mortician.

P.S. Special thanks again to Arwen and FiveofDiamonds for betaing. Particularly, FiveofDiamonds who had so much on her plate already! Best of luck with your studies!

Book VI

Chapter 23: The Fall of a King

Harry entered Malfoy Manor a few steps behind the Dark Lord, who was stalking about the premises like a wolf on the prowl and nearly flattened the terrified little house elf (already terrified of clothing simply on principle) at the door when he hurled his cloak and hat at it. Harry politely refrained from assaulting their coat checkers with textiles, but the care he took in surrendering his outer garb had more to do with the tiny passenger he was smuggling within the folds of his cloak than out of consideration for the servants.

He couldn't quite reason with himself on why he had agreed to sneak Skeeter inside the party. They were not friends, and she had no real power over him. Quite the opposite, in fact. All he would have to do was whisper in the right ear that Rita Skeeter, a source of infinite scandal and embarrassment for Court officials everywhere, was herself an unregistered animagus. Even supposing she managed to avoid a trip to Azkaban, her career would be over. If anyone asked why he had relented to her request, he would say it was a moment of weakness; he would have done anything to stop her leering at him in the fitting room at the tailor's. Of course, if anyone ever asked it would likely be during an interrogation and he would disavow her and any prior knowledge of her actions. Whatever mischief-maker's camaraderie existed between them, it did not extend to his protection, and he had made it clear that once inside she was on her own.

Distracted and delayed, by the time Harry turned around Voldemort had already disappeared, no doubt on the war path and intent on terrorizing someone. He hoped it wasn't Lucius. He had requested the Dark Lord refrain from antagonizing the general before Harry had the opportunity to determine where they stood. Harry didn't think the Dark Lord paid him any heed. Voldemort's annoyance with Lucius' recent bumbling, despite the cause behind it, had not dissipated. By the dark wizard's standards, he was exceptionally indulgent towards Harry but never- well, very rarely- to the point where his protégé could be considered a restraining influence.

"Can you tell me where Lord Malfoy is?" he asked the house elf handling his cloak and gloves.

"M-master is in-in-indisposed," he stuttered nervously, perhaps expecting to be punished for being unhelpful.

However, he had answered Harry's question well enough. If Malfoy Sr. was 'indisposed' then he was busy elsewhere and Harry had the time and room to find Hermione and maybe Snape to gather intel before his battle of wills with Lucius.

"And Lady Granger?"

"Y-young mis-mistress is in th-the ballroom, S-sir."

"Thank you," he said offhandedly. The poor house elf nearly fainted.

Voldemort had brought them late, either to spite Lucius or simply because he could, so the party was already in full swing by the time he entered the ballroom. Harry paused at the doorway to admire the spectacle that met his eyes. The Malfoys had outdone themselves this year. The ballroom, normally a cavern of gold and marble, had been transformed into an ice palace. The floor was layered in a sheet of opaque white ice and the walls lined with silver mirrors and crystalline tiles. Above them the ceiling was an arching, asymmetrical whirl of white and blue, like the hollow interior of an ice cave worn by a river. Icicle chandeliers refracted light into rainbow shards and frosted glass lamps emitted a light that softened the edges, granting a dream-like quality to everything it touched. The orchestra was dressed in blues and silvers, their instruments bewitched to appear as if carved of glass. Guests danced a Viennese waltz to the music, twirling about the floor, their reflections caught in the mirrored walls to become spinning kaleidoscopes.

Harry felt an instinctive need to shiver at the sight of so much ice, but it was actually quite warm. He shook himself for good measure anyway and plunged into the crowd. Immediately, he found himself the center of a great deal of attention. Witches and wizards he had met throughout his time shadowing the Dark Lord or else complete strangers cornered him at every turn to make conversation,

attempting to draw him into their little cliques or needle information out of him in the guise of casual banter. It was honestly rather awkward. Harry was used to attention, but typically he had another adult, Voldemort or Snape usually, between him and the crowd for when they became too invasive and a part of him that was still a child twisted uncomfortably at brushing off full-grown men and women directly when they were only showing harmless interest. He did his best to pretending to be on an errand of some importance that he could not afford to be sidetracked from, stalking through crowds rather than rambling and looking around but never making direct eye contact with anyone lest they interpret it as an invitation.

Luckily, his search turned up Hermione rather quickly. She was dancing with a slightly chubby young man with a ruddy complexion and giving him a rather pained smile. He suspected her partner, who wasn't exactly the most graceful dancer, was stepping on her toes, so he waded in to rescue her.

"Pardon me, sir," he said, tapping the man on the shoulder. The wizard turned slightly and froze, as if shocked to see Harry standing there. "Would you mind terribly if I cut in? Thank you."

He snatched Hermione up and spun her away before the man had time to protest. Hermione's smile became instantly more genuine, and she looked ready to laugh at his audacity.

"Thank Merlin, you're here. He was talking to me about the weather for the last ten minutes."

"Egad, the scoundrel!"

"And stepping on my toes. Not that I could feel it anyway in these ridiculous shoes!"

He glanced down at her feet to look at the offending heels and flinched sympathetically. He wondered if they had to cut off one of her toes to fit her into them.

"Do you want to take a break then? We could go somewhere so you can sit down and take off your shoes for a while." Somewhere private where they could also talk about Lucius.

"Soon. Lord Voldemort is here with you, I presume? We'll wait until he's dragged everyone off to the parlor and she won't know I've slipped away."

"Narcissa? She's watching you? Where?"

"Up on the balcony."

He looked around and found the balcony that he had missed during his initial observation. It was right above the entrance he had entered through, an elegant palisade that appeared to be carved out of snow. The space could easily have held forty people, but at the moment it was occupied by their hosts, General and Lady Malfoy, his guardians; Snape and Ira, and one whom he thought might be Lt. Stratus but couldn't be sure. They were standing by the balcony railing, talking and watching the crowd below.

Harry looked away quickly before Lucius caught his eye. He wasn't ready for their confrontation just yet.

"So what is that all about? She never seemed to watch you very closely before."

Hermione sighed.

"She took the end of the engagement pretty hard. She was furious with Lucius, but he seems to have wormed his way back into her good graces again and now she's throwing all her frustration into more husband-hunting. She's had me dancing with every available bachelor she could throw me at."

It wasn't actually funny, but her words brought up some pretty funny mental pictures, and he could help grinning. She rolled her eyes.

"You're awful."

"The very worst. Does she blame me?"

"I don't think Lucius ever told her about your involvement, but she might suspect. Not that she would accuse you. I think you might be on her 'eligible bachelors' list."

"Heaven and Earth, that woman needs a new hobby."

That earned him a smile and a laugh, but soon enough her mind started to wander, and he didn't think it was friendly paths it was taking. Her expression became distant, and despite her mockery of her previous dance partner's clumsiness, she stepped on Harry's toes more than once.

"You know what this reminds me of?" he said, attempting to draw her out of her melancholy.

"Hmm?"

"The first time you taught me to dance. Do you remember? We were right outside those doors, and you tried to teach me the waltz. I kept stepping on your toes and Draco and Natalie laughed at me."

"And then Dobby banished you into a snow bank. I remember that," she said, smiling sweetly. "We were so young then. Isn't it amazing how far we've come since then?"

"I know my dancing has certainly improved. Yours, not so much."

She gave him a friendly swat on the shoulder. He grinned.

"Alright, we can blame it on the tiny shoes."

"Is that Lord Potter?" Tom found himself asking, looking down at the swirl of bodies below. He had missed Harry's entrance, not expecting the young wizard to attend the ball that night, but his attention had been focused on his fiancé enough that he could hardly overlook him when he stole the little mudblood away from her partner. He feigned mild curiosity to cover the swell of irritation at the sight the young witch and wizard made. Laughing and smiling, they looked decidedly

in love. The little trollop had clearly been taking advantage of Tom's absence.

The rest of his party, the Malfoys and the Snapes, moved towards the edge of the balcony and looked to confirm for themselves. Ira smiled down at the pair fondly, but hers was not a sentiment shared by others. Her husband gave an exasperated sigh and rolled his eyes before seeming to lose interest entirely. Narcissa gave an annoyed huff. Tom could imagine what she was thinking. Whatever Harry's intentions, he held too much of Granger's attention and affections to let her seek them in others who might actually be attainable. As long as her Gryffindor cohort kept her company, she was perfectly content to ignore any other possible suitor.

Lucius...

Tom could not even imagine what Lucius was thinking at the moment. His gaze was decidedly fixed on Harry, but his expression was completely unreadable. Was he angry? Curious? Eager?

Afraid?

If he had half a knut's worth of sense, the pompous bastard should be terrified. Harry had all but taken him apart and, with a little help from Tom, he could do so again. Another time though. Right now, Tom was working to ingratiate himself to Snape, a man he fully planned to destroy in the near future.

"My, my," he said, keeping his tone light as he studied Hermione and Harry dancing together. "Will I be competing with the ambassador for the dear lady's affections?"

It was only partly in jest on his part. He had barely seen Harry since the boy's second year at Hogwarts, and he had no idea if the friendship he shared with the wretched girl had changed as their bodies had changed from children to young adults. From where he stood, he could see they were comfortable with each other, even dancing together, but whether there was an undercurrent of attraction, he couldn't ascertain.

"Don't be ridiculous," Lady Malfoy chided gently. "They are friends and nothing more. Practically siblings."

There was a touch of uncertainty in her tone that Tom didn't miss. Was it possible she didn't know where her own foster daughter's heart lay? He cast a quick glance to Lucius. The man caught his gaze and smiled blandly.

"Lord Potter's tastes," he said idly, "tend to run towards more... unconventional fare than our dear Hermione. If she has any feelings of her own towards him, she is smart enough to know better than to entertain them."

Snape gave an inelegant snort.

"Why, Stratus? Are you not up to competing with a schoolboy?"

Tom felt a twinge of annoyance but brushed it aside. Snape's taunt was a feeble one. Harry could hardly be considered a mere 'school boy'. He took the suggestion for what it was. A distraction. Out of everyone there, Snape might have the best idea of what existed between his ward and his goddaughter and the reason why it was not a relationship to be examined too closely.

Or perhaps he was merely testing him for weaknesses. Tom would show him none but those he chose for the other man to see.

"He does have the benefit of proximity," he said idly, testing to see how much the headmaster's words were distraction and how much provocation.

"Lockhart could use an assistant, if you believe it would improve your odds of success."

Provocation then. He met Snape's dour glare with a roguish smirk.

"I don't know. An air of mystery about myself might prove more effective."

"Only if you're actually clumsy and obnoxious with women in person."

"Severus," Ira chided.

"Whatever my inexperience with the fairer sex," he said without rising to the bait, "I do know how to treat a lady of Miss Granger's position properly."

Snape didn't appear impressed but at least he didn't appear disgusted at this point either. He took a sip of his wine and let his dark eyes slide over to Narcissa.

"So much for your hopes for grandchildren then. Perhaps you'll have better luck with Draco."

Everyone looked ready to shout at Snape to just 'shut up', but the unpleasant man was spared the rebuke by the balcony doors swinging open. Voldemort strode into their sanctuary with all the crazed tension of a caged tiger. His stride was long and purposeful, carrying him directly to them even as his eyes danced around the room and swallowed in everything at once. They tensed at his approach. There had been some uncertainty as to whether the Dark Lord would show at all, and despite the weakness it would have exposed to Lucius' enemies and rivals, it was still debatable if the man's presence was actually a good thing. In his current state, Voldemort might start casting curses just to release stress.

His crimson eyes danced from one face to the other, before settling, oddly enough, on Ira. He strode towards her and grinned like the devil.

"If it isn't the enchanting Mrs. Ira Snape. It has been some time since we saw one another, has it not? You're looking exceptionally lovely this evening."

The Dark Lord might as well have cast a stunning hex on the poor woman. She stood absolutely still, wide-eyed, and mute. They had met before and were on congenial terms for the most part, but his overly enthusiastic compliments and attention before everyone else in their assembled party had not only caught her off guard but also terrified her with the possibility that he was about to pull an exceptionally cruel joke of which she was the principle recipient.

Voldemort's grin only widened at her reaction, and he boldly reached out and took her hand to pat it affectionately. She let out a slightly choked sound but didn't move.

"It's always good to see you. How is married life treating you? I was expected a little one by now. I could always use a few extra Snapes laying around. Speaking of which!"

He turned his attention swiftly from Ira to her husband, who met his bright gaze with reserved annoyance. He didn't appreciate the Dark Lord toying with his wife, even if the man had been ignorant of how sensitive the subject of babies was for her at the moment, but he wasn't so foolish as to think he could in any way stop it. He happily accepted his master's somewhat manic regard in his wife's place. Now under mutual scrutiny, Snape realized something significant.

Voldemort had taken off his gloves. Since the amputation of his left arm and its subsequent reappearance, the Dark Lord had never been seen without a pair of sleek, black leather gloves. Whether traversing his domain by horseback or taking tea in his office, the gloves were never absent. Until now. Now the smooth, unmarred flesh of his hands was visible for all to see. Snape knew there had been reasons to hide them, but whatever it had been there was no longer any visible evidence. Had he performed some sort of ceremonial magic that had restored him completely? Was that the source of Harry's 'minor accident'? If so, it seemed both his master and his ward had walked away none the worse for wear.

"Severus!" Voldemort greeted, his smile all teeth. "I can tell you've caught on already. Is my condition not much improved?"

"I have never found your condition to be faulty, my Lord. You do, however, seem to be enjoying a minor alteration."

Voldemort chuckled darkly.

"Always quick with the diplomatic answer, my friend, even when it tastes like ash in your mouth. Never mind. I will pick your mind later, but for now I have more official matters with which to amuse myself."

At last, he turned his attention to Lucius, who was looking uncomfortable but doing his best not to show it. He was only too aware that Voldemort had snubbed both him and his wife intentionally by speaking with Ira and then Snape first. It was too much to hope that his previous errors had been forgotten so soon. His only consolation was that the Dark Lord was unlikely to torture him tonight. He had guests, important guests, that neither of them wanted privy to dissension within the governmental hierarchy. Not yet anyway. Not unless or until there was someone else set up to replace him.

Good God, he couldn't have found a replacement so quickly, could he?

"How are you, Lucius? You're looking... less pathetic at the moment. Harry does good work, doesn't he? Oh, but you both aren't getting along at the moment, are you? What is it now? He's planning to elope with that Granger girl, or you tried to put Veritaserum in his tea? I do have trouble keeping up with all of your little spats."

Lucius kept his expression featureless. There wasn't much else he could do. To object was to contradict the Dark Lord, to offer explanations was to try to justify mistakes, which was even worse, and to laugh it off would suggest he didn't take the matter seriously. And it was a serious matter. Despite his master's backhanded remarks, they were all taking this seriously. Voldemort regarded him, his shark's smile gradually fading away to blatant anger as the silence continued.

The general could say nothing. He could do nothing.

If the Dark Lord wanted to punish him, he had decided to do so before he had even seen Lucius, and there was nothing he could do to stop him.

"Whatever the matter, consider it settled. Harry has won this battle, and you have more important things you will need to be doing than prolonging it. Am I understood?"

Lucius acknowledged his orders with a tilt of his head and an 'of course, my Lord', but inside he was seething. Won? Harry? The fight

had barely begun. What had been done to him was not some prank gone wrong. It had been a deliberate intent to hurt him, to kill him, and the Dark Lord refused to acknowledge the possibility of Potter's involvement. It was unacceptable, and even if his master was choosing to ignore it, he couldn't afford to himself. What if Harry or Harry's accomplice tried again?

He would have to wait or perhaps approach the situation more subtly, but he couldn't accept defeat just yet. Certainly not to a sixteen-year-old boy. He cleared his mind, placing up the finest occlumency shields he could to protect these thoughts, but it was unnecessary.

The Dark Lord had already looked away to scan the crowds of people below, looking down at them with a sort of covetous pleasure. Lucius knew the feeling. The feeling that all those people down there belong to him, were subject to his every whim and mood, was an addictive feeling. Now that his master was fully recovered from his injuries, he was feeling powerful enough to indulge in the sentiment.

"Good," the Dark Lord said, no longer bothering to even look at him. "I will need you to make arrangements for me to return to the continent. I will need to speak with the Polish minister. Tomorrow if it is possible."

"It will be done," Lucius agreed.

It was always important to state one's compliance before voicing anything that might be interpreted as an objection. Equally important was not sending the Dark Lord into a situation in which he might be caught by surprise. Voldemort hated surprises in politics and battles.

"But you should be made aware the Polish press has been misconstruing your departure from their troops as a sort of abandonment and insult, and the Minister of Magic has been conceding to their insinuations rather than standing up to them. He will be reluctant to switch his position so easily again in your favor."

"The Minister is a coward. Arrange a meeting, Lucius. I will give him something worse than public opinion to fear."

"No doubt, my Lord. I will also need to call in several court officials from holiday leave."

Voldemort's expression twisted in irritation.

"Christmas morning," he said. It sounded strangely like 'plague of boils' coming out of his mouth. "Fine. Move up the deadline to the day after tomorrow, but I had better be back in the field before the new year."

"Yes, my Lord."

Voldemort turned back to the general, probably to make another threat, but his eyes landed on Stratus and he was momentarily distracted. He remembered Stratus. He had seen him on various occasions and his signature on several documents that had come to his attention, particularly during the last month or so as Lucius struggled first with his curse and then with Voldemort's punishment. Then there was the rather disastrous incursion into Hausteheim.

Despite his frequent presence, Voldemort had never paid much attention to him. He was a very minor official with no real political influence or significant family alliances. Additionally, Stratus had little presence unto himself. He was not particularly handsome or ugly, fierce or congenial. Averageness seemed to be his defining feature, and yet now that the Dark Lord studied him directly, he got the strangest feeling of... something.

"Lieutenant," he acknowledged. "It is good to see you again. I understand you have been taking care of matters while General Malfoy has been- hn- recovering."

"As much as one of my limited abilities is able, my Lord," the man said modestly. Voldemort continued to regard him intently, taking in the suddenly nervous body language. Nothing odd about that. People were often nervous around him, but still, he couldn't shake the feeling that something was off. He offered his hand to the man, a gesture he rarely practiced but that was occasionally appropriate and possibly insightful.

"A fine performance just the same. I commend your efforts on Britain's behalf."

Stratus hesitated for a moment. Then another moment longer than was strictly polite before tentatively reaching out to grasp Voldemort's hand. Despite the soldier's reluctance, the handshake itself was firm. The Dark Lord felt through his magus hypersentia, never quite as sensitive as Harry's but still formidable, the stir of magic beneath his hands but was coiled tightly and hard to identify. Quickly, he turned his attention to the man's eyes.

Legilimency. He nudged at mental barriers as subtly as he knew how, but they did not yield as he expected. In fact, Stratus seemed to know what was happening immediately and physically retreated. He looked rather affronted, and Voldemort couldn't help but laugh at his indignation.

"An occlumens? My, but you are a man of hidden talents. You need to work on controlling your expressions. It's not very useful to hide your thoughts in your mind while wearing them on your face at the same time."

Tom was too stunned to bristle at his counterpart's comment. Voldemort hadn't recognized him. How could he not have recognized him? Their last encounters had been brief and inattentive, and Tom had been careful to avoid the Dark Lord's presence as much possible to prevent recognition. He had been absolutely convinced that if they touched, there would be no way of hiding the truth. There should have been some sort of reaction. Some magical friction, a physical sensation, something.

And there had been something, but not what he had been expecting. There had been no familiar spark of fire. There had been no sudden feeling of absolute recognition. Rather, there had been sense of... someone else. He had sensed Harry.

But how? He could feel Voldemort's barely constrained magic lapping against his own, but it did not intertwine or react upon contact as he had expected. He could feel Harry's magic as a cold sliver of ice caught in the fire, small but impossible to ignore. It was what Tom

imagined his own magic had felt like just after his emergence from the diary, when Harry's magic had still been strong inside him before his own finally took over. But surely Voldemort had not gone through such a rebirth himself?

It begged the question of what he had done to take Harry's magic. Particularly, how he had done so without killing the boy.

What did it mean?

He felt suddenly and intensely jealous. Voldemort had shared... no, stolen magic from Harry. It was an intimacy only Tom had been privy to and one he used to frequently used to justify the sense of familial affection he held for Harry. That his counterpart had mimicked that defining characteristic of his and Harry's bond was unforgivable.

It was something to deal with later. He needed no additional excuses for revenge, but perhaps an extra layer to the suffering was appropriate. At the moment, he was lucky to have made it through this encounter undetected. He had been planning to curse the Dark Lord and make a run for it while his counterpart was still surprised. He couldn't hope to kill him. It would take more than simple wand magic to destroy Voldemort, and he hadn't had time to prepare. He hadn't honestly expected the Dark Lord to show up at all tonight. Now that he knew he had remained undetected, he had to play his part in this farce.

As briefly as possible. It wouldn't do to tempt fate.

"I shall work to improve, my Lord," he said shakily, only partly acting.

"You do that. I am afraid I must leave you now. I have some entertaining to do in the parlor. I would gladly invite a man of your talents, but I think you will have a little more practice first. Severus, Narcissa... Lucius, if you wouldn't mind gathering the others? Ira, my dear, we will be talking mostly business, and I am afraid it will be terribly dull for you. If you would prefer to stay and enjoy the festivities, I shall not think any less of you. And if you would do me the favor of watching out for Harry? He has only just recovered from that little

accident I told you about, and I would prefer he didn't overexert himself."

There was acquiescence around the room along with a general sense of relief. No one had died or gotten cursed, and now the Dark Lord's attention seemed to be directed towards a particular task rather than a particular person. There was only a great deal of wounded pride and awkwardness, and that was survivable.

Tom offered to keep Ira company in the absence of her husband, which earned him a rather unpleasant glare from Snape, but Ira herself looked relieved. She knew almost no one there, and the thought of being left alone with so many rich and somewhat snobbish purebloods was almost panic-inducing. For Tom's part, he hoped Ira's responsibility of looking after Harry might yield an opportunity to speak with his dear friend, and he was willing to put up with the woman's tepid personality for such a chance.

Before that, however, he had to assist his 'superior' in rounding up the former Death Eaters for their annual parlor room chat. He spoke briefly to one after another, at least those he recognized, and trusted them to pass on the message as he went. He was almost done and prepared to meet up with Ira when he spotted Crouch moving towards Lucius.

A sudden sense of dread came over him.

"Lucius, why so glum? Don't tell me you've lost your Christmas spirit," Crouch greeted his longtime rival cheerfully. He had been watching the confrontation on the balcony, and while he hadn't been able to see some of it or hear any of it, it was obvious that things still hadn't warmed between the Dark Lord and the general.

Such a pity, that.

Lucius turned to cast an imperious glare over his shoulder at him. Crouch noted that his jaw was clenched and he was working a little harder than usual school his features. Mentally, Crouch purred at the signs of weakness. It would make what he was about to do all the more enjoyable.

"The Dark Lord wishes for our presence in the parlor. If you see anyone who should attend, please let them know," the general said, ignoring his comment in favor of reciting the words he had said to a dozen other witches and wizards already. He was already turning away, but Crouch caught his arm to stop him. The man looked at him in surprise.

"Before all that, there's something I need to show you. Somewhere private."

Lucius gave him a skeptical look, but not a nervous one. No one could harm him in his own house, except perhaps the Dark Lord, but even he was reluctant to test the defenses of the formidable Malfoy Manor. If the Malfoys were in any way threatened within the manor, the defensive magic would rise up to their defense just as it would in Hogwarts, only the magic tended to be more insidious if not more powerful. Additionally, only the Lord of Malfoy Manor could deactivate the defenses once they were activated. Crouch might have the gall or the insanity necessary to attack Malfoy, but he wasn't stupid enough to attempt it at the manor.

So Crouch wasn't surprised when Lucius agreed by leading him out of the ballroom and into an empty corridor. He threw up a silencing charm before turning back to his unwanted companion. Crouch put on a vaguely concerned look despite his desire to grin like a madman. Not that Lucius couldn't see right through it, but one must observe propriety.

"What do you want?" Lucius asked impatiently.

Crouch pulled open his formal robes and slipped a piece of paper from his breast pocket. He regarded the document with something like fondness.

"Like I said, to show you something."

He handed it to Lucius, who snatched it out of his hand and skimmed it briefly. Crouch could tell immediately when the other wizard recognized what he was holding.

"Where did you get this?" he demanded.

"Oh, you know, the Court of Familial Affairs. I have a few of my people in there to monitor for things like this. Well, not things precisely like this, but you never know when a family tiff might threaten national security."

Lucius took a deep breath.

"How do I know this is real?"

"Darling, I couldn't make something like this up."

"Yes, you could."

"Okay true, but the fact that someone else had done it on their own is absolutely delicious."

"And what do you expect me to do about it?"

Crouch shrugged.

"That's entirely up to you. After all, she's your...daughter," he snickered.

Lucius fixed him with a look that made Crouch wonder if the man intended to kill him. He almost hoped he tried. That would be interesting indeed and, assuming he failed, something he could hold over his head for years. If Voldemort didn't kill him first.

But Lucius didn't draw his wand. Instead, his attention turned back towards the ballroom, and he knew all that barely concealed rage was being directed at someone else entirely. Without another word, the man stalked away, letting the document he had been holding fall to the ground. Once gone, Crouch let out a laugh, trusting the silencing charm to swallow it, before reaching down to collect the paper.

The words 'Declaration of Intention to Emancipate: Form 228C' stared up at him, and his laughter escalated until he was practically doubling over.

"What have you done?"

The madman grinned at Stratus, finding the man had already breached the sphere of silence and looked nearly as livid as Lucius had. Everyone really was being overly sensitive tonight, weren't they?

"Just securing our investment. Speaking of which, you shouldn't be speaking with me. People will become suspicious," he said with a smile, but there was now a touch of steel in his voice.

He might enjoy a little spat with Lucius, that was expected and could hardly be used against them, but this little fool was an investment of time and effort that could easily be compromised this early in the game.

"Tell me what you said to him!" the man demanded.

Whatever amusement Crouch held instantly fell away, and his face twisted into a snarl.

"Don't you take that tone with me, you insignificant little pissant. Know who you are addressing."

The soldier had the sense to look taken back for a moment, but it didn't last long.

"I know who I'm talking to. Now tell me what you've done."

Crouch sneered at him.

"You'll find out soon enough. It's better if it catches you off guard. You're shit at acting."

Stratus didn't grace him with a reply. He scurried away, probably to find Malfoy and stop whatever disaster the conspirator had stirred up. It was too late for that. The soldier had no power over the general,

and whatever happened next, ruination and salvation, depended entirely on Lucius' ability to control himself and the situation. Even Crouch could not be certain how it might turn out, except that Hermione Granger wasn't going to walk away from it unscathed.

He idled on his way back towards the ballroom. He had been called to the parlor, but he figured he had a few minutes before he was missed and wanted to see if the inevitable confrontation would occur right there on the dance floor.

Intent as he was on the possible drama about to unfurl, he failed to notice the little beetle hovering a few feet above him and was none the wiser when it disappeared in a quiet buzz up the nearby stairs.

"Oh, thank God they left finally," Hermione sighed, lying back in her bed, a bare foot being massaged carefully by Dobby, who was staring at the aggrieved limb as if it had the answer to the meaning of life. "Another ten minutes and there would have been blood, I know it."

Harry and Draco shared a sympathetic look, quite happy that men's footwear sided on the less painful end of the fashion spectrum. Harry stood by the window, looking out onto the manor grounds. There was no snow yet this year and the moon was only a small sliver, but even so there was still a sort of dismal majesty to the rolling hills and the proud, skeletal oak trees that spotted the surrounding land. He felt a distinct urge to explore the half wildness of it, remembering his brief jaunt over the grounds at night during one of his spells of moon madness. There would be no madness tonight, but he thought a bit of mischief in the form of exploration while in their formal robes might be a bit fun in and of itself. Could he convince Hermione and Draco? Draco would be scandalized, but then he liked to do scandalous things every once in a while. He thought it made him more interesting. It certainly made him more fun. Hermione might wave it off as a ridiculous notion, but then she surprised him often enough. Ridiculous or not, she had an adventurer's spirit hidden under all those etiquette lessons and fancy dresses.

But no, there was still the matter of Lucius. He couldn't very well expect the general to appreciate him running off with his son and foster daughter in the middle of the night and bringing them back

covered in dirt and brambles. For tonight at least, he would try to behave.

Next year, he wasn't making any promises.

"How long do you think you need?" Draco asked, pacing restlessly up back and forth across the room. Unlike his sister, he wasn't the least bit tired. He had been enjoying himself with several different dancing partners, finding himself the center of a great deal of fawning by pretty little pureblood ladies eager for his attention. Natalie's presence and scathing commentary tended to scare them away whenever she kept his company, but she had decided not to come this year after hearing Harry probably wouldn't be there and opted instead to spend the holiday with her mothers. Hermione rolled her eyes at him. She was not impressed with his Don Juan routine, but Harry preferred Draco distracted from the fact that he had been nursing a feud against him less than a week ago.

"I need just a few more minutes, but I'm going to stay here as long as possible. How long do you think the Dark Lord will keep them in the parlor?" she asked, directing her question to Harry.

"Who knows? I don't think it will be as long as usual. He didn't seem to be in the mood for reminiscing about the good old days. He's trying to organize his return to Germany before the New Year."

That caught both Draco and Hermione's attention.

"So soon? He has recovered from... whatever it was?" Draco asked.

"At my expense, yes," Harry said ruefully. He still hadn't quite forgiven his mentor for that. Looking at their confused expressions, he clarified. "He took a bit of my magic and healed himself. It was sort of an accident and sort of... well, not. Please don't ask me to do much magic for awhile. I'd probably embarrass myself."

"Harry, that's not... that's not possible. You can't take someone's magic directly... well, not without hurting them really badly or even more likely yourself. That's basic magical theory."

Considering they didn't teach that concept until they were at least fifth years at Hogwarts, he didn't think it qualified as 'basic' magical theory, but then she had probably known all about it before her first Welcoming Feast.

"You can if you filter it through the soul and not the body."

Draco looked at him blankly. Hermione's eyes were wide.

"Oh... OH! That's... that's rather brilliant. And dangerous! What were you thinking?"

"Funnily enough, I was thinking it was a really bad idea too. This time, it's entirely the Dark Lord's fault. Feel free to scold him thoroughly. He doesn't listen to me."

"You should feel some sympathy for everyone else then," Draco said. "You don't listen to anybody else either."

Harry just grinned at them. This was fun. He had missed this. He enjoyed the Dark Lord's company, but it wasn't the same as hanging out with his friends. Voldemort and he shared a strange, complicated, and undefinable relationship that kept him constantly on his toes and constantly guessing, measuring his defiances and acquiescences, his feelings always falling into extremes in any direction. It was exciting but exhausting. This was... this was easy. Well, not always easy, but certainly easier. Simpler, comfortable. Harry went off to have adventures with Voldemort, but he came home to his friends.

A frantic knock on the door kept him from responding with something teasing. Hermione let out a groan.

"It seems someone noticed we were gone. Alright, Dobby you can stop now. You did a marvelous job. I feel much better."

The house elf grinned and bowed and thanked his mistress for her kindness before disappearing. House elves were not to be seen if it could at all be helped, and while this rule didn't apply to immediate family and close family friends, it would apply to whoever had come looking for them in Hermione's bedroom.

"Who is it?" she called. It would be nice to know in advance if she would have to hide Harry in the closet or not. Having an unrelated boy in her bedroom was not a rumor she wanted circulating.

"It's Skeeter, open up!"

While Hermione's expression turned confused, Draco's became pure panic. He practically leaped across the room to grab Harry and throw their friend into her wardrobe. It seemed she wasn't the only one worried about her reputation. She went to the door.

"Skeeter? How did you get here? You're not on the guest list."

She opened the door to see Skeeter grinning at her like a Cheshire cat and wasn't given the opportunity to close the door in her face before a foot was thrust inside, followed by the woman herself. She was not dressed for the ball, or maybe she was, and the evergreen business dress with the white feather lining was her idea of what passed for formal wear according to her deranged sense of fashion. Her pointed, candy apple red shoes made Hermione's look like loafers in comparison. She cast a disinterested look around the bedroom, shamelessly seeking out any secrets it might yield up. Her gaze finally settled, and she stalked towards Draco.

"What are you doing here, Skeeter? Get out!" he snarled.

"Tut-tut, Mr. Malfoy, I'm not here for you," she said and strode right by him to the wardrobe, which she threw open. Harry looked out at her with some embarrassment from a curtain of lavender skirts and silk blouses. "Never hide in the wardrobe, Harry, darling, it's the first place anyone is likely to look. Well, that and under the bed. Up and out."

She grabbed him by his lapel and with surprising strength, pulled him out. Once free, they found Draco pointing a wand at her. She rolled her eyes.

"For heaven's sake, I'm here to warn you. We don't have time for the big brother routine. I don't care if the three of you were having a ménage à trois in here or not."

Three faces immediately turned red.

"Skeeter," Harry growled out to cover up his embarrassment. "What are you doing?"

She rolled her eyes.

"I already told you. I'm warning you. Lord Malfoy is on his way, and he is very, very angry."

He rolled his eyes right back at her.

"I can handle Lord Malfoy, thank you very much."

"No, Harry, he's not coming for you. He's coming for her."

All eyes turned to Hermione.

"What do you mean he's coming for me? What did I do?"

"He found out about the emancipation."

There was a collective gasp, except from the reporter who let out a snort.

"What? How?"

"Crouch."

Draco hissed. "That bastard. That fucking bastard."

"Do you mind if I quote you on that?" Skeeter tittered, enjoying this entirely too much.

"Oh God, oh God, he's going to kill me!"

This wasn't an exaggeration. If he didn't do it now, then he might after the guests left. They would have to do something.

"No, he won't," Harry said, gathering his resolve. It seemed his intention to placate the general would have to be set aside for the night in favor of continuing their little war against each other. He almost felt guilty about the relief he felt. He had always made war with Lucius better than he made peace. "Hermione, I want you to start packing. Enough for a week. You have ten minutes. Draco, you need to go back to the party. Whatever happens, don't interfere. Go."

"But Harry-" Draco started.

"Draco, we can't let your father know you helped us in any way. We need him to trust you or we won't know for sure when it's safe for Hermione to come back."

"Come back? Where is she-"

"Don't ask, go!"

The other boy threw up his hands in frustration, but hurried towards the door just the same. He grabbed Hermione as she scurried past him gathering up her things and hugged her. She seemed startled but then fiercely hugged him back.

"Be safe," he said and let her go.

Once he was out the door, Harry turned to Skeeter.

"Skeeter, you're taking Hermione to London. Find some place safe for her to hole up for a while. Someplace Malfoy won't be able to find her."

"I'm what? Oh, no, no, no. I came here and warned you because you did me a favor by bringing me to the party-"

"Harry!" Hermione cried. He gave her an apologetic shrug.

"-and I got this great scoop." The fact that Crouch had agents spying on the legal and private family matters of the British citizenry was going to be the scandal of the New Year. Lucius Malfoy's family debacle would be a page three article at best. "But that doesn't mean I intend to be a part of your little conspiracy. You're on your own, kids."

"Too late, Skeeter, you've already interfered. Now you're a part of it whether you like it or not. It's the price you pay for sticking your nose in other people's business."

"Oh really? And what are you going to do? Tell them I broke in? All I have to do is tell everyone that you invited me. We'll both go down together, but you're going to fall from a much higher height."

"Don't push me. You might be able to walk away from a Court inquiry, but what do you think will happen if I let slip your own role in Hermione's emancipation? I won't have to destroy you, Skeeter. Lucius Malfoy will do that for me."

For a moment, no one spoke. No one moved. Two sets of wide eyes stared at him.

"Fine," Skeeter said at last, letting out a huff of annoyance. "You're damn lucky I like you so much."

After that, there was nothing really left to discuss. Hermione kept her school trunk mostly packed already, and she only required a few odds and ends before she was ready to go. She didn't bother to change yet. She didn't want to waste the time and risk another minute in the manor. It wouldn't take long for the house elves to realize something was going on and report her to Lucius. She shrunk and lightened her trunk, changed into some walking shoes, and followed Harry quickly out into the hall. Skeeter had already changed forms and hidden herself in the elaborate weave of Hermione's hair, while she and Harry pretended nothing was out of the ordinary and they were enjoying a harmless if somewhat brisk walk towards the manor entryway. Harry went ahead briefly to look for signs of Lucius, and he was glad he did, because he spotted the man heading for the stairs.

"He's coming," Harry said as he hurried back down the hall towards her. "Is there another way downstairs?"

"The servant stairs behind the painting. It splits into a little hall that goes to either the kitchen or the cloak room."

"Go to the cloak room," he said, digging out his paper ticket the elf had given him. "Take my cloak and pull up the hood. If you're lucky, no one will recognize you until after you've left."

"Where are you going?"

"I have to slow him down."

"Harry, that's not-"

"He won't hurt me. He won't dare with the Dark Lord here. Don't worry. Skeeter will make sure nothing happens to you. Hurry, we don't have a lot of time."

As with Draco, she hugged him briefly but fiercely before running back down the hall. He watched her go, taking a deep breath to steady himself. He could do this. He would do this. They had anticipated a scenario very similar to this when they had first started planning for Hermione's freedom, when things were even more desperate than they were now. They hadn't gone over the details again, there wasn't time, and he had no intention of letting Skeeter know them.

London was still something of a wreck, even now, but that made it perfect for hiding in. A lot of hotels that weren't going to look too closely at anyone willing to pay the price for a room, and not even a quarter the number of Sentinels needed to conduct a search were available if one were ordered. If Hermione found herself in trouble, Harry had told her to seek out Fred and George at the Red Weasel. He knew that they would help her, and more importantly, he knew they would know how to help her. She could hide in London until he managed to get word to her or until the school year started and she could hide safely in Hogwarts. Snape might not agree with what she had done, but he wouldn't leave her to Lucius' mercies either. If

things got bad enough, he still had that open invitation for Hermione in France, where she could be safe behind the walls of Beauxbatons until she was old enough to make her own way in the world. Hopefully some sort of solution could be found before that became necessary, but it was comforting to know they had options and contingency plans if they needed them.

None of it would mean anything, however, if he couldn't get Hermione safely out of the manor before Lucius found her.

Taking another calming breath, he headed towards the stairs. He stopped at the top when he spotted his enemy climbing towards him. Lucius hesitated at the sight of him, but there was no surprise. Only suspicion. Harry regarded him coolly and leaned against the wall at the top of the rail. They said nothing for a moment, simply assessed one another, determining the state of mind and threat the other posed. Harry couldn't decipher much. At least, not much of what he didn't know already. Lucius was angry, his hands were shaking from it, but it wasn't directed at Harry, not yet, and soon enough the elder wizard continued on his course. Harry hadn't spoken or moved to stop him. He took a gamble and held his breath, tense but motionless until Lucius passed by the servant's secret door without pausing.

Harry let out a breath and waited, praying to any god or goddess that would listen that his gambit would pay off. That when Lucius didn't find Hermione in her room, he wouldn't summon the house elves to find her but instead...

"Potter!"

Would come looking for him. Minutes Lucius wasted were minutes bought for Hermione.

"Yes, Lord Malfoy?" he asked, still leaning against the wall.

"Where is she?"

"Where is who?"

"That wretched little mudblood I call my daughter."

Harry gave him a perplexed look.

"I am afraid I don't know anyone who matches that description."

"Hermione, you fool!"

"Oh, her. I wasn't aware you ever called her your daughter, wretched or otherwise. Haven't seen her."

"Don't play games with me, boy, I am not in the mood. Where is she?"

"How would I know? Does it look like I have her in my back pocket?" he sniped and moved away from the wall to make his way downstairs. Lucius would follow him now, he knew. He hoped. How much time had passed? He didn't have his watch anymore. Had she made it to the cloak room yet? She had to have. Would there be any house elves there? Would they question her? Of course not, they wouldn't dare question the actions of a witch, no matter how odd.

A hand snagged his arm, and he mentally crowed his success until the grip tightened into something painful, and all he could do was grimace. He would bruise tomorrow, but that was fine. Tomorrow, Hermione would be safely out of reach.

"Where is she?"

"I don't know. I'm not her keeper."

"I asked around. They said you left with her a few minutes ago."

"She said her feet hurt so I escorted her out so no one else would ask her to dance. I don't know where she went after that. Maybe she went to soak her feet. Maybe she went to find new shoes."

Go check the spa, Lucius, he silently willed. Go check your wife's shoe closet. Give Hermione the time and space she needs to get outside the manor. She had probably found his cloak by now and

may have already slipped outside, but it would take her ten minutes alone to run to the gate. He needed more time.

"You're lying."

"Hah." Harry didn't even attempt to deny it. "Okay, maybe I really do keep her in my back pocket."

He knew Lucius Malfoy was dangerous and for a variety of reasons, but he had underestimated just how daring the Slytherin could actually be. They were not a hundred feet away from the ballroom doors and in clear view of anyone who might happen to look up at them, and somewhere in that mass of people was a highly temperamental Dark Lord with an unpredictable protective streak. It would only take one concerned witness to bring down Voldemort's unholy wrath.

But it didn't stop Lucius from twisting Harry's arm sharply back and up, causing the smaller wizard to cry out in surprise and pain. Too late Harry realized it was his right arm, the one with his wand hidden up the sleeve.

"I've had enough of you, Potter. I won't tolerate your impertinence in my own house. Look at me when I'm talking to you."

He was shaken roughly, making him grit his teeth against a fresh wave of pain. Would Lucius really break his arm? Dislocate his shoulder? He could probably do it and fix it before anyone was the wiser. He didn't dare take the risk. He had already miscalculated the return of the Malfoy patriarch's sanity. Clearly, he wasn't all there.

He forced himself to turn back and glower up at the man. Lucius glared back at him.

And then Harry felt the tell-tale pressure of a legilimens' mind pressing against his.

He slammed his eyes shut and turned away again. No! He couldn't let him see! If he did, he would find Hermione, whether she had escaped

from the manor or not. He would find out about Ron. He would find out about Bobby and Carrigan.

There was another twist of his arm, and he let out a cry of pain, unable to hold it.

"Look at me! Look at me!"

But Harry wouldn't. He'd take the broken arm and the pain. He would protect his friends. It hurts, it hurts! His body protested and his mind flailed, but he kept his eyes squeezed shut.

From below he could hear voices, low but frantic. Had someone found them? He squinted his eyes open to see Ira standing horrified at the bottom of the stairs and just beyond her was Lt. Stratus- Reggy. He was the one talking, trying to talk Lucius down and to release Harry before things got out of hand. Too late for that, Harry thought.

No one else had spotted them yet, and frantic house elves were quickly but quietly closing the ballroom doors before anyone else did. The noise from the orchestra had drowned out his cries and Reggy's pleas. Who knew how much Lucius could get away with? Reggy was a direct subordinate of Lucius and Ira didn't have the skill set to face Lucius in combat. Would either of them be able to stop him?

There was a shuffling behind him and Harry became aware of Lucius switching out the hand holding his arm so that he could draw his wand. Harry's eyes widened. He couldn't let Lucius use his magic on him. With his own magic so low, he might not have the ability to fight off an Imperius, and a stunner or body-bind would leave him absolutely helpless.

He shoved himself backwards hard, ramming into Lucius, and smashed the back of his head into the man's face. Lucius was taller but not so tall that the top of Harry's head didn't reach his nose. The move stunned the man, and he loosened his grip enough for Harry to twist out of it and shove him away roughly. The force of the shove knocked Lucius over, but also sent Harry back a step.

Between the first gush of blood from Lord Malfoy's broken nose and the half step backwards of his attacker, the manor's wards activated. Harry didn't have the time to register the sudden burning tingle of defensive magic through his magus hypersentia. His first sense of something wrong came when he reached back his foot, expecting to find a step there and only found open air.

By then it was too late.

He was falling. He was falling and for a heart-stopping moment it almost like flying, weightless with a rush of moving air, and then it was very much like falling again as first his left arm then his back stuck the rounded marble edges of the stairs. There was immediate pain, but it was too brief again for him to analyze before gravity and momentum rolled him even further and his head struck the stairs with a ominous crack.

He didn't remember anything that happened after that.

Ira was not given the benefit of blacking out, although it amazed her that she didn't faint then and there. Amazed that rather than standing there like a frozen rabbit, she sprinted for the stairs. She wasn't fast enough to stop Harry's fall nor the first strike of his head against the stairs. She couldn't stop him from rolling, but she did manage to catch him before he was more than halfway down and just barely managed to keep herself from being knocked the rest of the way with him.

"HARRY? HARRY?" she screamed. She couldn't stop herself from screaming, even though he was right there in her arms. Bleeding all over her arms. Panic seized her. He hit his head, she thought, and even in her own mind she was screaming. What about his neck? His back?

Any of these fragile pieces could have shattered against the marble and killed him instantly. He was not moving, but his eyes are just slightly open. Did they flutter? Did they blink? She couldn't see. Her eyes were flooded with tears and panic. She fought the urge to shake him, as if she could shake him awake and force him to speak, to reassure her that he was alive and he was going to be okay.

She could force herself not to shake him, but she couldn't stop herself from screaming.

"SEVERUS, SEVERUS! HELP ME!"

But Severus wasn't there, and even if he heard her, he was far away, and Harry was still bleeding, and she didn't know where. Moving him as carefully and gently as she could with her shaking hands, she moved his head to her lap and took out her wand. She knew what she was supposed to do. She'd been trained for this. Years ago, but it was her favorite class. Her favorite teacher. She'd only had to use her first aid training for minor things like second degree burns and a sprained wrist so far. She'd never had to use the emergency first aid training. Prayed she would never have to, but never dared let herself forget it completely.

"Rigidus spina," she invoked, managing a few decibels below a deafening screech.

Nothing happened. She panicked and tried again, and this time she could feel Harry's neck and back straighten and stiffen. His spinal column now secured, she reached for his pulse. She didn't think she would be able to feel anything beneath her trembling hands, but the pulse was there when she searched for it under the softness of his jaw.

Then, incredibly, he blinked and he let out a soft gasp. His eyes remained unfocused and dull, but he was alive! She could have laughed she was so relieved.

But he was still bleeding, and she didn't know where it was coming from.

"SEVERUS!"

Tom knew exactly when Harry got himself into real trouble, and it wasn't when Lucius grabbed his arm nor when the elder wizard reached for his wand. Tom could easily have rescued him from both these situations, either through reason or a few simple, harmless spells. The moment everything went to hell was when Harry broke

Lucius' nose. After that, it wasn't Lucius who became the enemy, it was the entire goddamn manor. For a moment, he was frozen in fear of this.

The moment was long enough for him to fail.

Harry's fall was abrupt and hard, and he didn't have the chance to get a spell off before Ira had rushed up the stairs to stop it with her own body like a panicking muggle rather than with a spell. She was still faster than him though. Faster to catch Harry, and faster to scream before he could stop her. In moments, the doors behind him were pushed open and people came streaming out to find out what all the noise was about.

What greeted them surely must have been something to see. A woman in modest gray satin covered in blood, the body of a boy, the unmistakable Harold James Potter, in her red stained hands, and Lucius Malfoy peering down at the carnage like the specter of death. No, not death. He looked far too surprised to be death. Surprised and bloody, with a handkerchief pressed to his face to stifle the blood flow.

People moved further into the entryway, although no one dared move closer to Harry's still form. By now, Ira was beginning to blunder her way through magical first aid, still crying out for her husband when she should have been crying out for a medi-wizard, but he couldn't criticize her. She was a panicky mess of flailing limbs, stammered spells, and shrieking, but at least she was doing something. He hadn't moved at all. He hadn't said a word.

He couldn't remember how.

A soft chuckle in his ear made him wince.

"This just gets better and better, doesn't it?" Crouch said softly in his ear, low enough that no one else around them could hear.

And like a flipped switch or a spell that had been lifted, his mind returned to his body and he turned slowly to look the other man in the eye. Crouch blinked once, taken off guard. Stratus blinked back, confused, then looked around. The confusion didn't lift. The certainty

of purpose and intention was no longer with him, but with Crouch who moved carefully through the crowd until he stood at the bottom of the steps.

Ira didn't see him. Her sight was only for the boy whose life now rested in delicate, trembling fingers. Crouch watched them silently for a moment, taking in Harry's half-lidded, unseeing eyes and his blood-soaked hair. If not for the faint movement of his lips and a barely discernible whisper he would have believed him already dead. It was too soon to know if he could be saved.

Unforgivable.

He turned his hateful gaze up to Lucius, his eyes flashed crimson. A questioning look entered the general's gaze but then he fumbled for his wand as Crouch raised his own to point it directly at him.

"Avada Kedavra."

The man that was once Lucius Malfoy crumbled to the ground with barely a sound. A puppet whose strings were cut. Several screams and outraged cries erupted from the surrounding crowd, and wands were drawn.

Then the entire manor let loose a tremor, rattling windows and chandeliers. Doors suddenly slammed themselves shut, knocking over startled guests or trapping them inside or outside of the ballroom. Locks and latches slid into place. Lamp bulbs burst and candles snuffed themselves out, casting the rooms into darkness. There was more screaming now, this time from fear rather than outrage, and panicked witches and wizards tried for the doors but found them sealed against escape. A terrified wizard tried shoving open a window but found his hands severely burned for his efforts.

Lighting charms were cast, but they only lit the rooms in blinding light and madly dancing shadows, adding to the chaos rather than banishing it. Ira was just as confused and terrified as any of them, but she didn't move from her post, half curled over Harry's helpless body and still desperately trying to find out where all the blood was coming from. At the bottom of the stairs, Crouch continued to stare at Harry's

unmoving form, watching the flickering of light and darkness against his features.

He stared and he stared and kept on staring until the chandelier above him dropped free from its mooring and plummeted down on top of him, killing him instantly.

Stratus was more confused and frightened than anyone else, remembering neither how he had gotten there and nor what was happening, and stood frozen, moving only when some panicked witch or wizard ran into him or shouldered past. If not for the pain of those careless knocks and bruises, he might have thought he was having a nightmare. He had been having so many nightmares lately, it seemed.

He suddenly stiffened, feeling a familiar, terrible presence within him. He closed his eyes and shoved back at the presence, trying to push it out again, but he was not strong enough and it hurt to go near it so he fled into the darkness again where at least the horrors were painless. Tom opened his eyes and admired his handiwork. Lucius was dead. Crouch was dead. The sheep were panicking and hadn't noticed a damn thing.

Revenge was sweet, but he didn't have time to enjoy it. He needed to help Harry, if help could still be had for him. He made his way towards his incapacitated friend, wary of any other falling furniture or magical traps, but before he got there one of the side doors exploded. The force of the blast knocked him and several others nearby to the ground. When he regained his senses and sat up, he could make out the Dark Lord striding into the chaos.

"What is going on here?" he demanded, his voice magically amplified to drown out the panicked crying and wailing. A mirror nearby shattered and hurled its glassy knives at him, but he waved his wand and banished them with barely a sideways glance. "Where is Lucius? Why has he activated the wards?"

Death Eaters began flowing in from behind him, positioning themselves around the area in a defensive circle. The angry but fearless presence of the Dark Lord seemed to call order back into the

room, and everyone quickly stopped flinging themselves about pointlessly in favor of letting him fix the situation.

"Lord Malfoy is dead!" a witch cried out and pointed towards the top of the stairs. "He was killed by Bartimius Crouch!"

Voldemort's gaze rose up the stairs but stopped halfway on Harry and Ira. Ira, blood smeared from her chin all the way down the front of her dress, looked to him with pleading eyes. He didn't need legilimency to know what she was begging for, but he used it anyway to find out why this had happened. In the blink of an eye, he saw it all. Lucius' attack, Harry's panicked counterattack, and the near-fatal result. What he didn't see was how Lucius had died. She had not been watching anything but Harry at that point.

Her gaze broke away as it landed on Snape, who was rushing towards her. He took over Harry's care quickly and efficiently, going through the limited number of steps of diagnosis and treatment available to him with only his wand and Ira's shaky explanations. He forced himself to look away after that. Snape would do more than he could ever hope to do himself until they could get Harry to trained medi-wizards. And he wouldn't be able to get Harry that much-needed medical care until he deactivated the manor's damn wards.

He turned his attention to the top of the stairs where the witch had pointed. There was Lucius. Fallen bonelessly onto his side and staring out at nothing, his white blond hair half fallen onto his face. Dead.

The Dark Lord felt a stirring inside of him but wasn't sure what to identify it as. Grief? Regret? He couldn't define it explicitly, but mostly it seemed to him to be frustration at the complete waste of it. Whatever his ire towards his general, it was not enough to erase the years of dedicated and competent servitude. Lucius was as selfishly ambitious as they came, but he had been a part of Voldemort's dream. A part of the vision of Britain's future he had been building and a symbol of Pureblood heritage and culture. And now he was gone, and Voldemort wasn't certain how he could ever possibly replace him.

"Where is Crouch?"

"Dead!" the witch cried again and pointed to the chandelier. Voldemort looked down and spotted a few odd limbs sticking out of the debris. His feelings towards Crouch were considerably less complicated.

Mostly, he was just extremely annoyed.

It seemed he was running out of people to blame for this mess.

There were loud thudding and clacking sounds from up upstairs, signaling the manor's collection of enchanted armor had taken up arms and was now marching towards them. It was another of a hundred minor waves of retaliation that would continue until the wards were deactivated, the possible enemies were all dead or close to it, or the manor tore itself apart.

"Where is Narcissa?" he demanded. She had followed them out of the parlor, but now he could not see her anywhere. No, she couldn't do anything about this anyway. She was a Malfoy by marriage, not blood. "Where is Draco Malfoy?"

From within the ballroom there came a cacophony of screaming followed by several loud crashes. Voldemort rolled his eyes. Why was everyone so bloody helpless? He waved his wand at the doors and melted them from their hinges. Icy water poured out from the doors in a miniature wave, rushing over over his feet and ankles and flooding the entryway. From his position, the Dark Lord could see the ice cavern melting rapidly, causing ice sculptures and the overhanging balcony to collapse in slushy avalanches onto the guests below them. Some of the more level-headed witches and wizards had started casting spells to protect themselves, but there was no way to stop the collapse itself.

Voldemort turned back to his minions, who were waiting for his orders.

"You and you," he said, pointing to two of his more able servants. "Find me Draco Malfoy."

One disappeared through the ballroom doors while the second braved the cloak room and backrooms beyond it. The sound of thudding and clanking grew louder, and from the top of the stairs appeared four suited pieces of armor, armed with halberds and swords, beginning their loud, cumbersome descent down the stairs and towards Harry and his guardians. Voldemort was momentarily distracted by a panicked scream when an elderly wizard suddenly caught fire for no apparent reason (warming charm gone wrong perhaps?), and missed Snape blasting the enchanted soldiers to pieces.

His victory was rather short-lived when the stair beneath him suddenly transfigured into a smooth, steep decline and deposited him, his wife, and the barely conscious Harry into a half foot of freezing water below.

"Bloody son of a-" Snape cursed, hissing as he was instantly soaked. Ira was too stunned to do more than gasp at the sudden shock but quickly lifted Harry's head out of the water before he choked. Harry himself couldn't move, but his eyes had widened and began rambling faintly 'not again, not again'. The water around him quickly turned red. Voldemort was quickly losing his patience, his crimson eyes flashing with rage and magic as evidence of his lost control. He was quickly coming to the conclusion that tearing down the manor was the most practical thing he could do.

"I found him, my Lord!"

From the ballroom, one of his minions reappeared, dragging Draco Malfoy behind him. The young Slytherin's confusion quickly turned to fear as the Dark Lord turned his attention on him and waded towards him. Voldemort seized him by the shoulders, his fingers fisted into claws. Draco winced but didn't try to pull away.

"Deactivate the wards!"

"I-I can't! Only father-"

"You are the Lord of Malfoy Manor now."

Grey eyes widened, so like his father's and yet so different. Lumps of dull coal waiting to be hardened into diamonds by pressure and fire. They skittered wildly around the entry, searching for escape, searching for help, searching for his father, but all he could find in any direction was inexplicable chaos.

Until he found one of the things he was looking for.

And wished he hadn't.

"Father?"

Voldemort, at the end of his patience, struck him across the face and to the ground.

"Deactivate the wards, you little fool!"

Draco gasped and scrambled away, water splashing everywhere. The manor gave another harsh tremor, gearing for another wave of attacks as its newest master was assaulted. Men and women were starting to scream and cry again. Voldemort pointed his wand at the ceiling.

"Deactivate the wards, Draco, or I will tear this place down around us."

"N-no, w-wait," the young Slytherin stuttered, shock and cold causing him to tremble. "En-enough! ENOUGH! Placidus praedium!"

There was one more violent shudder, and then the house settled. The doors and windows unlatched themselves, the water around them receded, and house elves were suddenly everywhere, frantically trying to put everything and everyone to rights. Draco remained where he was, half crouched on the floor, staring up the stairs and the end of his childhood.

Everything was instantly, overwhelmingly silent.

Silent, except for Harry's dazed, half-whisper.

"Where's 'Mione?"

Book VI

Chapter 24: Funeral Games

Harry started his morning by rolling over and vomiting over the edge of the bed. Everything went pretty much downhill after that. Under the revolting taste of bile was the only slightly less revolting taste of potions. His first coherent thought was that Snape must not have brewed said potions, because otherwise he wouldn't have vomited and his head wouldn't feel like someone had been hammering it for the last hour. His second thought was maybe Snape had brewed the potions and Harry had done something to irritate him.

"Harry, are you alright? Can you hear me?"

He turned his head and blinked blearily at the fuzzy figure leaning close to him. It took him a moment, but he recognized her.

"Ira?" he said, his voice raspy from abuse.

"I'm here. Just a moment, let me get the medi-wizard."

Ira shifted out of his line of sight, and he closed his eyes. Merlin, he felt awful. Awful in a way he couldn't remember ever feeling before. What had happened? Was he sick? Injured? Poisoned? The sound of footsteps boomed in his ears like drums and cannon fire, and he groaned and covered his head with his pillow. There was the muffled rumble of voices, what sounded like a spell (probably to clean up the mess he had made), then a gentle hand on his shoulder. Reluctantly, he pulled the pillow away.

"Water, Harry," Ira said, bringing a glass and straw to his lips.

He drank it down eagerly, washing away the awful taste and soothing his parched mouth and throat. She pulled it away before he was satisfied and consequently before he was sick all over again. As she moved away, he spotted the medi-wizard she had gone to get and a nurse. He could not make out many details without his glasses, but the healer seemed to be a short, pudgy gentleman with a neat little mustache and the nurse a dour, emaciated-looking thing.

He attempted to give them a cheeky little grin and ask if he was dying, but it came out as a grimace and a despairing 'I'm dying' instead. The medi-wizard chuckled anyway.

"No need to be dramatic, Lord Potter. You're well out of danger now. It's all uphill from here," he said congenially, gently positioning his patient onto his back again. "I'm Medi-wizard Pappanoski, this is Nurse Peele. We'll be seeing to your care."

"I wish I could say it was a pleasure, but... well, you know," Harry grumbled. At the moment, he was sorely tempted to ignore everyone, close his eyes, and go back to sleep, but Ira's nervous hovering got the better of him. He would attempt to stay awake long enough to soothe whatever fears she had.

"No offense taken. Now, I am going to ask you some questions and performs some tests. Please be patient with me. I know you're tired and in pain, but this is all necessary."

Harry sighed and nodded. Ira's hand slipped into his left and squeezed gently. When he tried to return the gesture it felt numb, probably from sleeping on it wrong. There was a bit of shuffling around, rearranging equipment and bedding, and gathering paperwork. Harry found himself propped mostly upright in his bed, his glasses once again perched on his nose, and Ira at his side. Now able to see properly, he realized he was not in a hospital room like he had originally thought. The room was just as sterile and cold, but clearly a guest suite in either a prominent pureblood manor house or a grandiose hotel. The bed, a king, was a monstrosity of decadent wealth, and there was an extravagant set of drawers and chairs to match. The thick fur of some unidentifiable beast rested as a rug in front of the fireplace which was burning intensely. It wasn't until he glanced out the set of large windows that he realized where he was.

"Why am I at Malfoy Manor?" he asked. The healer settled into a chair beside the bed and sank quite comfortably into it. He rested a clipboard on his lap while his pudgy little fingers scribbled an illegible scrawl with his quill.

"Oh excellent, you recognize your surroundings. That's a good sign. To answer your question, you were originally taken to St. Hockley's in Durbinshire for emergency care, but due to overcrowding it was felt your recovery would best be served somewhere less... chaotic. Lord Malfoy graciously offered a room."

Harry somehow doubted Lucius had been anything but gracious about it. The Dark Lord had probably bullied the man into it, or else Lucius had offered his home as a means of holding something over his head.

"What happened?" he asked, looking first to the medi-wizard and then to Ira. Ira's eyes were bloodshot from crying, and he noted the clothes she was wearing did not seem to be her own. Why was Ira borrowing clothes from Lady Malfoy?

"Well... what do you remember last?"

Harry tried to think back. What day was today? Was it Christmas time yet? Had it passed? His head hurt, and the harder he tried to think the worse it got, until he started to feel nauseous again.

"I don't... I don't know. Merlin, my head hurts. Can you give me something for it?"

He reached up to massage the back of his head, but when his hand brushed bare skin he gave a surprised squawk. He tried to pull his hand from Ira's, but it wouldn't move, so he was left feeling about for the hair that was no longer there with his right. He was not actually hairless he soon realized. He could still feel a sort of fuzzy growth just starting to come in, but it was a near thing. Amongst the sparse fuzz where his spine met his skull, he felt a jagged line of puckered skin and a sharp, stabbing pain when he brushed it.

"Harry, it's alright," Ira hushed. "It'll grow back by tomorrow. They had to shave it all off to see where you were bleeding."

"Someone hit me in the head?" he asked.

"Only if you count gravity as 'someone'. You fell down a flight of stairs. You are terribly lucky you didn't break your neck. I take it you do not remember the events surrounding the incident, then?"

"No... no. So... it was an accident?"

Somehow he didn't think it could be that simple.

Pappanoski and Ira shared a look. Nurse Peele glowered at him balefully without expression.

"That, I think, we can discuss later. If you wouldn't mind answering a few of my questions and letting me examine you, I'll see if I can't scrounge up a potion for that headache of yours. Deal?"

Harry looked at him long and hard for a moment, then at Ira who was staring down at her hands. He might be able to bully some answers out of her, but he didn't want to resort to it. She was obviously upset already, and he was too tired to care much about what the answer would be at the moment anyway.

"Okay."

For the next forty-five minutes, Medi-wizard Pappanoski performed a variety of tests. Some of the questions were basic memory questions, like what was his full name and where did he go to school and what did he last remember? Others were to test his mental acuity. What words rhymed with 'cat'? Can you count back from one hundred? Look at this card, Harold. What is out of place? Which of these objects looks closer to you? Can you name three charms beginning with the same letter?

It wasn't until the physical examination that Harry became truly alarmed when he found what he thought was weakness in his left hand was, in fact, partial paralysis of the entire left side of his body.

"Don't panic, Lord Potter!" the medi-wizard said cheerfully. "You bled into your brain quite a bit, so a little nerve damage is to be expected. Not to worry. Mediwizardry has made great leaps in neurological potions and therapies. Physical paralysis is the easiest thing to treat. I

am more concerned about your amnesia. Amnesia as the result of physical trauma isn't something we have a firm grasp on yet. It may be that you'll never remember what happened."

Harry couldn't say that he particularly wanted to remember what happen. If he had fallen down a flight of stairs it was probably embarrassing. On the other hand, their reluctance to discuss the circumstances made him suspect something more than his own clumsiness had been at work at the time. Perhaps something to account for Lucius' generosity in offering him this room and what was probably his private physician?

A spectacularly painful throbbing in his head derailed any further thoughts on it or attempts to gain answers. He closed his eyes and rested listlessly as the medi-wizard scratched notes onto his clipboard and then rummaged through his medical bag for something or other. Ira had not released his hand, although he could barely feel it, and he tried to squeeze it back with no better results. It remained stubbornly unresponsive.

"Ah, I think this will do it!" Pappanoski said enthusiastically, scuttling back to his bedside.

Harry, enjoying consciousness less and less, forced himself to open an eye to look at him. The medi-wizard was holding three vials in one hand and two vials in the other. One of them was a rather unsavory shade of brown. The invalid young wizard groaned.

Despite his lack of enthusiasm and the five new flavors Harry would have happily gone his whole life never knowing, the potions did their job well. His nausea went away and his headache dulled to something tolerable. His left arm and leg began to tingle with pins and needles, but Pappanoski explained he would need more doses every six hours over the next two or three days before he was up to his full strength.

With most of his discomfort in retreat, Harry took considerably more interest in his circumstances and how he came to be there in the first place. He asked his healer and Ira once again what had happened, but they evaded his inquiries clumsily but effectively.

"If you won't tell me, then take me to someone who will," he demanded testily, then caught himself. "Please."

He was more than a little surprised when they did as he said. He was wrapped in a hooded green bathrobe and loaded into a wheelchair. The wheelchair was self-propelled, but Nurse Peele made a show of pushing him along while Ira and Pappanoski led the way. Out in the hall, which Harry identified as the south wing, he was glad for the extra layer. The hall was strangely cold and his breath misted in the air. The squeak of his wheelchair as it rolled along echoed loudly and seemingly into forever.

Where was everyone? Where was Hermione? She would have been nearby if she were able. Did that mean she had also been hurt? Or perhaps someone else in her foster family required her attention?

His concern for his absent friend increased as they crossed into the north wing of the manor, passing the main entryway as they went and a truly alarming amount of destruction therein. House elves were scurrying about collecting water-soaked tapestries, removing damaged woodwork and chipped marble, collecting bits of debris which included everything from broken bits of a now absent chandelier to a shoe.

"What happened here? Were we attacked? Is Hermione alright?"

"I'm sure Hermione is just fine, Harry," Ira tried to assure him.

"You're 'sure'? You mean you don't know? Where is she?"

"That is something we were hoping to ask you."

Harry turned to see Snape standing in the doorway of the parlor. He moved out of the way to allow the wheelchair through but tugged down Harry's hood rather rudely as the boy went past. The Gryffindor flushed with embarrassment at his exposed scalp and slapped his guardian's probing fingers away with his good hand.

"Do you mind?" he snapped, pulling his hood back up.

"You have another scar," Snape stated.

"Yes. What does it look like?"

"Ugly and unremarkable."

Unremarkable was good. He had too many semi-mystical scars as it was.

He looked around the room. Draco was there, sitting next to Lady Malfoy, looking down at his hand and twisting a ring around his finger distractedly. There was also someone he had never seen before. He was a tall, slender man in his late forties with neatly trimmed mutton chops. He wore a gray suit, a black robe and bowler, and a silver badge that identified him as some sort of law enforcement. Harry noted two rather obvious absences. Lucius wasn't there, for which he was thankful. Neither was Hermione, for which he was not.

Where was she?

The stranger turned towards him the moment he entered the room, and a few long strides forward brought him directly in front of Harry. He removed his hat and offered his hand.

"Sentinel-Inquisitor Amelon, it's an honor to meet you," he said quickly, shaking Harry's hand. "I thank you for coming to speak with me so quickly. I was given to understanding that you might not be up to it today. I would say you surprised us, but it seems I am the only one not acquainted well enough with you to be caught off-guard by this minor miracle."

All of this was spoken rapidly and was accompanied by an even more rapid shifting of the man's eyes as he took in every detail of Harry's appearance, that of his caregivers, everyone in the room, the clock by the door, the tea tray, and the sulky little house elf stoking the fire in the mantle. His entire demeanor was one of constant motion and rapid thought. Harry felt tired just looking at him.

"Nice to meet you. Now where is Hermione?"

"An excellent question. Apparently, you were the last person to see her. At least, the last person alive."

"She's missing? Wait... someone died?"

"General Malfoy and Lord Crouch to be precise."

Harry's heart leaped into his throat. Lucius Malfoy was dead? Hermione was missing? But... that... how? He looked around the room, searching for answers, but he wasn't a legilimens and the eyes that looked back at him held no answers. The beginnings of a panic attack were creeping their way into his awareness, starting with a sudden difficulty in breathing.

"Please say no more!" Healer Pappanoski pleaded. "Lord Potter is suffering from a form of acute amnesia regarding the events surrounding the injury. A very common occurrence with head trauma cases. He cannot be considered a witness. I am taking him back to bed to rest. I should never have brought him down!"

The wheelchair began to roll backwards, and Harry flung his good arm out to catch door jamb to make it stop, nearly pulling himself onto the floor.

"Wait! No, you can't do that. You can't just... you can't just tell me something like that and not explain! What the hell happened last night?"

He was shouting by now, and his struggling had made his partial paralysis obvious. If he didn't feel like he was going to die from unsubstantiated terror, he would have been mortified. Pappanoski was starting to panic himself and was searching his pockets for his wand or possibly a sedative while Nurse Peele pushed him back into the room so that she could re-settle him securely back into his chair. Ira looked ready to rush in to help, but Snape held her back. Amelon's eyes were the only part of him that moved, and they were turning round and round the room.

"Dammit! Dammit, dammit, dammit! Just tell me!"

"Harry."

Draco's voice was a whisper. So soft it should have been missed entirely, but Harry heard it so clearly he almost thought it magic.

"Calm down. Please."

Harry stopped struggling, allowing himself to collapse back into his chair. Panic was suddenly overwhelmed by guilt. Draco. Goddess above, that ring on Draco's hand was his father's.

"Draco... I'm so sorry."

And he was. His feelings towards Lucius often skirted the edge of absolute loathing, but Draco, his proud, boastful, shameless friend, had loved his father. And now that father was dead, and Draco was the heir of a vast and perilous kingdom.

Draco continued as if he had not heard him, never looking up from his ring.

"I've already told the inquisitor what I know. You had found out Lucius knew about the emancipation attempt. We hadn't had time to withdraw it, did we? We were worried how father would react. Does any of this sound familiar?"

"No, I'm sorry."

"You told Hermione that you wanted her to leave the manor. You said you knew a safe place to hide. You never told me where it was."

Harry felt himself relax a little. They were looking for Hermione. That meant she was okay. She had left before anything had happened. He tried to recall where he would have sent her. Draco continued.

"Father confronted you. I wasn't there. Mrs. Snape and Lt. Stratus said you had an argument and things got physical. You drew blood. The manor's wards activated, and you were tripped down the stairs. You were hurt pretty badly."

'Hurt pretty badly' was a rather feeble description of what had happened to him, but Harry wasn't going to call him on it.

"Crouch... went crazy or something. He used the Killing Curse on father. Naturally, the house killed him after that."

There were some major holes in the story. Crouch's 'or something' meant no one was really sure what happened, not even Ira and Reggy both of whom had apparently been there. He looked to Ira, but she had her head buried in Snape's shoulder, the memory of what happened still too intense even with Draco's lackluster delivery. He looked to Snape, who looked back with tired, unreadable eyes but no answers.

Amelon cleared his throat, taking over the story-telling from there.

"Yes, well, that's the gist of it. Miss Granger hasn't turned up. She probably hasn't heard what happened yet. Do you think you know where you might have sent her?"

Harry looked to Draco, but when he received no response he assumed that meant it was okay to answer honestly.

"London, I think. There are a lot of places to hide there. Fred and George would have found a place for her if she couldn't find one herself."

Narcissa sprung to her feet and rushed towards him, her wand drawn. Harry jumped in surprise, but Snape jumped straight into her path, blocking her and her wand. But he couldn't block her words, which she was hissing out in a savage rage.

"You little mudblood piece of shit! This is your fault! You were always planning to destroy my husband. First you turned my Hermione against him, then the Dark Lord. You planned for this to happen! This is all your fault!"

"Mother!" Draco shouted, finally shaken from his apathy. He scrambled to his feet to stop her, but Snape had already grabbed her

wrists, keeping her from aiming her wand or her clawed fingernails as she struggled against him.

"Somnibus," Amelon said, flicking his wand with all the flare of turning off a light switch. Narcissa collapsed into Snape's arms. Everyone looked at the inquisitor, startled. "Poor woman, she's obviously overtired. It's been a long, terrible night. Headmaster, Lord Malfoy, perhaps you should see the lady to her room? I'm sure when she wakes up in a few hours she'll be much calmer. There you go."

Nurse Peele quickly moved Harry out of the way to allow Snape to carry the woman away while Draco followed nervously behind. Harry felt a pang of guilt as Draco turned to offer him an apologetic shrug. It wasn't right. Draco didn't owe him anything. Narcissa... Harry couldn't say she was right, but she wasn't being unreasonable under the circumstances. Her husband had just been murdered, for Merlin's sake, and her foster daughter was missing. She was entitled to a little hysteria.

"Was that entirely necessary?" Ira demanded indignantly from the other side of the room.

"It was as good an excuse as any to send her to bed. Now young Lord Draco will have the opportunity to rest as well. They will need their rest for the coming days. As will Mr. Potter."

Harry studied the inquisitor closely, trying to understand how much of what he had done was sadism and how much altruism. He couldn't say the man's expression was kind precisely, but there was a knowing look that would have been called sympathetic on anyone else. He wasn't sure what to call it on this man.

"Yes, yes, absolutely!" Pappanoski chimed in, spurred by the other man. "I shouldn't have brought him down into all of this. He cannot help you, and the stress is not good for him."

He gave Amelon an accusing look, but the inquisitor just smiled a bit.

"No help? I wouldn't say that. I know to have my men start looking for Miss Granger in London. That's a big help right there. But I know

what you're saying. Good day, Lord Potter. It was an interesting first meeting."

The inquisitor disappeared with the same hurry and abruptness he had displayed during their brief interview, and Harry was left staring after him unsure of what to make of him. Ira, however, shared none of his uncertainty.

"I do not like that man."

Snape slipped back into the room, having already deposited Narcissa with the house elves.

"A man of his profession cannot concern himself with social niceties," Snape said neutrally.

"Maybe not, but he doesn't have to enjoy everyone else's misery either."

"I doubt it's the misery he enjoys. It's the drama. He has something of a reputation for being a theater enthusiast."

"Hmph."

Harry didn't get to hear what else they said. Nurse Peele and Pappanoski were already taking him back to his room. He hoped it was to rest. The headache was returning and he longed for the shallow oblivion of sleep.

Maybe when he woke up, Hermione would be back.

Skeeter entered the Daily Prophet Headquarters like a queen overseeing her court. The clickity-clack of her high heels was her drumroll and trumpet, her black and purple plaid robes and matching feathered cap were her banners, and the trail of envious and terrified news staff that followed her every move was her unwilling entourage. Let them love her. Let them loathe her. They could not turn her away.

The newsroom was busier than usual, she noted. Not surprising. The 'fluff' articles that padded the paper leading up to Christmas were

done, and the staff had to scurry to find real news. Well, she had a little something that might just brighten their day. She headed straight for the editor's office, ignoring the secretary who trembled in her chair at Skeeter's passing. Without knocking, she entered.

"What now, Skeeter?"

Humphrey Penney glared up at her from his desk with bitter resignation. She couldn't help but grin. She and Humphrey had something of a love-hate relationship. He absolutely hated her, and she loved that he did. They had known each other pretty much from the moment she had first entered the business, when she had brought him her request for a job, and he had promptly escorted her out with a laugh and pinch to the behind. By the end of the year, she was a freelance and he was eating his hat when he found himself forever stuck in a bidding war with Wizing Weekly and The Quibbler for her articles.

Whenever she thought he might be forgetting his epic blunder, she pinched his cheek teasingly to remind him and it was back to loathing as usual.

"Oh Humphrey, did someone leave coal in your stocking this year? Perhaps I can cheer you up."

"Cut the crap, Skeeter. You have anything on the Malfoy Massacre or not?"

The only sign she had been thrown by the question was a sudden blink, which she quickly covered by grinning even wider.

"I think I might," she said teasingly, fishing for more. "But then again, maybe one of your own reporters beat me to it."

It was a bad joke between them. She had been running circles around the rest of Penney's reporters for years now and wasn't slowing down any time soon. He sneered at her in response, but knew better than to try and defend them.

"Can you at least confirm Potter is dead?"

This time she couldn't hide her startled expression, and Penney suddenly went red.

"You cheeky minx! You didn't even know about it, did you?"

She didn't even bother to pretend to be apologetic. Honestly, she couldn't be bothered to do much more than try to wrap her mind around what she had just been told. Harold James Potter was dead? But... she had just seen him last night! Just before...oh. Oh! How could she have been so stupid? She had left to babysit the Granger girl while Harry went alone to face off with Lucius Malfoy, and she hadn't stopped to think that something like this might happen?

"I should have known Lucius was going to lose it," she said, mostly to herself. "He's been a loose cannon for weeks."

Penney gaped in surprise.

"How did you know Lucius attacked Potter?"

"Oh, I know more than that. I might not have seen the fight, but I know what it was about."

"How... when... HOW?"

"Darling, you should know better than to ask."

She sighed. So Harry was dead. That was... too bad. She had liked him. He was absolutely crazy in the most wonderful way. She had wanted to take him and his secrets to pieces, expose all the broken, glittering shards of his life to the light for all to see, and see how many times he would cut her in the process. It would have been fun. A lifelong adventure of goading and manipulating and trading favors.

But there was no use crying over spilled potions.

Harry had a short but good go. His had been a remarkable life, and she was just the girl to make sure everyone knew exactly how remarkable it had been. She took a deep breath.

"Well, that's it then. I'll write his obituary."

Penney looked ready to hurl his chair at her.

"Who asked you?"

"I should have the initial article in by tomorrow evening. I'm assuming there hasn't been an official release yet? Can't publish anything until they give confirmation, but that will give me the time I need to put everything together. We'll make a week long run of it. I couldn't fit it all in one article, even if it took half the bloody paper."

"Now look here, Skeeter! There's more than just Potter we need to worry about! Lucius Malfoy is dead! So is Bartemius Crouch! And who knows who else was killed or maimed!"

She felt a shiver run up her spine at the mention of multiple deaths. It left her feeling light-headed and giddy.

"No! Malfoy? Really?"

Probably killed by the Dark Lord in a rage over Harry, or maybe Harry and Lucius killed each other? But then how had Crouch died? And what was this about others getting hurt? Her head was spinning with possibilities. Harry and his obituary were still prominent in her thoughts, but if she could weave it in with this latest tale of intrigue and woe then she would be very pleased indeed.

Oh, how she wished she hadn't let Harry bully her into leaving. If she had stayed, she could have seen it all for herself. The only member of the press there to witness it! She could have spent her night writing up her articles and then roll them up in order to beat Penney around the office with them in the morning. But no, she had been roped into leading a frantic teenager through London and ruined a perfectly good pair of shoes in the process.

If Harry weren't already dead, she might have killed him herself for that.

If Skeeter had any consolation it was that she was the only person in the world who knew that Hermione Granger was staying in a dingy little hotel on the east end of Wizzarding London, and she would get to be there to witness the no doubt fantastic reaction to the news that her best friend and doomed love interest was dead.

And it was entirely her fault.

Voldemort had been at his office for thirty-six hours straight before he took his first break. And by break, he meant he took every letter, form, token, card, and parchment that did not warrant his response or consideration to the dueling hall and proceeded to set it all on fire. It did little to ease his temper or frustration, but setting fire to the innumerable aides and secretaries he had acquired from various departments to help sort out said useless items would not have improved his situation any. Sixteen hours and he was already swimming in folders stamped 'top-secret' and mail marked 'urgent' and a parade of government officials who never seemed to have any answers but always plenty of questions.

He still hadn't figured out who he was going to replace Lucius and Bartemius with.

Tomorrow morning he would make an announcement to the press, at which point he was going to have to name someone. The public and their enemies could not know the true state of crisis they were in right now. They would undoubtedly suspect, but they could never know. Voldemort wasn't overly concerned about the reaction of the citizenry. Malfoy was a well-respected but not particularly well-liked commander, and Crouch had intentionally been left largely unknown to the public, so there would be very little outcry. The major concern was that they would lose confidence in their military campaign in Germany while matters at home were obviously so chaotic and begin withdrawing their support and even actively calling for the abandonment of the war. The Germans, of course, would take advantage of the chaos, redouble their efforts, gather more followers, and push the Dark Lord's people out of the country, and it would be years before he could find another excuse to try again, and then they would be ready for him.

So now he was stuck trying to find replacements, if only in name, and then figure out who and how the roles of his two most devious minions would be occupied. Morgan would be the likeliest candidate to fill Crouch's role. He had a reputation for being stolid and unshakeable, and he played the political game by refusing to play it. He made his rivals nervous, but his underlings were quick to trust him, to give him their all because they knew he was willing to do the same. However, he was reluctant to hand over these new responsibilities to a man who had been working diligently towards his own retirement, setting up an office that would not crumble the moment he walked out the door, a slew of competent, ready replacements scattered through the national security court division. Perhaps if he consolidated the offices of National Security and Foreign Intelligence into one? Morgan had complained frequently of Crouch's interference into matters that were clearly domestic.

It wouldn't make the job easier, but placing Foreign Intelligence under the jurisdiction of another department would certainly simplify matters of authority, and Morgan could reshuffle the new staff and assign trusted officials as he saw fit. It would also give Morgan the opportunity to assign some of those potential replacements to supervise a division and test their mettle. Foreign Intelligence officers were notoriously difficult to deal with.

He would discuss it with Morgan later.

"My Lord."

Or perhaps sooner.

Voldemort turned from the pile of smoldering ash to the man striding into the hall. He looked awful. As unceasingly as Voldemort had been working, so too had Morgan, but unlike his master, the wizard was not gifted with near-immortality or dispensation from sleep. He was pale with blood-shot eyes and had neither changed nor shaved. Voldemort wished he could reward his efforts with rest and the comfort of his own home, but the time for rewards would have to wait just a bit longer.

"What have you to tell me?" he asked instead. "How are things at the Court of Foreign Intelligence?"

Morgan's bland expression didn't change, but there was a definite souring in his mood.

"'Intelligence' should not be used in their name in any way."

"Are they giving you a hard time? Do you need me to go down there and kill someone?"

"Killing them wouldn't solve anything. No one knows anything. Crouch kept everyone on a need-to-know basis which meant no one knew what the hell they were doing except Crouch, and everyone was too scared to try and figure it out. I've got every curse-breaker I can get my hands on tearing down the wards in his office, but it'll be weeks before they can clear everything, and there's no telling what's going to get destroyed in the process."

Voldemort told him of his intention of integrating Crouch's people with National Security.

"In that case, they're all fired," Morgan said without missing a beat.

Despite his rotten mood, Voldemort couldn't help but smile a bit at that. It seemed his taciturn friend had finally developed a pet peeve.

"I leave it to your discretion. I'll send out the necessary paperwork with you, but there won't be a formal announcement until tomorrow morning."

"Have you decided what you are going to do with the General's position?"

"I was thinking Lestrage."

"..."

"I know it's not ideal, but she'll be primarily a figurehead. I had intended to take on greater control at this stage of the invasion

anyway. I will position some other political factions higher up the chain to act as moderators."

Like Morgan, Lestrangle was unquestionably loyal and a dedicated worker, but, unlike Morgan, no one liked her or trusted her entirely, regardless of rank or intentions. Morgan's political position had been attained through his complete unbiased, whereas Lestrangle was unbiased against everyone in seemingly equal measure. She was unlikely to unbalance the various competing political factions within the military intentionally, having no real faction of her own, but that didn't mean she might not accidentally tip the scales and unbalance the uneasy harmony Lucius had established during his tenure. A few minders here and there, in addition to his own supervision, would help reduce that possibility.

That matter settled, there was one more he wished to discuss before he was once again shackled to his desk and bureaucratic drudgery.

"Any word on Harry, yet?"

"Potter woke up about an hour ago. He'll be a complete mess for the next two or three days but should make a full recovery. He doesn't remember what happened."

Voldemort let out a sigh, but whether it was one of frustration or relief, he wasn't certain. He had left Harry at Malfoy Manor in stable condition, but with no way of knowing when or if he would wake up and what state he would be in when he did. The medi-wizard had been cautiously optimistic. He had said Harry had some of the strongest self-protecting magic he had seen in years, and if it hadn't been so low at the time of the accident, he suspected the boy would have walked away from it relatively unharmed. It spoke well of the possibility of recovery, but also reminded Voldemort rather harshly that his own recklessness had left his protégé vulnerable.

He should have merely left the boy at home that night.

Then he wouldn't have been hurt. Then, neither would Lucius and Bartemius. And he still didn't understand what had happened there,

and now that Harry had seemingly forgotten the matter he might never know.

"That is unfortunate. Has Inquisitor Amelon's investigation made any progress?"

"He currently has several theories, but none he's willing to share just yet. He's certainly been asking some interesting questions."

"Does he think something aside from the obvious was going on?"

"Don't you?"

"I've known both Bartemius and Lucius for a long time. I can see Lucius losing his temper, but Bartemius' reaction was completely out of character. I don't know how I am going to explain this to the public. It's so ridiculously stupid of both them, and I can't afford to let my administration look foolish at this time. They are relying on us to look after their best interests in a time of war. Their current acquiescence can only be maintained by their confidence in our judgment."

"You want to find someone to blame this on?"

It was almost redundant of Morgan to ask. It was standard operating procedure to find a scapegoat when an upper echelon bungled something unforgivably. Then, after the scapegoat had garnered the necessary negative attention, Voldemort would go on to punish the responsible parties appropriately. It wasn't a perfect justice, but it worked.

"I was thinking Stratus. He's already under suspicion, isn't he?"

"Amelon didn't say. Did he have a motive?"

"Who knows? It would be easy enough to generate something. A war hero turned resentful after being assigned the inglorious and undistinguished position of secretary to a wizard known for his arrogance and temper. It wouldn't be much of a stretch to make it believable. Perhaps he can be a spy under polyjuice? He was in

Germany after all. It wouldn't be too amazing for Dumbledore to arrange a bait-and-switch."

This was all ridiculous, of course, but the public loved ridiculous stories like that. Harry's immense popularity hinged on them. It was irrelevant that in Harry's case, they were mostly true.

"It'll make a lot of people nervous to think someone in his position was reporting to the enemy."

"True. It might also stir some passion back into the game. Assassination on this magnitude will infuriate just as many."

"It's your decision."

"Have you seen Narcissa? If I can get her to speak out on the matter, it would have greater effect. Grieving widows and all."

"I think a grieving son will work better. He's taking it all a lot better than she is at the moment. Could be the shock though."

"Good idea. Miss Granger too. Her tearful statements will appeal to the lower classes more than a pureblood's will."

"She's still missing."

"No one's found her yet?"

"Amelon sent some people to London to look for her. He's not certain they'll find her, though."

Voldemort wondered at that. Why would Granger run away to London? For that matter, why had she run away at all? After leaving Harry to recover at Malfoy Manor, he hadn't lingered to ask questions. There was so much that needed to be done, the 'why?' hadn't mattered so much as the 'what now?'. It was suspicious, whatever the reason. London wasn't a place people would automatically run away to nowadays. It was still mostly a war-demolished heap of rubble in most places, and not the ideal place to go for someone unfamiliar

with the area. That suggested she had planned her escape in advance, but why?

He felt a sudden wave of suspicion, and it suddenly occurred to him that perhaps Stratus was not the most ideal scapegoat after all.

"Please excuse the mess, good sir," the house elf begged softly as she led Robert through the front hall, the area clear of debris but still bearing the scars of the battle that had occurred there. "We is not quite done with repairs. It is a disgrace to Master, but there is so much to do. Poor Master."

The little elf, who had clearly been crying previously, burst out into several retching sobs. Robert fidgeted nervously as he followed behind her. He wasn't terribly comfortable with house elves. He was never certain how he was supposed to treat them and they were always so emotionally unstable. Did he try to offer her comfort? Did he scold her emotionalism? Praise her loyalty? Was it even his place as a mere visitor to offer any of these things?

"Uh... think nothing of it. It's quite understandable... under the circumstances," he tried. The elf started wailing.

Robert sighed. It wasn't like it mattered anyway. He had received a summons that morning from Malfoy Manor informing him of the circumstances of Lord Malfoy's passing the night before and with a request to bring all the files pertaining to business dealings he had had with the recently deceased with him. It could only mean that Malfoy's heir, Lord Draco Malfoy, wasn't wasting any time consolidating his father's affairs, and Robert was very shortly going to find himself out of a job.

This was unfortunate for a number of reasons, although none of them relating to any remorse over the loss of his former employer's company. Lucius Malfoy had been a right bastard, but at least he had paid well and on time.

The elf's wailing gradually waned into some rather ridiculous sniffing as she led him towards the study. Chairs had been placed just outside, and in them were perched about half a dozen witches and

wizards in professional business robes. Some chairs were empty, suggesting there had been others there previously. Some of those present were clearly lawyers like Robert himself, judging by their attaché cases, which meant the rest were probably financial advisers and investors.

No one spoke to another. No one there was an acquaintance or associate. At best, they were uninterested third parties, at worst, bitter rivals for those positions the new Lord Malfoy saw fit to retain. Robert had already resigned himself to the fact that he could not even consider himself competition. Everyone there was clearly the top in their profession. Their suits alone could have paid a half a year's mortgage on his London flat and the condescending sneer from those who deigned to look at him could only have been acquired through years of ruthless self-advancement. He had only gained his current position as a means to harass a mutual acquaintance of the late Lord's by the name of Harry Potter.

So he waited as patiently as he could for the inevitable, trying to plan what his next move would be. He was out of clients, his previous ones having settled their affairs (although not their bills) and while his financial circumstances would hold for another month or two, he would need to find work again soon. Perhaps Harry was in need of a lawyer? He was nearing the age of majority soon, which meant he might be coming into the inheritance his parents left him, and he would need professional help when that happened. Maybe he could get another job? Manage an office or a factory somewhere? Kyle would prefer the more regular hours.

While he pondered this, the lawyers and investors and who knew what else filed into the office in varying degrees of confidence and left either furious, smug, or horrified, until only Robert was left. After nearly an hour and a half of waiting, he was finally given his turn.

As he entered the office, the first thing he noticed was that Draco Malfoy was the only other person in the room. He looked around curiously, expecting to see Lady Malfoy or perhaps the godfather, the notorious Headmaster Snape, or some other relative. No one. They were alone.

"Please have a seat, Mr. Reicher," the young lord said, gesturing towards the chair set across from him. The second thing Robert noticed was that Draco Malfoy was a lot younger than he had previously thought. He had never met the boy in person, but in his mind he had assumed him to be in college, but he clearly couldn't have been much older than Harry. His father's massive desk dwarfed the young wizard, making his slender form seem that much smaller, while the tired, haunted look in his eyes made him look frail. Those gray eyes were shadowed by an intense grief, but they were not red. He had not cried, but clearly he had wanted to.

For the first time since he had arrived, Robert considered the possibility that the death of Lucius Malfoy might mean more than a simple inconvenience to himself.

"Lord Malfoy," Robert greeted somewhat belatedly. "Is Lady Malfoy not going to be joining us?"

An irritated expression crossed the boy's face, but it quickly smoothed into neutrality.

"My mother was in attendance earlier, but she has since retired to rest. Neither of us believe that her supervision at this point is necessary."

"Forgive my impertinence, sir, but you appear to have need of some rest yourself."

The irritated expression returned, but this time Lord Malfoy didn't bother to hide it.

"You are impertinent, indeed, Mr. Reicher, but since it appears to be the first sincere thing anyone has said to me all morning, I shall let it slide. You are my last appointment for the day, and the sooner we complete our business the sooner I might do precisely as you suggest. You are, of course, aware of my father's passing?"

"Of course."

"Are you aware of the circumstances?"

"I... not really. Some sort of... accident?"

"Murder, Mr. Reicher. My father was murdered."

"...Yes."

"No condolences?" the young lord asked with a touch of bitterness.

"It would sound insincere."

"Sound insincere or be insincere?"

"What would you have me say? Your father was a great man... but he was not a good man."

Robert mentally kicked himself. He had not meant to say that out loud, particularly not to Draco Malfoy. While he had a bone or two to pick with Malfoy Sr., it was cruel to denounce his character so bluntly to his only child. Cruel and unprofessional and potentially dangerous. He usually knew better than to poke at the wounds of grieving relatives.

But the young lord did not fly into a rage or break down into tears. He simply regarded him expressionlessly until his scrutiny became distinctly awkward. It was only then that Robert recognized a bit of the former lord in his son. Despite the boy's seeming frailty in his father's chair, there was steel in his eyes.

"What projects were you working on with my father?"

It was not the question Robert thought he wanted to ask, but he could be nothing but relieved about it. Business was a subject he was comfortable with, and this was something he had come into the room prepared to discuss. He opened his attaché case and pulled out the necessary files.

"I worked three cases for your father, but two of them he withdrew before their completion. Amongst them was the lawsuit against Bartemius Crouch, which was shortly afterward withdrawn as a

stipulation of your foster sister's betrothal, and also a contract I wrote up on your father's behalf."

Malfoy's expression became stricken, and Robert mentally cursed. He was really bungling things today. The boy had been fond of Miss Granger. Lucius had lamented this fact quite frequently in his company. It seemed that he had kept the specifics of her betrothal a secret from his son, which must have made his announcement quite a shock.

"My father arranged for my sister to get married by blackmailing Crouch with a lawsuit?"

Robert swallowed thickly.

"Ah... yes, he did. Then he called off the betrothal."

"I know that!" young wizard snapped, hurling himself away from his desk so that he could stand and pace. "I helped call it off!"

Oh. Wait...what?

"So... you probably know about the second betrothal?"

The boy froze mid-step. Apparently he hadn't known.

"Your father had arranged for me to write a new betrothal contract with Lt. Reginald Stratus. If it's any consolation, I don't think there was any coercion involved."

Malfoy unfroze one limb at time, and Robert watched in fascination as the boy seemed to melt in mid-stance and pour himself back into his chair. He leaned to one side, his head resting in one hand while the other rubbed his temple. He did this for a few moments, his expression hidden behind his hands, and then startled Robert once again by chuckling softly. Soon the chuckles turned to laughter and from there into hysterics, arms clutching at his sides and tears pouring down his face. The elder wizard sat frozen, but not overly concerned. It was hardly the first time he had seen grieved relatives behave as such after they had received an unexpected shock.

"Oh," Malfoy laughed, "Oh god, he really... he really was a bastard, wasn't he? I...I didn't... I didn't understand how... how she could hate him so much... but... I get it... I get it now."

As Robert knew it would, the laughter faded away, leaving the boy looking even more exhausted and frail than before. He didn't speak, didn't push or attempt to offer comfort. He simply waited until the other had the time to collect himself. Malfoy eventually did, staring off into some unseen distance for several minutes, before his gaze slid back to the lawyer.

"He couldn't stand the thought of her winning," the boy explained. "Making her miserable was a game to him. She literally had to fight him for even the possibility of happiness."

Robert nodded.

"You're not surprised?" Malfoy asked, a touch of resentment in his voice. "Did he seem like such an awful person when you worked for him? If he did, why did you help him? Surely you knew what he was doing."

"I did not 'help' your father. I worked for him. And you're right. I did know what he was doing. I hated what he was doing, but... I have a family of my own I need to take care of. A family in a rather desperate situation when your father came knocking on my door. He had to have known my situation. He knew and took advantage of it."

"Why bother? No offense, but you're hardly... He could have done better."

"I'm not sure how I could not take offense to that, but I'll try. To put it simply, he wanted to use me against Harry Potter."

"Harry? What does... oh. You're his lawyer friend. The one with the little girls."

Robert was startled. Harry had talked about him to others. Harry had talked about his little girls as people worth mentioning. He felt strangely grateful for the consideration.

"Yes. I know Miss Granger is his good friend. I assume you are also acquainted with him?"

"I suppose you could say he's a friend of mine too."

Draco seemed a bit uncertain when he said this, almost guilty. Robert didn't know the entire situation, but he knew Lucius and Harry had been bitter enemies even as Hermione and Harry had been the best of friends. It probably wasn't surprising the young Lord was feeling a bit ambiguous about their relationship at the moment. He continued before Draco became distracted by this revelation.

"Your father had many admirable qualities, Lord Malfoy. He could not have achieved his position and influence otherwise. Unfortunately, during my service to him, I was not made privy to any of them. I respected your father, but I never liked him. However, I am genuinely sorry that you have lost your father. I am especially sorry that you will have to face these trying times without his guidance."

Robert waited tensely for the other's response. It was beyond presumptuous for him to criticize Lucius Malfoy to his son so soon after his death, and he wouldn't be the least bit surprised or unsympathetic if he was tossed out of the house on his tail with a curse or two for good measure. On the other hand, his answer had been honest. For whatever that was worth.

What it was worth, apparently, was tears. Draco Malfoy's expression didn't change at first as his eyes welled up with tears and overflowed, racing down over his cheeks and along his chin until they fell in fat droplets onto his hand and the documents beneath it. His expression was so extraordinarily blank that he may as well have been standing under a leaky faucet rather crying. To Robert's growing horror, even this stubborn stoicism began to break down, and the fatherless child slowly broke down into a mask of pained anguish and shaking limbs.

"Merlin..." Draco grit out, quickly losing control over his voice along with everything else. "Why... shit."

"I'm sorry," Robert said quickly, not entirely sure what he was apologizing for. It didn't really matter. The boy had been at the tipping point, and it could have been anything that pushed him over. He had seen it enough times to know.

"Oh, shut up, you didn't- hic- you didn't- hic God, now I've hiccups!"

And that caused the boy to break out laughing, the absurdity and the stress bubbling out with the tears into a hysterical fit. The lawyer let him have it out and tried not to squirm. Grief was a strange, ugly creature, but it was natural. There was no point in being afraid of it.

"Would you like some water?" he asked.

This only caused more laughter and more tears.

It couldn't last forever. Minutes later- ten? Twenty? One hundred?- and the tears gradually stopped and laughter subsided, and the afflicted wizard sagged into his chair, completely exhausted.

"I don't know what I'm doing," he sighed, looking terribly young. "I don't know what to do next. I'm not technically a legal adult so I can't get anything done through the court offices without my mother's consent, but our bloodline property only acknowledges me as the rightful lord. Did you know she was locked out of her own bedroom? The doors wouldn't open to the Master suite until I forced them too. They still tend to stick for her. As if things weren't bad enough, she has to deal with the house rejecting her too."

Robert nodded at this. While he had never worked with anyone with property quite as old or extensive as the Malfoys', he seen more than one client struggle with shift in power and position within a magical home caused by the death of a family member. A death within the immediate family was always hard, but the home's persistent adherence to the new order of things made it doubly harsh to deal with.

"And it's only a matter of time before everyone else finds out about what happened. The press is going to turn this into a circus, my cousins are going to be scrambling to dig their claws into the family coffers, my father's enemies will malign our family's name and take advantage wherever they can, while a sea of sympathetic friends and admirers will be trying to weasel their way into my good graces. Oh, and did I mention my sister is missing? Who do I trust, Mr. Reicher? Where do I start?"

The questions were likely rhetorical, but Robert took a moment to think them over just the same. Draco Malfoy needed help, and for whatever reason, he had asked Robert for it, even if he wasn't truly expecting it. He felt strangely compelled to do just that, despite the fact that he didn't think he would ever return to this place or see the young heir again.

"Lord Malfoy," he said after a moment, "I don't know if you know this, but my specialty is in both civil suits and inheritance law. I've worked with many families adjusting to the loss of a parent or both parents, many of whom felt as you do now. Overwhelmed, unprepared, grieving, angry, and... exhausted. I hope you will consider this past experience before dismissing my suggestions out of hand."

The young wizard eyed him warily, but said nothing.

"To your first concern regarding Lady Granger, I would recommend as little thought to be given to it as possible. Assuming she was not kidnapped, she will more than likely return on her own. You express a genuine concern for her, and I can only assume it is reciprocal. She will return, if not to honor your late father, then to comfort her grieving brother.

"In regards to whom you should trust... I would recommend trusting those who were close to you and to your father prior to his death. Your mother, obviously, your sister, any friends or relatives who have earned your confidence. Your godparents, perhaps? Then your father's closest associates; those he entrusted to both personal and highly sensitive work. I am not overly familiar with his business, but I believe Lt. Stratus would be a good start."

"Lt. Stratus? The man... the second man my father tried to sell my sister to?"

"I know it might be difficult to see past that, but there's nothing to suggest that Lt. Stratus' intentions were anything less than honorable. He expressed a desire for Lady Granger to not only complete her Hogwarts' education but also a university career. He must have held a genuine respect for her, if not affection. Additionally, as your father's personal aide he would probably know more about your father's dealings than anyone else and was trusted to keep them to himself.

"And to your third concern, it is my personal recommendation that you prepare yourself to sacrifice the empire your father built."

The boy stiffened noticeably.

"You haven't the connections, experience, or position to maintain it as you are now. The best you can hope to do is consolidate the wealth and inheritable titles your father managed to acquire throughout his career, ruffle as few feathers as you can along the way, and then bide your time to rebuild again as you are able."

"And if I don't?"

"Romans, Lord Malfoy. They sacrificed everything to try to keep what they couldn't maintain and ended up with nothing in the end. And you have to ask yourself if you really want to try and live your father's legacy or if you wouldn't rather build your own."

Silence fell over the office. Robert wasn't optimistic enough to think that it was the young lord considering his words that caused it. In point of fact, the boy was looking positively mutinous at him. Robert sighed. A little too much honesty then. Ah well, he had tried.

He stood up and stretched. Malfoy blinked at him in surprise.

"Where are you going?"

"Home. Unless you need me for anything else? I believe you have enough lawyers to sort out the paperwork I gave you."

"You... you're quitting?"

Robert blinked.

"Aren't you firing me?"

"I... well, I sort of intended to."

"I figured as much."

"Then why say all that to me?"

"Why wouldn't I? Come to think of it, if I thought you were going to keep me on, I don't think I would have had the gall to say it. I think you'll find lawyers are the most honest to people they don't actually work for."

"I believe that's true of everyone."

He chuckled at that.

"I guess so."

"Any other honest advice then?"

"Sleep. A lot. Exercise even if you don't feel up to it. It'll help with the stress and the fatigue. Oh, and if you don't have one already, get a lawyer that specializes in inheritance law."

"Sounds reasonable. I understand you just quit your previous position. I don't suppose you're looking for another?"

The elder wizard blinked.

"I... Are you having me on?"

"My mother fired our inheritance lawyer this morning. In fact, she fired pretty much everyone we had a meeting with. If she hadn't... taken a nap, I dare say we would have consolidated my father's assets even more than you would have recommended."

Robert liked to consider himself a professional, but that didn't keep him from gaping like a fool at the completely unexpected offer. The young lord, for the first time since their meeting had begun, actually smiled. Well, smirked and somewhat grimly at that, but still...

"Shall I take that as a 'yes', Mr. Reicher?"

Harry limped out of the Court floo station in Bristol shortly after six that evening, leaning heavily on one of the more austere canes Draco had provided from among his father's collection. It was black with a silver wolf head handle that appealed to him aesthetically, even if its necessity was galling. He had regained most of the feeling on the left side of his body since that morning, but the strength in his leg seemed to come and go sporadically. At least he didn't have to bother with the wheelchair or his nursemaids anymore. Although Ira looked ready to cry again when he insisted he would be fine to answer the Dark Lord's summons by himself. He had been promised an escort after all, so he would hardly be in danger of passing out in a ditch somewhere.

Medi-wizard Pappanoski had insisted that his rate of recovery was remarkable, but it still wasn't quick enough for Harry's preference. He had been lying in bed all day, pained and exhausted but his mind too full to sleep. Hermione had still not returned, and his only visitor had been Ira, who hadn't been willing to discuss what was going on under the misguided notion that it would somehow 'upset' him.

Only now he was on his way to see the Dark Lord and had absolutely no idea of what was going on.

"Ambassador Potter?"

Harry turned a bit to see Lt. Stratus waiting for him in the corner of the floo station. The station was mostly quiet but for the few lone court workers headed home and the maintenance staff coming in.

They all turned to stare at him as he ambled by with varying degrees of surprise and curiosity. They didn't whisper though, which struck Harry as odd. He had expected quite a bit of whispering after word of Lucius' death got out.

"Reggy," Harry said, offering him a tired smile as he limped over. Stratus gave him a worried look in response. "It's not as bad as it looks. The limp will be gone by tomorrow."

"Anything... more permanent?"

Harry shrugged.

"A scar probably, but my hair is already starting to cover it up."

He ran his hands over his head, now carpeted with a short, thick crop of hair rather than the thin layer of peach fuzz that morning. It wasn't back to its usual length, but at least it looked normal.

"So you're my escort, then?"

"The visible one."

Harry made a quick glance around. There was no one to see of course, but that hardly meant no one was there.

"You should still be resting," the lieutenant said with some disapproval, although not directed at him. Harry's smile became a bit more genuine at the show of concern.

"No rest for the wicked, Reggy, especially not today. I bet Lord Voldemort has been running you around in circles. Have you slept at all since last night?"

Stratus shook his head and sighed, leading Harry out of the floor station and into the street.

"I couldn't have slept even if the option had been available to me. There's so much that needs to be done before tomorrow."

"What happens tomorrow?"

"The Dark Lord will make the official announcement of yesterday's events to the press."

"You mean no one knows yet?"

That earned Harry a startled look.

"No one told you?"

"No one is telling me anything," he said, letting a bit of bitterness seep into his voice. They strolled on in thoughtful silence along the walkways, their cheeks and noses turning red in the cold and gusty wind. Eventually Harry started to shiver. Without a word, Stratus cast a warming charm on him.

"Thank you."

"Did your wand break?" Stratus asked in concern. "I noticed you weren't carrying it as you got off the floo."

"No, it didn't break, but I'm not allowed to practice magic for a while. Medi-wizard's orders. Honestly, you don't have to look so worried. I'm not going to keel over on the sidewalk."

"I cannot help but worry. I don't know if you remember, but I was there yesterday when you fell. I saw what happened and how badly you were injured," he explained, a touch of anger in his voice now. "You very nearly died, and now I have to escort you to a Dark Lord in a temper. without so much as your wand to defend yourself with."

"A bit testy today, is he?"

"Harry, be serious!"

"Then take me seriously, lieutenant," he snapped. "Worrying at me isn't going to help me. Just... tell me what's happening right now. I need to know what I'm dealing with if I'm going to have to face him."

Stratus gave him an appraising look and must have approved of what he saw, because after a moment he nodded.

"Very well."

The lieutenant gave him a general run down of what had happened since yesterday. The press was being pressured into silence until the official announcement tomorrow, an announcement which would provide the official version of the events of the Christmas Ball as well as the actions being taken now. The integration of the Court of Foreign Affairs into the Court of National Security under Morgan, and Lestrangle being called in from Germany as Lucius' official replacement even as others were being reassigned to curtail her actions. War councils had been held to discuss the how their enemies would respond to the news and what their own troops would need to be prepared for. There was a small army of curse-breakers stripping down the security in Crouch's and Malfoy's offices, and another small army monitoring them to make sure they weren't sneaking off with national secrets. Court workers were being brought in early from their Christmas breaks to slave their way through the growing mountain of paperwork and informational backlash that was flooding between offices. People were getting panicky but forced to keep themselves in check as the Dark Lord stalked their progress like a raging beast, shouting out orders and reprimands and curses left and right. Office politics were already starting to rear their ugly head, aggravating an already dangerous situation, and rumors were flying. Meanwhile, Sentinel-Inquisitor Amelon was making a nuisance of himself with his own investigation, gathering his secrets with a grating nonchalance, giving away nothing, and unsettling everyone he spoke to.

It was all a barely contained madness, and it was only going to get worse.

The more Stratus talked the more withdrawn Harry became, his already pale skin getting paler by the second as the enormity of the situation began to set in. What had he done? How much of this was his fault? He hadn't killed Lucius or Crouch, but had his actions somehow set in motion these deadly consequences? What did this mean for him? For Hermione and Draco? For Britain?

Why had Voldemort summoned him?

"Are you alright, Harry?"

"Yeah."

"If you need to see a medi-wizard, I'll make excuses to Lord Voldemort."

"My, but you really are a brave man."

The offer of escape was a bit touching and a bit annoying. Harry wasn't looking forward to his meeting, but he didn't need coddling. He'd accept his part in this mess and do what he could to fix it.

"I'll be okay. Best to get this over and done with."

"Just be careful, okay? He's in a dangerous mood."

There was never a mood in which Voldemort wasn't dangerous, but Harry didn't bother pointing this out. He didn't really have time to. They entered the Cultie Headquarters, went through the usual security protocols, and from there were escorted by a young recruit towards the indoor training hall. They heard Voldemort well before they saw him. The angry, sibilant hiss of parseltongue followed by the sound of small explosions was unmistakable. They turned into a hall where a line of about a dozen wizards and witches filed along the wall just outside the doorway, many of them trembling and flinching visibly. A gray-haired, podgy little witch standing nearest the door looked as if she had been spared from execution at the sight of Harry.

Harry swallowed thickly and gave a weak smile.

"I guess he really is testy today, isn't he?" he asked them. They smiled weakly back but said nothing.

"Do you want me to stay?" Stratus offered.

"You've got your own things to take care of. I'll see you later."

He left his escort out in the hall and did his best to hobble inside with some semblance of dignity.

The training hall was, predictably, a wreck. It seemed Voldemort had spent at least an hour systematically destroying the innumerable practice dummies with a variety of curses. Dummies and remnants of what had once been dummies were scattered across the room in heaps of charred, splintered, dismembered, melted, mangled, maimed, and twisted wood and cloth. The air tingled with Dark Magic, and even in his depreciated state, Harry could feel it tingling against his skin unpleasantly.

The Dark Lord himself stood amongst the carnage, slightly disheveled, his entire body coiled with tension. His wand work was sharp and harsh, his eyes doubly so, and as he turned his attention to Harry, the young wizard froze instinctively.

Crimson eyes stared into his for just a moment before flitting towards the cane Harry rested so heavily on. To his surprise, the Dark Lord's fierce expression softened just a little. The elder wizard made a motion towards the door and it closed with a loud bang, sealing them both inside.

"How's the head?" Voldemort asked without preamble.

"Still there."

"Obviously. Any improvement in your memory?"

"Only up to you giving me my keystone in the study."

"Hhhmm..."

There was a silence as Voldemort considered, and Harry felt a growing tension coiling inside him with each passing second. Recklessly, he pushed ahead without waiting for the Dark Lord to finish his contemplation.

"How much of what happened is my fault?"

Voldemort, however, wouldn't be rushed and only became more thoughtful and turned away to begin pacing the room. His wand flicked idly back and forth, wordlessly reassembling those dummies that could be salvaged. Harry waited this time, hand clenching around the handle of his cane. After a minute or two, the elder wizard answered.

"I don't know. Maybe all of it. Maybe none of it. More than likely, you played some part, although I'm not entirely sure in what way. Your injury was obviously accidental, but your provocation of Lucius? Then there was Crouch. He killed Malfoy outright, but we still don't know why. Had he done so believing he was protecting you? Had he been in his right mind? Did your accident instigate the attack or provide an excuse, however feeble, for it? It's a strange situation, and I already have people working to unravel it."

"Inquisitor Amelon."

"Yes. What did you think of him?"

"I don't know. Everything was so disorienting when we..."

Harry shook himself.

"What will happen now?"

Voldemort glanced back at him, but didn't stray from his self-assigned task.

"That is a good question. Britain is in a very vulnerable position. Lucius and Bartemius were very difficult men to lose while we are at war. Inevitably, Germany will try to take advantage of the situation. We were already at a standstill with them, hence my intentions to go there in person. Now I am stuck here sorting out this mess, leaving even that tenuous balance in question. Depending how quickly things can be resolved and how the Germans react, we may simply delay our progress by a few months or we could lose the country altogether."

That was bad, but not the biggest concern Harry had. He had been losing his enthusiasm for the war for some time, and lately he had begun to wonder what they would actually do with Germany if they succeeded in overthrowing it. They couldn't hold it as a British territory, could they? Force the people to surrender all their cultural and financial wealth as punishment before returning control to its people? Set up a puppet government to rule on Voldemort's behalf?

"What about here?"

"Here? There won't be rioting in the streets ,if that is what concerns you. However, a negative turn in the war could destabilize the economy. We've had growth in certain industries to meet our need for war-time supplies that has offset the decline elsewhere as well as several investments tied up in the potential victory over Germany. We will have to reduce the number of active-duty Culties, which will overstress the job market and likely increase crime in certain areas. Then there's the lingering sense of insecurity from leaving our enemies the time to recoup and plot yet another attack against Britain, this time on their own terms. A not unreasonable fear. Plus the complication of our re-emergence in the international economy from the unresolved tension between our allies and Germany's."

Harry's head was starting to ache even more than before. It was all so complicated, so large and interconnected that he couldn't hope to understand half of what the Dark Lord was saying. He held up his hand in a silent plea for him to stop. It was just too much.

Voldemort nodded.

"It's nothing unmanageable, Harry, but it definitely complicates things."

"What can I do?"

The Dark Lord didn't actually smile, but the question obviously pleased him to some extent. He seemed to relax somewhat.

"Our biggest concern at the moment is damage control. The press has been frothing at the mouth to release news of what has

happened, and given the number of witnesses, it will be impossible to silence them indefinitely even with the media blackout. What we need right now is to reassure the public that we have everything under control on the government and military side of things, and to distract them with a sensationalist story on the more celebrity side of things."

Harry frowned a bit, not understanding.

"You want me to tell them about the anti-betrothal plot?"

Because that truth was about as sensational as things got.

"No. I don't want you to tell anybody anything. As far as the world is concerned, you are just an innocent victim in this. The one lucky enough to have survived it. Given your memory loss, it should spare you the necessity of press conferences."

"I don't understand. If all you wanted was to keep me out of the way, why did you call me here?"

Voldemort stopped pacing and turned to face him directly, a few feet away.

"I thought I should give you advanced warning. I am issuing a warrant for Hermione Granger's arrest."

Harry didn't understand at first. Arrest Hermione? For what? She hadn't done- His eyes widened in horror.

"No."

"Yes. The people cannot be made to think their government is being run by fools who kill each other over petty feuds or lost tempers. Lucius and Bartemius must remain the noble patriots they were in the eyes of the public. I need a villain, Harry."

"You need a therapist!"

"Kettle meet cauldron."

Harry's headache bloomed into a full-blown migraine until he felt nauseous with pain. It did nothing to distract him from what was happening. Hermione, blamed for murder? The press would crucify her and then what? Azkaban?

"Why? Why her? She hasn't done anything!" he asked desperately.

"She disappeared after her foster father and former fiancé were killed and her supposed best friend was grievously injured."

"She was gone before that!"

"But no one else knows that, and even if they did it would still be highly suspicious. It doesn't help she had a grudge to bear against both of them."

"Along with half of bloody England, no doubt."

"Shall I randomly assign blame to someone else then?" Voldemort asked tersely, resuming his pacing.

"Yes!" Harry snapped back impulsively, but balked almost immediately after. "I mean no. I mean... why can't we just find the person responsible?"

"I fully intend to, and if it is convenient, I may even charge them this crime and Miss Granger will go free. If it is convenient, and that is a very big 'if'. Do you-"

There was a knock on the door. Voldemort let out a snarl of annoyance. With a flick of his hand the doors burst nearly off their hinges. Stratus stood in the entryway, startled.

"What is it?" the Dark Lord snarled.

A lesser man would have cringed in fear or run away, but Stratus merely fidgeted, glanced quickly at Harry, and marched directly up to Voldemort. The Gryffindor, vexed by his headache, Hermione's potential demise, and the inconvenient interruption, glared daggers at the both of them when Stratus whispered something to the source of

his grievance too quietly for Harry to hear. A curious look crossed the Dark Lord's features. He glanced at his protégé.

An unspeakable dread filled Harry. Goddess, had they found Hermione?

"Let them in," Voldemort said.

He felt dizzy with relief. It hadn't been about his friend.

Stratus didn't look pleased with the order, but saluted and marched out again with another glance at Harry. The man worried over him entirely too much. But that wasn't important right now.

"Please," Harry begged. "Don't do this. I... I'll do whatever you want, just... Don't ruin her life over my mistakes. I'll take responsibility for it. I'll..."

Even as he spoke he knew it was useless. If Voldemort wanted him to take the blame, then he would have said so outright. But the Dark Lord wouldn't sacrifice Harry just to pacify the press. It had nothing to do with liking or caring for him, but the simple fact of the matter was the man had too much invested in him.

"Harry," Voldemort said, his tone surprisingly gentle. "I know this seems cruel, but it isn't personal. The fact that she is your friend is unfortunate but doesn't change that she is the most suitable choice for this. Lives and fortunes depend on the distraction she will provide."

"This feels very personal to me," he bit out angrily.

"If it's any consolation, she's too young to be sentenced to Azkaban or to death."

"So an asylum, then? That's loads better!"

"I can have her killed during the attempted capture if you think it more humane," was the cutting reply. The Dark Lord was starting to lose his patience again. Harry had already lost his. He wanted his wand.

He wanted his wand badly, but all he had for a possible weapon was his cane, and he actually needed that.

Violence not being an option left to him, he had to try and think his way out of this situation. What could Harry say or do that would save Hermione? What could he possibly bribe with or exchange for her continued safety and freedom? He tried to sort it out, because surely there was something. There was always something. Perhaps Voldemort even wanted him to find what it was. Find the solution on his own, another learning experience, or some other option that would put him back in the Dark Lord's debt. Why else would Voldemort have bothered to warn him in advance and in person?

Questions filled his mind, but the pain stalled any answers from generating and only exacerbated his condition. He covered his eyes with his free hand, trying to block it all out. He was starting to shake, he realized, and his palms felt sweaty and slick.

"I can't... I can't think... Just... Just tell me what I need to do to save her."

Voldemort said nothing.

"TELL ME!"

There was sharp, swishing sound and then a rush of heat and noise. Then an even more intense wave of heat and a burning wind. Harry dropped his cane and curled on instinct, thinking he had been cursed and expecting the agony to set in at any moment. But there was no pain, none that wasn't already there, and when he dared to open his eyes he could see it was the dummies burning in ghostly green flames and not himself.

The heat and the vision of writhing bodies brought another swell of nausea. He gagged, but nothing would come up. He tried to climb to his feet, but his left leg wouldn't cooperate and his right didn't feel strong enough to lift him. There was no escaping it. He could only sit there and endure. Closing his eyes and rocking slowly, he tried to keep himself from passing out.

For several moments, he was blind and deaf to everything, too caught up in his own physical and psychological misery. Then the sound of footsteps seeped in. The slow tap of shoes against hardwood moving closer. Harry didn't even have enough energy in him to be afraid.

"Harry, I am trying to keep my temper with you, but you make it very difficult."

Despite his words, the Dark Lord didn't sound angry at all. Maybe it had been spent on the curse that had demolished a small legion of practice dummies. Perhaps Harry just didn't have the presence of mind to notice it.

"I am not doing this to punish you, Harry, or manipulate you. I know this situation is as much my fault as it is yours. Had I called off this feud between Lucius and you, or if I hadn't brought you to that party in your weakened state, how much of this could have been avoided?"

He felt the Dark Lord touch his hair and paused in his rocking.

"But even I cannot undo what has happened. We must both pay a heavy price for our mistakes. You've never been a coward. You must accept the inevitable."

Harry took a deep breath, not looking up.

"I hate you."

He meant it. He meant it, and it felt like a betrayal, which only made him hate him more.

"It changes nothing."

The hand tightened in his hair. Harry could feel the magic and rage coiled within the palm of the Dark Lord's hand, and he wanted nothing more than to lash out at it. To slap it away, to crush it, to bite it. He opened his eyes and finally brought his eyes to meet Voldemort's, daring him to legilimens him and see within Harry's mind

all the loathing he felt for him in that moment. Crimson eyes stared back at him without blinking, unflinching.

Harry looked away first. Not because he was intimidated, but because the sound of surprised shouts and banging doors drew his attention away.

"Perfect timing," Voldemort said, moving his hand from his protégé's head to his arm. Harry barely managed to grab his cane before he was forcibly lifted off the floor. His legs still refused to cooperate with him, and he weaved and stumbled dangerously trying to keep to his feet even with the help of the cane.

He had just managed to steady himself when the door swung open violently again, this time aided by a furious Sirius Blackbone's foot rather than Voldemort's magic. The werewolf stalked into the room, radiating the savage nature hidden beneath his human form, no doubt terrorizing every witch and wizard he had come across along the way. Remus followed a few steps behind, barely noticeable in the wake of his alpha's presence and looking to keep it that way. His eyes darted about cautiously, looking out for the dangers Sirius was choosing to completely ignore.

Both werewolves froze, however, when they saw Harry. They seemed even more surprised to see him than he was to see them.

"Sirius? Remus? What are you doing here?"

The Dark Lord chuckled nastily.

"They have been rather misinformed that you were killed last night."

Oh dear.

"Um... no?" he said stupidly.

"Fuck me," Sirius swore, studying Harry from head to toe. He looked torn between relief, disbelief, and horror. Remus looked ready to run over and snatch him right out of the Dark Lord's hands, but he kept looking towards his alpha for some sort of cue. It turned out neither

Remus nor Sirius had to make a move. Voldemort was more than happy to go to them, dragging his unstable protégé behind him.

He practically threw Harry at Sirius, and the werewolf caught him easily and tucked his godson under his arm without ever looking away from the Dark Lord. Harry found it easier to stand with the support of the werewolf's strong arm, but a lot less easy to move. Sirius' protective grasp was unfortunately a bit constricting.

He didn't dare protest. He felt too guilty for frightening his godfathers as he had.

"You may keep him back at your colony until the beginning of the new term," the Dark Lord said coldly. "If you take him to see his doctor first. He seems to have suffered a relapse."

Sirius snarled like a beast.

"What did you-"

"Sirius," Harry begged. "He didn't do anything. Let's just go... please."

His godfather didn't look away from the Dark Lord, but his hold on Harry tightened just a bit more. Slowly and without saying another word, Sirius gradually relaxed and half-carried his wounded charge out of the dueling hall, having never taken his eyes off the Dark Lord now silhouetted in the green flames of his own magic.

Sirius did not look away, but Harry refused to look back.

Book VI

Chapter 25: Separation

Harry vomited in an alleyway between two stores, and unlike that morning felt better for it. Remus rubbed his back soothingly until he was done while Sirius paced anxiously and looked about as if expecting to be followed. Not an unreasonable expectation, as Reggy had to sneak them out of a low window to keep a small mob of reporters from cornering them at either exit doors. They couldn't be certain they hadn't been spotted, and Harry wondered if there weren't going to be some rather embarrassing photos of Sirius literally tucking him under his arm and running off with him. It was a bad enough memory all its own without photographic evidence.

He took a deep breath, grimaced at the bitter taste of bile and potions, and then took another. He was having a hard time catching his breath. Exhaustion or the beginnings of another panic attack? This wasn't the time or the place to indulge in either. Hermione was danger. She was in danger, and he was the one who had put her there. He had to find her . . . no, he couldn't. They would be expecting that. Wasn't that just what he had always done? Run off at the first hint that someone he cared about was in trouble? Someone might follow him right to her . . . if he had any idea where she was exactly. By the Goddess, he had told them she was probably in London. How could he have been so stupid?

Still bent over and heaving to catch his breath, he felt the faintest touch to the back of his head. He froze as he felt fingers trace the raised line of his newest scar through his too short hair, then grimaced at the dull throb that followed. He turned to look over his shoulder.

Sirius stood there, the trademark manic fury suddenly absent and only a terrible stillness remained. Harry could not recall ever seeing the look his godfather was giving him now.

"They said you were dead . . ."

Harry's throat tightened. Thoughts of Hermione and whatever danger she might be in suddenly vanished, and there and then suddenly became painfully real. Coal black eyes swallowed him in, trying to take in a truth he hadn't dared believe possible.

"I prayed . . ." Sirius said. "I never believed the gods answered prayers, but I did it anyway and . . . and here you are."

"I'm sorry," Harry whispered, his eyes suddenly wet. "I'm sorry."

He hadn't meant to scare them. He hadn't meant to make them grieve for him. But his intentions had always had a way of twisting in on themselves and hurting rather than helping. Hermione, Vesper Larousse, the Goddess Colony, Stephen, even Voldemort, and now Sirius and Remus . . . all had suffered at his attempts to help them or others. Why? Why did this happen? Was he cursed?

Sirius pulled him closer and rested his forehead on Harry's.

"You're the closest thing I'll ever have to a son, Harry. After James . . ."

Sirius trailed off, not knowing what to say after that. Harry didn't know what to say either so he tried another 'I'm sorry'.

"It wasn't your fault. If Lucius Malfoy weren't dead already, I would have killed him," he said, the familiar anger returning, hardening his features once again.

And Harry was reminded of Hermione.

"We have to go to Malfoy Manor."

Sirius pulled back and gave him a grim look.

"There is no need to speak to the healer there. We have healers of our own."

"No, it's not that. I have to warn Draco about Hermione."

He gave Sirius and Remus a brief explanation of what had happened with Voldemort before they had walked in. Sirius listened and didn't interrupt, but he looked skeptical. Remus nodded thoughtfully but wasn't any more convinced than his alpha.

"You're weak as a kitten and your magic is shot to hell. We need to get you home as soon as possible."

Remus wasn't wrong. Harry still felt nauseous after his confrontation with Voldemort, weak and feverish now as well. Pappanoski hadn't wanted him to go and certainly not alone, but the summons had come after Snape had taken Ira back to Hogwarts, and Draco and Lady Malfoy were busy trying to handle Lucius' final affairs. His excursion had taxed him more than he had anticipated, and he knew he was going to be paying for it soon. The wisest course was simply to let Remus and Sirius take him back to the colony, put him to bed, and let the healers ply him with their bitter medicinal brews.

Harry was many things, but no one had ever mistaken him for wise.

"Please, just for a few minutes? If Draco can warn Hermione, maybe even hide her, it could save her life."

"No," Sirius said. "The sooner you are home the better. I can already smell the sickness settling into you."

Harry closed his eyes and took a deep breath. How to make them understand the importance of what he needed to do? Remus might understand, but he wouldn't defy Sirius unless it was absolutely necessary, and Sirius could be as pig-headed as the Dark Lord when it came to caring for his godson. There wasn't a lot that would override his possessive protectiveness. Except . . . except perhaps one thing . . .

"Sirius, please . . . She's . . . Hermione . . . she's what my father was to you. She was the first person I could look to and think 'family' after my parents died. And now she's in trouble, and it's my fault, and I . . . If there's even the slightest chance I can save her . . . Please, just give me ten minutes. I just need ten minutes."

His godfather was momentarily taken aback by the comparison, but as Harry continued to speak his expression darkened with every word. The young wizard was soon convinced that not only was Sirius not going to grant his request, but he was about to be grounded until graduation. He glanced at Remus, hoping for a little help, but Remus' attention was back to watching the mouth of alley for any potential eavesdroppers.

After an intense, but brief silence, Sirius finally spoke.

"If we do this . . . help you do this, you will return to the Goddess Colony without another argument, is that clear?"

Harry nodded quickly. Anything, he'd do anything.

"And once you are there, you will not defy me on a single matter. You will sleep when I tell you to, eat when I tell you to, take your medicines, and not try to run off even when you start to feel stronger. Do you agree?"

Harry swallowed thickly. It would mean that, aside from warning Draco and hoping for the best, there would be nothing else he could do for Hermione until he left Sirius' care. If he didn't agree, however, not only would he not be able to warn Draco, but Sirius would keep him under constant surveillance, and he wouldn't be able to do anything at all.

"Okay," he said. "I promise."

Sirius nodded and placed a hand on his shoulder as he led him back out to the street. Harry wished he could delude himself into believing the hand was just Sirius reassuring himself that his godson was alright, but Harry knew deep down the alpha was just making sure he didn't try to make a run for it.

Ron had a smile that made babies cry and old women cross themselves. It was an unnatural, lopsided thing, and it ached within a minute, but for the last half hour Ron couldn't wipe it off his face. The Red Weasel was a tavern not even half a year into business, but it already had a set of well known practices that made it wildly popular.

One such practice was the exchange of a free drink for a good tale or an interesting bit of news. That afternoon it had brought in a wizard from the Court of Public Affairs with word that Lucius Malfoy was dead.

Ron, who had been working as a kitchen boy and occasional server for the holiday break, had brought out the mug of Brimsley's Meade himself and a free plate of Walapple pie and hadn't stopped smiling since.

Not even George's threat to banish him to the kitchen if he didn't stop it had worked to deter his manic glee. For the first time since the holidays had started, he was looking forward to going back to Hogwarts. The Court wizard hadn't had much in the way of details except that there had been some sort of confrontation between Harry, Bartemius Crouch, and Lucius Malfoy at the winter ball that had left two of the three wizards dead. Harry had been injured in some way, but Ron wasn't particularly concerned. Harry seemed to be made for walking away from injuries. He was almost certain the Gryffindork would be up and about by the time school started again, and Ron would be able to prod all the terrible details out of him that the papers would omit. By then he should also have his smiling under control, because he wasn't fool enough to think Draco Malfoy wasn't going to notice and find something overly dramatic (and awful) to do to him. Besides, Hermione would probably think it was tacky of him.

Ah well, he had another week to get it together.

Ron made his way back towards the kitchen hauling a load of dirty dishes, practically dancing out the way of patrons and servers as he went, humming along with the fiddler in the corner. The tavern was packed, as it usually was by mid-afternoon, and noisy with music and conversation, and pleasantly warm after coming in from the cold. He was so distracted by his own pleasant musings, his work, and the busyness of the place he would have completely missed what was happening if not for the fiddler suddenly stopping halfway through the tune.

Ron turned to see what the matter was. A short distance away from the stage, George was having an argument with several Sentinels.

Even without the fiddle, it was far too loud, and he was too far away to hear what was being said, but George's expression was worrying. There was very little that could upset either of his brothers enough to abandon their mischievous grins. The man George was speaking to, a slender gentleman with neatly trimmed lambchops and an air of curious amusement about him, was showing his brother a photograph which was being pointedly ignored. The man made a gesture and the four other sentinels he had brought with him scattered themselves around the tavern, causing George's expression to turn livid.

Ron felt a sudden moment of dread as he saw one of the Sentinels head towards the narrow stairs that would lead to his brother's laboratory above the tavern. Was this a raid? Were his brothers being arrested? Fred and George were eclectic businessmen, whose rebellious and fearless nature had led them to pursue some less than legal activities, and they were very good at it. Was it too much to think the authorities hadn't found out?

His father had been thrown into Azkaban for the pithiest of reasons. Would the same happen to his brothers? Lucius Malfoy might be dead, so there was no archnemesis working from the shadows to destroy their family, but that didn't mean they were safe from the arbitrary malice of the Court.

Even as Ron stood there, frozen, matters began to deteriorate further. The Sentinel who had taken the stairs to the laboratory had returned, hauling an indignant Fred behind him, and George was likewise being seized by still another man. Lambchop's expression of amused curiosity didn't change as his men led the twins forcibly out of their own pub.

They were being arrested!

Ron abandoned his dishes on the nearest table, ignoring the indignant protests of the family sitting there, and hurried over to the fiddler who was still staring dumbfounded at the door his employers had disappeared through.

"Patrick, what happened? What did that man say?" Ron demanded.

The fiddler turned to him in confusion.

"Ther looking for someone," he said, "And they think your brothers might know where to find her. They took'em to be questioned."

Ron felt his throat tighten. Even before the war, 'interrogations' were a thing to be feared, and after Voldemort came to power they hadn't gotten any gentler.

"Her?" he tried. He didn't know if he could manage anything more without stuttering.

"Aye. A girl, probably not any older than you by the looks of her. They called her 'Granger'. Sound like anyone you know?"

"Granger?" he said in surprise and quickly tried to cover it up. "No, I don't think so."

"Are you—"

"Never heard of her!" he snapped, and stalked away before Patrick could ask anything else. Hermione, he wondered, what kind of trouble had she gotten herself into? What had she gotten his brothers into? He went back to gather up his dishes again, absently muttered an apology to the patrons, and headed towards the kitchen. He couldn't help but notice at least one of the Sentinels had been left behind and was now skulking in a dark corner, hiding the tell tale uniform under a plain, black cloak.

Ron dumped his load into the sink, breaking several dishes with his carelessness. His hands were shaking badly.

Why were they looking for Hermione? How would they know she would come here? What would happen if she did? What would happen to Fred and George even if she didn't? Was this history repeating itself?

He took a deep, calming breath. Now was not the time to fall to pieces. His brothers weren't his father. They were smart, they had connections, and they weren't the sort to be bullied. They'd get

lawyers, the press, Harry bloody Potter even to come to their aid, and sooner or later they'd be let go.

The only thing he could do to help them was keep things together here until that happened and make sure Hermione Granger never set foot in the Red Weasel.

Remus had never been to Malfoy Manor, and Sirius only vaguely remembered visiting once or twice when he was still young enough that his parents could make him go somewhere, so they flooed to Molston Vale and hired a carriage to take them out to Malfoy Manor. Sirius grew increasingly agitated the longer they remained out in the open and away from the safety of his territory. Harry was too tired to do much about it, and if Sirius' belligerent and intimidating behavior frightened a few people here and there, at least it kept snoop reporters at a respectable distance too.

A guard stood inside the gate as they drove up, and Harry could tell he wanted to quit the moment he saw them. Harry had a standing invitation to be there, but his godfathers, his obviously werewolf godfathers, were a different matter altogether. Sirius snarling at the man from the other side of the gates didn't help the situation, and the ten minutes it took to get permission to let them inside did nothing for Sirius' temper. Remus was starting to look embarrassed by his friend's behavior.

Draco wasn't particularly impressed either when Sirius kicked open his office door and snarled out, "Ten minutes."

"Because I'm sure your schedule is just packed," the young pureblood quipped.

"Draco," Robert Reicher half warned and half pleaded. He was seated behind Malfoy's desk, sorting through documents when they had been interrupted. Harry wasn't sure who was more surprised. He to see Robert or Robert to see the werewolves.

He didn't honestly have the time to hear the story. There wasn't a lot of time, and he needed to make it count.

"Ten minutes. Why don't you go get my wand from the mediwizard? He should be upstairs, sixth door on the right."

Because if anyone was likely to make the healer relinquish his wand, Sirius would be it. He shut the door quickly before the alpha could protest.

"Oh my," the Slytherin drawled. "And here I thought women were bad during their time of the month."

There was a surprising amount of bite in that statement. When Harry had left, his friend had barely been holding it together, emotionally and mentally shutting down under the strain, but now he seemed to have regained something of his old attitude and a hint of steel resolve in his eyes that had never been there before. The Gryffindor didn't know if this was a good or a bad thing. Probably a bit of both. Good for Hermione. Bad for Harry.

There wasn't enough time for Harry to soften the blow, and he mentally prepared himself for the backlash.

"The Dark Lord is issuing a warrant for Hermione's arrest on suspicion of murdering your father."

Draco stared at him.

"He's using her as a scapegoat. He doesn't . . . he doesn't want anyone thinking that his people don't know what happened or that—"

Harry ducked as a teacup was hurled in his direction. It shattered on the door, spraying the back of his cloak with porcelain and tea. That wasn't entirely unexpected. In fact, Harry was more surprised Draco hadn't attempted a hex instead. The Malfoy heir was already reaching for his next projectile, a paperweight, but Robert quickly wrestled it out of his hand, and Draco gave it up in favor of hurling abuse instead.

"You stupid halfblood mongrel bastard! Lord Voldemort is punishing you through Hermione for what happened to my father! God, what the hell were you thinking? Have you fucked up your own life so badly,

you felt the need to move on to your friend's? Is that it?" Draco screamed at him.

Harry, even exhausted and weak as he was, felt his anger swell at the accusation.

"Screw you, Draco! You think I intended for this to happen? I would die for Hermione. I nearly did! You want to blame me for everything that happened her? Okay, fine, go ahead, but at least I fucking did something. You couldn't have fucked anything up, Draco, because you didn't even bother to try and do anything yourself in the first place!"

As soon as he said it, Harry regretted it. Draco looked as if he had been simultaneously struck and betrayed, shocked at first and then righteously furious. He reached for his wand, and Robert called a warning to Harry.

Before Harry could duck, however, the door behind opened and smacked him in the head.

"Ouch!" he cried as it bumped the sensitive scar.

"Oh! Sorry, Harry," a feminine voice apologized, and a moment later Natalie stuck her head through the door. "What on earth are you two shouting about?"

They were all too surprised by her sudden arrival to offer an explanation, and she didn't wait for one before striding across the room to Draco. She ignored the wand still in his outstretched hand and pulled him into a hug.

"I'm so sorry, Draco, I came as soon as I heard, but security wouldn't let me through the gate until Dobby came to vouch for me," she said, sounding sincere and regretful and completely unlike herself. "How are you holding up?"

The Malfoy heir was caught completely off guard. By all logic, she should have gone to Harry first, hugged him first, asked over his well being first. He was the one she was not so secretly in love with after

all. Even Harry looked a bit surprised . . . and maybe a little put out. Draco's anger suddenly evaporated into nothing, leaving him feeling like a fool.

"I'll manage. I'll have to. The bad news just keeps coming."

He gestured towards Harry, who took the hint and explained what had happened, adding a few extra details for everyone else's benefit.

" . . . I'm being sent to the werewolf colonies to be kept out of the way. There's not much I'll be able to do for Hermione—"

"You've done enough," Draco said, trying for cold but it only came out tired.

"As much as you could," Natalie corrected. "We'll have to handle things as best we can on our own. I think we'll surprise you, Harry."

Harry smiled a bit sadly.

"I wouldn't dare to underestimate you."

Robert, who was pretending to be oblivious to the conversation as he tidied up the mess left by Draco's tantrum, suddenly cleared his throat.

"I can't say that I understand what is going on," he began, "Or that I even want to know what is going on, but if there is some assistance I might provide you, I willing offer it you."

"Thank you, Mr. Reicher," Draco said. "For now, I believe we only require your silence."

"As you are my employer, I am obligated to keep your confidence without question."

"Even from Kyle?" Harry couldn't help but ask.

"There are some things I keep even from Kyle, despite what he thinks . . . I'd thank you not to tell him I said so. I don't believe this is a matter that requires his attention, regardless."

Harry reached instinctively for his watch to check the time, but of course it wasn't there. He looked around the room for a clock to no avail.

"I don't have much time. You have to find Hermione and get her somewhere safe. The Weasley twins will be able to help with that but be careful that you're not followed. Particularly you, Draco. They'll be expecting you to go look for her."

Draco simply glared into the fireplace in reply.

"The Weasley twins?" Robert asked curiously. "You mean those boys that run the Red Weasel?"

"Yes, you know them?" Harry asked.

"Everyone in London knows them. I've eaten at the pub a few times. It wouldn't be at all out of the ordinary if I dropped by for dinner on my way home, on the off chance anyone would even bother to follow me. I'm willing to leave instructions with them if you have any, but I would prefer not meet with Lady Granger in person if it can be helped. I have a family of my own to consider."

"That's a good idea. We can write a letter—"

A heavy knock on the door caused them all to jump. Conspiracy, it seemed, was making them nervous. Sirius snarling through the door didn't help either.

"Harry, you've had your ten minutes."

The Gryffindor thought to argue for a split second for just a minute more, then thought better of it. He had made a promise. Sirius would make sure he kept it one way or another.

"Coming," he said before turning back to them. "Send me an owl when you can. Send Elsbeth if you can manage it."

"Goodbye, Harry. I'll tell the girls you said hello," Robert offered.

"Go lay down before you keel over," Natalie said.

Draco didn't bother to turn around. The worst of his anger was gone, but some resentment still lingered. Harry was pulling out just when they needed him the most. The resentment itself left him feeling ashamed of himself. The sharp words they had traded only a moments ago still stung. Harry hadn't been wrong. Draco had let Harry and Hermione do most of the planning and the legwork, and had gone along willingly enough even on those parts of their plans he was skeptical of. When had he become so reliant on Harry Potter to fix the problem? Why had he thought the Gryffindor was capable of it?

It was Draco's turn now. He was Lord Malfoy. He followed no one.

After Harry left, the study fell once again into a tense silence. What now? Natalie broke the silence first.

"Mr. Reicher, would you mind if I had a private word with Draco?"

"Of course not. I'll take some paperwork into the library with me. Let me know when you're done with the letter."

Once he was out of the room, Natalie turned to Draco.

"I'll follow him after he leaves to make sure he delivers the letter. He may just turn it over to the first Sentinel he comes across."

Draco sighed and nodded. Her concern was legitimate, but he wasn't honestly concerned Robert would betray him. There was another source aside from the Weasley twins he knew they would have better luck with, but one he was reluctant to expose either Natalie or Robert to. Rita Skeeter knew exactly where Hermione was. They had sent his sister off with her in search of refuge, after all. But if he, Natalie, or Robert went to her, what would the reporter do? Expose their

scandalous intentions in Wizing Weekly? Sell them out to the Dark Lord for some journalistic tit for tat?

Harry had seemed to have something over her head, but he was a fool if he thought he could control her. Now Harry was in proverbial exile, and Draco and his comrades had nothing to work with. Skeeter had probably already betrayed Hermione. It was just a question of whether it was to the Sentinels or the papers.

His only hope was that Hermione caught on before the trap closed around her. She was usually rather clever that way.

Whatever the case, they were running out of time.

He reached for a sheaf of paper and a quill. He would send Robert and Natalie to the Red Weasel and hope against hope that they got lucky. Then he would hunt down Skeeter. He wasn't entirely sure what he would do, but he was a Slytherin and, more significantly, a Malfoy.

Family was everything.

The Persnickety Inn had been a hovel well before the Italians ever came to London, which was probably why they hadn't bothered touching it during their stay. It was a narrow, gray building that seemed strangely emaciated with concave walls and a sharply pointed roof that leaned heavily to one side. Bits and pieces were missing from it; roof tiles, window panes, and a step leading up to the front door.

Inside wasn't any better. Just as narrow, slanted, and gray with missing things like door knobs and light bulbs and floorboards. The owner was likewise a rickety old witch in ratty gray robes, missing most of her teeth and one of her socks. She was almost completely blind and deaf, and if that didn't make her job of keeping up the place hard enough, she also didn't give a damn. It made her a lousy innkeeper, but a perfect host for hiding runaway little girls as far as Skeeter was concerned.

The reporter let herself in and headed up the stairs without bothering to wake the old witch snoozing behind the counter. The stairs practically wailed as she made her ascent, but stealth wasn't her intention. She had spent the better part of an hour prodding her fellow reporters for information about the party and felt it had been something of a waste. No one seemed certain of anything except that Lucius Malfoy and Bartemius Crouch were dead, and most seemed fairly certain that Harry Potter had died as well, although it seemed his death had been painfully drawn out where the others had been swift. How it all had happened was anyone's guess. Some said murder, some said accident, and others a duel gone wrong.

There was supposed to be a press conference in an hour, but Skeeter doubted it would be worth going to. It wasn't as if the Court would explain anything. They'd spout some sugar-coated nonsense and wax on about how they had everything under control.

She was still going to go, of course. There was bound to be a good quote or two floating around.

But first, she needed to see Hermione and break her little heart.

She reached door number two (it was actually door number twelve but the one had gone missing), took a deep breath, muttered a very light crying curse on herself, and knocked on the door. The sound of footsteps and rustling clothes emanated from inside.

A moment later, Hermione Granger opened the door in her cloak and wool scarf, her school trunk resting behind her. She looked positively ghastly. Pale and puffy-eyed, she clearly hadn't slept the night before but obviously had no intention of finding rest there. The reporter had caught her on her way out, but where had she been intending to go? The girl gave her a confused, vaguely annoyed look.

"Skeeter? What are—"

Before Hermione could finish, the reporter threw her arms around her and started bawling.

"Oh! Oh! It's awful," she cried, her spell-induced tears dribbling down her cheeks. The girl stiffened in her grasp.

"What is awful?" she asked warily.

Skeeter indulged in a brief grin, hidden as it was in their position, but quickly tucked it away again as she pulled away to look Hermione in the face. This was it! This was where she saw for herself just what precisely had been between the most famous boy in Britain and the little muggleborn princess.

"It's Harry! Oh god, Harry is dead!"

The look of absolute shock on the girl's face was sadly predictable and would doubtlessly be followed by a brief stint of disbelief. Once the reality sunk in, however, things would doubtlessly get interesting.

Sadly, the shock didn't dissipate. Quite the contrary, it completely overwhelmed the girl until her eyes rolled to the back of her head, and she fainted. Skeeter barely managed to catch her and lost her balance for her trouble, landing them both in a graceless heap on the floor.

"Bugger," Skeeter muttered. Not exactly what she had hoped for, although she supposed it was a rather interesting response. Not very good for a quote though. She hauled Hermione's dead weight up and over to the cot in the corner of the room and dropped her on it. The girl didn't even stir. Nor did she stir when Skeeter slapped her lightly on the cheek . . . and then not so lightly. The rennervate charm worked a little better.

"Ooohhh . . ." she moaned.

"Hermione? Hermione, can you hear me? Tell me what you're feeling."

"Nnn . . ."

"How does Harry's death make you feel?" she said more loudly.

"Uhhnn . . ."

Entirely useless. Her rennervate wasn't the best, and unfortunately she didn't know anything stronger. Perhaps that old crone downstairs had some pepper-up or something lying around?

"Hermione-darling, I'll be right back. I'm going to go get you something to make you feel better. Then we can have a little chat," she said, then scampered away. As she made her way downstairs she considered possible headlines for the obituary she was going to write.

National Hero Murdered by Father of Secret Lover!

Potter's Beloved Faints from Grief!

Unrequited Love Ends in Tragedy!

Malfoy Heiress Left Mentally Unsound by Death of 'Her Prince'.

She was practically cackling in delight by the time she found the old crone, who did in fact have Pepper-up potion, along with a myriad of rather interesting concoctions in her medicine cabinet. She gave the crone a sickle for her trouble and hurried back to the room. When she got there, however, she let out a shriek of indignation.

There was no trunk.

There was no Hermione Granger!

Voldemort studied Severus as the man studied the view outside the window. Under normal circumstances, Severus Snape would never let his gaze wander from the Dark Lord like he was doing now. It was only this uncharacteristic distraction that hinted to Voldemort that the events of last night affected his minion at all. Severus had been a hard and angry youth when he had met him, and he had grown into a hard and bitter man. His grief was a cold and distant thing. Assuming what the man felt was actually grief. It was difficult to tell with Severus.

Lucius and he had an unusual relationship. They had been co-conspirators but never confidants, rivals of nothing the other wanted, and respected and reviled each other in equal measure. They had been each others' closest friends, but only because they were the only ones who shared enough wit and will to thrive in each others' company. How did Severus actually feel about Lucius' demise? And how much of that feeling was wrapped in his own selfish concerns? He was now the godfather to the Malfoy heir and a wanted fugitive on top of his responsibilities to his ward and an entire school that was half falling down around his ears these days.

Not that Voldemort could or would judge him for that. All he felt about the matter himself was selfish concerns. Even with his shiny new soul and all those curious new feelings that had been wiggling their way to the surface, he could not describe anything resembling sadness regarding Lucius Malfoy's passing. There was frustration and annoyance about the inconvenience of his passing, but no more than Bartemius Crouch, whose services he appreciated far more than his company. He felt vaguely disappointed, but not surprised. Even before he had torn his soul to bits and pieces, it was unlikely he would have grieved much for a minion, however loyal or useful it had been. Perhaps when the worst of his aggravation had subsided, he might spare some more tender emotion; wistfulness or a touch of melancholy maybe.

"You're very quiet, Severus. Have you nothing you would like to say? Some request you would like to make?"

Snape turned from the window to the Dark Lord. His expression was blank, his eyes a legilimens' nightmare.

"My Lord . . . do you mean to spite every Death Eater that's ever served you?"

Voldemort was too surprised for a moment to speak.

"You had already thrown half of the surviving members to the dogs by the end of the war and rebuffed or punished half of those that remained in your service after that. You've managed to spite everyone left after that on a more personal level since then . . .

Lestrangle and her removal from Hogwarts, MacNair and Umbridge, whatever happened to them, Lucius and that silly rivalry with Potter, and now . . . now you mean to turn your attention on me, then?"

Voldemort let out a huff of disbelief and threw up his hands in disgust.

"Is this about the Granger girl? Merlin, Severus, I gave you Harry because I thought you would be a good influence. I had no idea it would get all turned around and he'd end up turning you into an angsty and self-absorbed teenager! And don't think I'll tolerate it from you the same way I do Harry."

Snape's withering glare seemed strangely adolescent to him at the moment.

"I'll excuse you this once, this once, because you're obviously tired and stressed," he continued. "But don't make the mistake again. All those who have received my spite earned it first. Had I indulged every Death Eater their infantile whims, where would we be now? Still butchering our way through the shreds of our society that remained and deluding ourselves into thinking an enemy must still exist because we had managed nothing but ruin. Is it my fault that those who were most suited to war, were so ill-suited to peace? I gave them a chance! I gave everyone plenty of chances! You chief among them! So don't you dare sit there, spit in my face, and then have the gall to call yourself a victim."

As he spoke, the Dark Lord let a bit of the anger that still lingered even after his blow up at Harry earlier that day seeped into his voice and into his magic, letting it linger in the air like poisonous miasma. Snape, already pale and stiff, shifted back in his chair and swallowed thickly.

"Forgive my impertinence, My Lord, I spoke out of turn."

Satisfied, Voldemort drew back his magic and reigned in his temper.

"Yes. Your goddaughter's situation is unfortunate, but I know you understand the necessity of it. If you have an alternative solution, I

will be more than happy to hear it. If the true culprit is found, I have left enough leeway to allow for her pardon."

"You are most generous," Snape said, refusing to look him in the eye when he said it.

"Don't be sulky, Severus. It doesn't suit," he chided. "There are other matters I need to discuss with you or else I would have simply sent a letter. I wish to offer you a job."

"Has someone failed to inform me I was fired from my headmaster's position?" he asked. There was a touch of his sardonic wit in his voice this time, and the Dark Lord felt strangely relieved.

"You might consider it a promotion, albeit more of a sideways one. I've decided to put Lestrage in Lucius' position."

Snape didn't bother to hide his grimace.

"That is . . . unfortunate."

Voldemort smirked.

"I am aware of Bella's shortcomings. She is no Lucius Malfoy, but she has a head for tactics and enthusiasm for the cause. So long as she attends those duties Lucius should have been solely focused on she should do well."

"Which she won't do. She never could accept her leadership skills as being less than Lucius'."

"Just so. That is why I am assigning her minders to keep her authority limited to the war. Lucius and Barty had their spoons in too many cauldrons, and without them there to stir, the Court is going to stall. It could take years to put things back in order. I will not let this mistake be repeated. No one should be as indispensable as they made themselves."

Except for myself, of course.

"And you wish me to be one of her minders? What would you have me do precisely?"

"I was thinking Chief Financial Administrator of the Culties. Money is the best stopgap there is."

"True, but counting sickles is not how I pictured my career going. And the politics . . . I have never enjoyed it."

"But you were very good at it during those first few years you helped to rebuild. The hours are shorter and the income is better than what you receive as Headmaster. Something I am sure your new wife would appreciate."

"My wife appreciates purpose over purse strings, My Lord. As do I. Hogwarts shall be my legacy. I cannot leave her in her current state. There is too much that needs to be done."

Voldemort sighed, but did not look particularly surprised.

"I thought you might say something to that effect. A pity, but I have no intention of foisting the position onto you if you truly don't want it. The school does need looking after during these days of war."

Snape settled a little more easily into his chair. That could have gone very differently, and if the Dark Lord had the mind to make him take the position there would have been very little he could have done about it. In fact, he could have suffered severely for simply having the audacity to refuse his master's generosity. As it was, he could barely believe he had dared to refuse it at all. Some of Potter's madness truly must have been rubbing off on him.

Or maybe he was just too damn tired to care.

"That leaves one final matter to discuss," Voldemort said. "Do you wish to surrender guardianship of Harry?"

" . . . I'm not sure I understand."

"Your friend is dead. Your goddaughter is a wanted fugitive. Harry Potter is at least partially at fault. If you believe yourself to be incapable of fulfilling your duties as his guardian under these circumstances, then I can transfer custody to someone else."

"You didn't offer this after Vesper died," he pointed out, revealing his skepticism.

"It hadn't occurred to me at the time."

This was perfectly true. He hadn't had a complete soul at the time and hadn't cared particularly if Harry and Severus got along or not. He still didn't particularly care, but after Lucius' death and another near death experience for Harry, he wasn't about to tempt fate again.

Snape remained silent for a moment, considering, but did not for long.

"I will keep custody of him."

"Forgiven him already?"

The headmaster gave him a look of dark amusement, but when he spoke there was a touch of bitter poison in his honey tones.

"What choice do I have? He did nothing that we ourselves did not allow him to do."

The winter air burned her lungs and froze her skin as she ran through the narrow, twisting streets of Knockturn Alley. A cat snarled at her as she passed. A gnarled figure of a man watched her speculatively from behind a dirty window. Somewhere overhead a plane flew by. She was oblivious to all of it. Her panic was of the odd variety that made her reckless where she should have been cautious and stole her breath away even as it sent her flying.

She couldn't believe it.

She couldn't accept it.

Harry, dead?

She had believed herself to be resigned to the probability of Harry's premature death, and yet once the predicted event was presented to her she couldn't bring herself to fathom it. He could survive anything. Had survived nearly everything the magical world could throw at someone: werewolves, faeries, murderous wizards, poisons, curses, duels, Dark Magic, Old Magic, lunatics, and the Dark Lord himself! How could he possibly be dead now? She had seen him just last night, his eyes flaring green as he steeled himself to face yet another danger, this time on Hermione's behalf.

She turned a corner too quickly and caught her foot on an empty crate, lost her balance, and landed heavily on the cobblestone ground. She gasped from the shock of pain and from breathlessness. Something wet trickled between her eyes, and for a second she thought it was blood, but it was only dirty snow that had stuck after she knock her head on the ground. Lying sprawled there, she burst out into tears and told herself it was because of the pain.

Shaking and gasping for air, she slowly climbed back to her feet. Her toe, knees, hands, and head hurt from her fall. Her clothes were filthy down the front. She wiped her eyes and her nose with her dirty mittens, tightened her cloak around herself, and pulled up the hood. More than likely, she looked a fright and one thing she didn't want at the moment was strangers stopping to ask her if she was alright. Taking a deep, shaky breath, she continued on more slowly. Running was no longer an option. She was limping heavily.

The panic was still there, lingering under the surface and making it hard to breathe, but the worst of it had been knocked out of her by her fall. Her more sedate pace left her mind more time to wonder at the situation and become increasingly aware of how little she actually knew.

Skeeter, the horrible, wretched creature, had said Harry was dead, but how did she know? She had left the party with Hermione and certainly couldn't have made it back inside. She might have learned of it from someone else. It would certainly have been newsworthy, but if that were the case why had she come to Hermione to tell her and

not gone in search of actual witnesses of the event? Why bother to tell Hermione at all? It obviously wasn't an act of compassion.

She felt a shiver run through her as she remembered the look in that woman's eyes as she told her Harry was dead. Why had she looked like that? So twisted and hungry, even as she had been weeping her crocodile tears.

Skeeter might have had a talent for weaseling out a story (and then turning into a bawdy piece of tripe), but acting definitely wasn't her forte. At least, she hadn't been as good as Hermione, whose damsel-in-distress was spot-on. She hadn't used it since the school plays of her early childhood, but it seemed she still had the knack for it. The fact that her legs actually had fallen out from under her had helped with the realism.

If that had failed to get Skeeter away from her, she would have resorted to a stunning hex. She would have started off with one in the first place if she could have remembered one at that moment.

In a clearer state of mind, she might have done a lot of things differently. Most significantly, she would have gotten more details. Like how had Harry died in the first place.

Oh God, had she sent Harry to die?

It had to have been Lucius. Somehow and in some way, either out of anger or by accident or some combination, he had killed her friend. He had killed Harry for trying to protect her, for standing in the place she should have been when he had discovered her plan to be free of him. It had been bothering her all night, stealing her sleep, the idea that she had run away when she could have stayed to face Lucius Malfoy once and for all. Once out of the manor, she had felt like a complete coward. What could he have done to her, really? Curse her, maybe, probably disown her, hurl verbal abuse upon her, most definitely. The cursing would have hurt, but he wouldn't dare go too far with so many people in the manor, and once over she might have been free of him at last. She might have saved her friend if she had displayed half his nerve.

But now Harry could be dead, and rather than being free she had to go back to see what nightmare had unfolded in her absence and face the consequences of her cowardice. Certainly, Harry's death, awful as it was to think about, would not be the end of it. There was the Dark Lord to consider and his reaction to the whole affair. Would he kill Lucius? No, not immediately anyway. They were in the middle of a war, after all. He was essential, but he would probably be punished. That didn't concern her much, except for the possibility of him taking it out on her later. Her more immediate concern was Draco and Narcissa. Even if they weren't involved, there was no guarantee that they would be safe from the Dark Lord's wrath. And if she went home now, could she expect more of the same?

Maybe there would be something in the paper that would give her a better idea of what she was walking into. There was a newsstand at the floo station. There had to be something about last night there.

The thought made her walk more briskly. It also made her limp more obviously.

Knockturn Alley was several blocks away from the only remaining floo station in Wizarding London. As she left the row of dingy shops and crooked townhouses, she began to pass shops and homes that looked considerably more inviting, but no newspaper stands. Somewhere up Podwaddle Street was the Red Weasel, which would have a paper, and the Weasley twins might have spared her some news and a cup of something hot to help her frazzled nerves, but that would have taken her out of the way, and if she moved from her decided course she might lose her nerve yet again. She couldn't stand the thought of breaking down into tears in the middle of a pub.

After what seemed like forever, the street she was on suddenly opened onto Dinaden Square. Dinaden held the only floo station that hadn't been destroyed during the Italian invasion, and subsequently, most of the rebuilding had started there. It was tidy and clean, without a broken window or pile of rubble in sight, and a steady stream of witches and wizards moving or milling about. She found the newsstand she was looking for quickly, but the copy of Wizard's Weekly had nothing in it about Harry or the Christmas Ball.

Hope flared in her chest.

Could Skeeter have been lying? Could it have been some sort of cruel trick to make her reveal something she wouldn't have in a clearer frame of mind?

The more she thought of it, the more possible it seemed. Yet she didn't dare let herself believe it completely. It was just as possible that the papers simply hadn't heard about it yet or maybe not in time to make the morning edition.

There was only one way to be certain.

She had to go home.

"H-hermione?"

She half-stumbled at the sound of her name and turned to her right to see a familiar face looking back at her.

"Natalie? What are—"

She didn't have time to finish her sentence before the other girl was beside her, grabbing hold of her arm and forcing her back in the direction she had been coming from. She grimaced at the force of Natalie's grip and the strain of their pace on her aching knees, but was too surprised to attempt to pull away. What was she doing here? Had Draco sent her? No, Draco wouldn't have known where she was. He didn't even know she was in London, did he?

"Don't say anything," Natalie said sharply, "and don't pull down your hood. Has anyone seen you?"

"I don't think so. What's going on, Natalie? Why are—"

She stiffened. There was a man standing across the square looking directly at them with a surprised expression on his face. Natalie cursed when she spotted him and changed directions so they were heading towards one of the side streets.

"Who is that?" Hermione asked anxiously.

"His name is Reicher. He works for your brother."

"Works for Draco?" Since when did Draco have people working for him, aside from his school cronies? "Then why are we running away from him?"

"Just because he works for Draco doesn't mean he can be trusted. He might turn you in if the reward is high enough."

Reward? Reward for what?

"What are you talking about? What's going on? Is this about Harry? Is he . . . is he . . ."

She didn't want to say it out loud. Not if she didn't have to. Natalie suddenly stopped and just looked at couldn't even begin to describe her expression or what it could possibly have meant. Just as suddenly as they had stopped, they started again. Natalie said nothing more, and Hermione didn't dare to ask until they were far away from prying eyes and ears, alone in a burnt out husk of a building.

"What have you heard?" Natalie asked first.

"Only . . . Harry . . ."

She bit her lip.

"Harry's fine."

Hermione looked at her. Something in the girl's expression softened.

"He's fine," she promised. "I saw him less than an hour ago. He's weak and in pain, but he'll be okay."

"Oh . . ." She tried to say something else. There was so much to say, so much to ask, but as hard as she tried all she could manage was another little 'oh' and a little laugh and another round of tears, this

time from relief. She didn't think she had ever cried so much in her life. Natalie took a step forward, and she looked as if she might try to hug her, but after a moment's hesitation she just put her hand on her shoulder and gave it a squeeze. They had never been friends enough to hug, and honestly, until just recently Hermione hadn't been sure they had ever really qualified as friends at all.

It took a little time, but eventually Hermione regained her ability to speak again.

"And Draco? And Narcissa?"

"Both fine . . . well, as fine as they can be under the circumstances."

"And what are the circumstances? I don't know what's happened. I was about ready to go home and then Skeeter just showed up and told me Harry was dead!"

She could say it now, at last, knowing it wasn't true and Harry's seeming invincibility was once again proven.

"And you believed her? And here I thought you were supposed to be the smart one," Natalie said, falling back into her familiar persona of tactless bitch. "Parkinson wrote me a letter to the same effect, but I knew better. I mean, it's Harry. As if a tumble down the stairs could have done him in."

"He fell down the stairs?"

She didn't know if she should have felt relieved or not. Obviously it hadn't been a fun experience for Harry, but if it had only been an accident then . . .

"Or Lucius pushed him, depending on who you talk too. I don't think we'll ever really know. Harry's doesn't remember it, and Lucius obviously can't tell us anymore."

"Why? What happened to Lucius?"

Natalie gave her a sideways look, then looked off into the distance.

"He's dead."

Hermione closed her eyes. She waited for the pain, for the happiness, for anything to fill her in some way like it had for Harry, but she felt nothing.

"Crouch is dead too," Natalie continued.

That was actually almost funny, in an ironic sort of way, but she couldn't bring herself to laugh. Not yet.

"I think you should start from the beginning."

It didn't take long. Natalie didn't know much of what had happened, herself at the party, not having been there, but she was very knowledgeable of the consequences. She explained the situation as best she could about the warrant for her arrest, Harry's exile to the werewolf colonies, Draco's plan to find her with the lawyer and the Weasley twin's help, and her own intention to make sure Reicher was trustworthy. The more Natalie spoke, the less real it all seemed to Hermione.

Lucius and Crouch dead? A warrant for her arrest? Draco now Lord Malfoy and hiring lawyers? She didn't know if it was truly too absurd to contemplate or if she was just in shock. Whatever it was she knew she couldn't go home now. It was one thing to face her foster father's fiery temper and quite another to face the Dark Lord's cold machinations.

When Natalie was done, Hermione asked, "So now what?"

"Now? Now we get you out of Britain."

Robert was feeling ten times a fool, but that hadn't stopped him from going to the Red Weasel. He had told Malfoy that he would, and even if the little bastard had lied to him and sent his little friend to follow him, he intended to complete his instructions just as he said he would. What did he care if they hadn't trusted him with the fact that they already knew where Hermione was? That Natalie had intended to

meet up with her at the floo station while Robert went off on his little goose chase? It wasn't the first time a client had played silly little games like this. Why shouldn't he expect it from a bunch of children?

He was being more bitter than he really had a right to be, he knew. Yes, that Natalie girl had followed him, and yes, the fact that Hermione Granger showed up in Dinaden Square at the same time was highly suspicious, but he couldn't say he honestly knew what any of them had been thinking. So what if they didn't trust him? Why should they?

Logic didn't ease the sting of it, but the glass of ale helped, if only a little. The Red Weasel wasn't stingy with their tap, he would give them that. He hadn't been able to deliver his letter, Fred and George Weasley having just left on errands according to the barmaid, so he had sat himself down to enjoy a drink. Maybe they would show up in an hour or two and he could give them the letter then. Maybe they had already left to help the Granger girl and he was just being redundant. He would do it anyway, and hope Draco Malfoy felt arse afterward.

He was so caught up in his own annoyance that he didn't notice the hooded figure that walked through the door and straight to the bar. Hardly anyone noticed in fact. But a handful of people did, and when the girl leaned across the bar to whisper something to the barmaid, one of them thundered up behind her and seized her by the arm.

"Got you, Granger! You're under arrest!" the wizard shouted dramatically, flashing his Sentinel's badge to the surrounding tavern that had fallen into a stunned silence at the outburst. Robert dropped his mug in surprise and horror.

"Unhand me, you stupid oaf!" the girl screamed, throwing back her hood.

It was not, in fact, Granger. It was Natalie.

The Sentinel realized his mistake and flushed. He glanced around the room quickly, aware that the entire tavern was now looking at him expectantly, and he quickly tried to cover his mistake with bluster.

"So you think a little polyjuice is going to trick a Sentinel? Hah! Hand over your wand or I'll be forced to stun you."

Natalie's indignation turned to fury as the larger wizard continued to manhandle her.

"I'll hand you my wand! I'll make you eat the damn thing. Now, let go of me! Someone help!"

No one moved.

"Resisting arrest, are you? Fine, if that's how—"

"What is your name, officer?"

The Sentinel turned to see Robert now standing behind him. Natalie's eyes widened and narrowed suspiciously in turn.

"What's my name? What's your name?" the man said defensively. You tryin to interfere with a Sentinel doing his duty?"

"My name is Robert Reicher, professional lawyer, and if your duty is abusing school girls then I am afraid I must interfere. Now, what is your name and the name of your supervising officer?"

The Sentinel's eyes widened, and he looked around nervously.

"I . . . I don't have to tell you that!"

"Technically, Flaske, you do, you great idiot," a new voice interrupted from the stairway at the corner of the tavern. It was yet another Sentinel, shedding a notice-me-not charm as she descended the stairs and made her way towards them. She turned towards Robert and gave him a suspicious look. "I'm Sentinel Harper, this is Sentinel Flaske. Sentinel-Inspector Amelon is our supervisor. We are here looking for a sixteen-year old girl suspected of murder."

Harper turned an intent look at Natalie, who scowled right back at her.

Robert raised an eyebrow at the suspected murderer, then turned back to the female Sentinel.

"Really? And sixteen and female is your only search criteria?"

"She is also wearing a Hogwarts cloak, the school the suspect attends."

"Well, that explains things. And is she the girl you're looking for?"

"Probably not," Harper said without inflection, glaring at Flaske before turning a bland expression to Natalie. "I'll need to see your papers before I can let you go."

The young witch gave them all a disgruntled look but presented her identification papers that any witch or wizard old enough to wield a wand was required to carry. Harper barely glanced at them.

"You don't live in London," she remarked.

"My mother is an art dealer. She's been storing some items for a client who lives here in London. She said I could wait here while she meets with them," Natalie said. It was only half a lie. Her mother really did have London clients she was storing items for if the Sentinels decided to check it out. Harper shrugged and handed back her identification.

"Sorry about the mix up."

Natalie didn't deign to reply and stalked off to the other end of the bar. The conversation that had died during their little drama picked up again, people joking and speculating on the failed arrest and who the sixteen-year old murderer could possibly be. Harper slapped Flaske upside the head and dragged him off to a corner to resume their post. Robert wandered down to join Natalie, who was being served a pint of butterbeer by someone who clearly wasn't the barmaid.

At first, Robert thought the redhead was one of the owners, but as he drew closer he realized he was too young, only about Natalie's age. A school friend? The boy looked at him without expression as he

approached and left altogether when he sat down. Robert was starting to wonder if he needed a shower or something with the way people were treating him today.

"Thanks," Natalie muttered, not looking up from her drink.

"Oh, gratitude! I like that. Do you think you could throw in an apology somewhere in there?"

The young witch said nothing.

"Right. Since my presence seems to be rather superfluous, I'll just leave it to you then."

He tossed the letter Draco had given to him onto the bar and walked away. She watched him go out of the corner of her eye, but didn't follow. Whether or not she could actually trust him, she wasn't absolutely certain. This could all have been a trap set by him, and now he was luring her into a false sense of security so she would lead others back to Hermione. Oh, Merlin, who was she kidding? If Reicher had betrayed them, all he would have had to do was tell them he saw Natalie with Hermione earlier and they would have Hermione's location out of her quick enough whether she willed it or no. She . . . maybe . . . owed him an apology, but it wasn't going to be given in a pub surrounded by Sentinels and eavesdropping customers. Not after what had just happened.

Even Ron had the sense not to talk to her.

At least, not out loud.

She looked down once again at her butter beer, watching the tiny little bubbles floating to the surface to spell out a series of letters until the message became visible.

Baggins Alley. 8:00 PM.

She took a moment to memorize it, then swallowed the message down with a long draw from her tankard. Conspiracy was a thirsty business.

Hermione was starting to think she would never be warm again. She had been outside for hours, unable to risk returning to her hotel room or ducking inside to get warm, and she had grown exhausted just maintaining the warming charms on her clothes, which never seemed to hold up well to either wet or wind. Natalie had brought her a cup of hot chocolate to help keep up her strength, but that had been hours ago.

Now London was dark and colder still, and they had curled up next to each other on some crates in an alley to get out of the wind. They didn't dare light their wands or speak too loudly. Sentinels still patrolled the city, and even if curfew wasn't in affect for another hour or so there was still a risk of being pulled aside for identification.

"What time is it?" she asked quietly.

"Fifteen til. We'll leave in a minute here," Natalie replied, sounding relieved. She wasn't enjoying their outdoor excursion any more than Hermione, even if she had more opportunities to warm up.

"Aren't your mums going to be wondering where you are?"

"I told them I might spend that night with you and Draco."

"Why would you spend the night?"

Natalie hadn't spent the night at Malfoy Manor since she was ten, before puberty had reared its ugly head and deemed childhood over and propriety an unofficial law.

"Draco's dad is dead, remember? He might want a friendly face after something like that."

Hermione ducked her head guiltily. Of course Draco would want comfort, deserved comfort, and if circumstances were different she would probably be giving it to him herself right now.

"It still doesn't feel real. It's just . . . I don't know. I should feel scared or sad or angry . . . something, but I don't. I can't. It didn't even occur to me that Draco would feel sad about Lucius. God, what's going to happen to Draco?"

Her brother had never been on his own before. Not at school, not at home, not anywhere. Hermione had always been his companion in those matters his parents had been unable to follow or understand. She had always been his best friend.

"He'll be okay," Natalie said softly. "He's stronger than you give him credit for, but I'll take care of him when he needs it."

Hermione nodded.

"I suppose you've been doing a better job of it than I have lately."

"You had your own things to deal with."

Natalie stood up and stretched.

"Enough of this maudlin shite. Let's go."

The walk was short and uneventful, except for a brief scare when they startled up a flock of pigeons. Baggins Alley was a little dead end street that had once opened up to Muggle London. It had been sealed off after the war, like most other streets, but it still warranted a place on most city maps if only for those wizarding folk separated from their muggle loved ones to leave tokens and pictures of remembrance. The brick wall at the end of the alley was still covered in photographs, moving and unmoving alike and letters that would never be read, rustling like leaves whenever the wind blew. It was a sad place, Hermione thought, not unlike a cemetery or some other memorial.

A figure stood at the entrance, looking about anxiously until he spotted them and retreated further into the alley. They took a precautionary look around themselves before following after.

"Ron?" Hermione whispered.

"Sshhh. Don't talk until we're on the other side. Here, take off your cloaks and put these on," he said, and shoved something into their arms. Confused and becoming increasingly nervous, she did as he said, carefully transferring her miniaturized trunk and wand from her cloak to the unfamiliar coats. The parkas were silly looking things, puffy and inelegant, but they were warmer than cloaks and with the hood up it was like being enveloped in warmth all over. It was muggle clothing she realized with a jolt.

They were going into Muggle London.

They hadn't been sure exactly what Ron had wanted to meet them for, but apparently he had known about his brothers' plans to help her sneak out of London. It was a stroke of luck. She had thought it would take at least another day explain their need.

Ron paid them no mind as they floundered their way into their new clothing and turned his attention to the alley wall. Whatever magic had been undone on it had just as readily been redone, and a few taps with his wand had the wall folding in on itself and tucking bits of paper and celluloid harmlessly away as it did so. Ron went through first, looked around, and gestured for them to follow. They did so, and the wall sealed itself behind them once again.

The alley on one side of the wall wasn't very different from the other by appearance, but there was definitely a difference in the air. Noise was filtering into the alley, loud and alien and unceasing, and it was with considerable trepidation that Hermione and Natalie followed Ron out onto the pavement.

Muggle London was like nothing either of them had ever imagined. They had been so young when they were taken, their memories stolen, until whatever remained was nothing more than an old dream that grew dimmer with every passing year. They had never imagined there would be so many people in one place. They were crowded on the pavement in ones and twos and small groups, talking into little objects in their hands like crazy people, smoking cigarettes, and

stalking about in impossible looking shoes and tiny skirts. Muggles crowded the streets in cars that looked not only strangely different from the few automobiles they had seen but also completely different from each other. They crowded the windows of shops, restaurants, private gyms, and shop apartments. So full of people and all of them seeming to be on their way somewhere or doing something, until Hermione and Natalie felt dizzy just trying to keep from running into anyone.

The lights didn't help matters. There were so many lights and of so many sizes, colors, and shades and some of them moving or blinking or spinning about. The noise was baffling in and of itself, car horns, clacking shoes on wet pavement, beeping and buzzing sounds from coat pockets, strange music drifting out of open doors, one-sided conversations, catcalls, and whistles.

Even the busiest cities and largest events in Wizarding Britain had nothing on this sensory nightmare.

"Oh god," Natalie moaned. "I think I'm going to puke."

"Don't worry about it. It happens to everyone the first time," Ron said nonchalantly, not even slowing his pace. "Do it in the gutter if really have to."

"Ron, where are we going?"

"There's a bus stop just up ahead. We'll take it down to the river, then get you a ticket on the ferry."

Hermione started to shake. This was really happening, she realized. It was finally starting to become real.

They managed to make it to the bus stop without anyone puking. While Natalie took a moment to lean on a lamppost and close her eyes in an attempt to regain her equilibrium, Ron killed time by playing tour guide and pointing out the various sights London had to offer.

"That's the London Eye," he said, pointing to the giant Ferris Wheel spinning about in the distance. "Fred and George took me up there last year. You can see all of muggle London. Gives you kind of a queer feeling, looking down on it. Makes you feel small and kinda stupid. I mean, there's this whole giant world down there, out here, thirteen million people in this city alone, and we try to pretend it ain't even there. How dumb is that?"

Thirteen million people, Hermione marveled. A number both awe inspiring and terrifying. There were more muggles in this city alone than there were wizards and witches across the world. She had come from this place or some place like it, but like Ron had said, she had gotten so good at pretending it wasn't there that she had forgotten about it.

"I wonder if my parents are out here," she said. "I could have walked by them and I would never know."

Ron gave her a startled look, then looked away.

"I could probably find out," he said. "I mean . . . they keep everybody's name in giant books where anybody can find them. It couldn't be that hard to look them up."

Hermione smiled a bit sadly.

"That's sweet of you, but I don't think it would do any good. They wouldn't know who I am."

The bus they were apparently waiting for pulled to the corner, and Ron led them on, slipping the fare into the coin box as he went. The bus was almost empty but for a young man listening to his headphones an elderly woman dozing against her husband's shoulder. The bus lurched into movement, and Natalie groaned unhappily.

"Alright, here are your papers and some light reading," he told Hermione, pulling out a thick envelope and opening it. "This is your passport, this is your photo ID, and this is your oyster card. Don't ask me about the last one, I have no idea what it does but supposedly

every adult muggle has one. Fred and George tweaked the age a bit so no one would bother you for traveling alone. This is about fifty galleons worth of Francs. They use muggle money even in the wizarding parts of France. This is Fred and George's little instruction manual for traveling around muggles. You'll have two and a half hours to read through that. Explains things like money, transport, muggle customs, things like that . . ."

"Where did you get all this? How do you even know about it?"

"Where do you think? My brothers have been sneaking into the muggle world for years. I'd say they got the itch from Dad, but they're way smarter about it. You didn't think they got all that money to buy a pub from smuggling Christmas presents into Hogwarts, did you? That was just the tip of the iceberg. The real money's in smuggling muggle contraband and tourism."

"Tourism?"

"Sure. There's lots of things to see and do out here. The old timers miss being able to do it, and the younger folks like the thrill of doing something novel and illegal. It's not like it hurts anybody."

"Unless you get caught."

"Yeah . . ." he agreed, his smile fading. Hermione frowned thoughtfully. "Anyway, Harry had them put a kit together for you a while back, just in case. So when Natalie showed up at the tavern, I knew what she was there for."

Hermione frowned thoughtfully.

"How did you know what she was there for, Ron?" she asked, because it was rather a leap in logic for him to have assumed Natalie showing up at the Red Weasel meant Hermione had to leave the country. He didn't answer.

"Ron . . . how come Fred and George aren't here?"

"Don't worry about it," he said. "They'll be okay. It's probably best I got this out of their office, or they really might have gotten in trouble."

Natalie pulled herself out of her misery long enough to turn to Ron.

"They were arrested. That's why there were all those Sentinels there. They thought Hermione might show up in person to ask for help."

He shrugged.

"They won't keep them. They didn't know anything about Lucius, and they never saw Hermione after the fact, so they can't charge them with anything. Most they got them on is muggle contraband, and I doubt they'll get more than a fine for that."

He sounded as though he was trying to convince himself, and Hermione couldn't even begin to think what he must be feeling. His father had died in prison, and now his brothers were looking at a similar fate. All because of her.

"I'm sorry, Ron."

"It's fine," he said. "Way I figure it, me helping you out means Draco owes me a favor. Might work out better to have a Malfoy on the Weasley side of things for once."

She wasn't sure what he meant by that, but she could tell he didn't want to talk about it anymore.

"So where am I going in France, precisely?"

"Paris."

She took a sharp breath.

"Are you sure that's safe?"

"Lot of English refugees in Paris. It'll be easy enough to disappear. Won't be able to use your wand though. Not until you find a way to

get it registered without getting arrested. You'll probably want to unshrink your trunk before you get on the ferry."

They talked more about the practicalities of Hermione's emergency excursion into a foreign country. On such short notice, there hadn't been time to make arrangements for her arrival, so she would essentially be on her own once she got off the ferry. She spoke a little French, she had a little money, and her school trunk had plenty of items she could use, trade, or sell. For the short-term, she would be fine so long as she stayed below notice. What she was going to do long term was a trickier matter. The Weasley brothers might be master criminals, but she wasn't and didn't know how she was supposed to live if she were forced into hiding for months or even years.

She tried not to let her misgivings show.

She could do this. She would do this.

She didn't have a choice.

The bus had been nearly empty, but the port was full of people on their way home from visiting family and holiday retreats. Hermione felt self-conscious in the crowd, wondering if anyone would notice anything off about her. Her clothes, her behaviors, some unknown quality that separated a witch from every other woman there. But no one seemed to notice, not even when she went into the public loo empty handed and came out carrying a trunk. She wondered, hopefully, if muggles weren't perhaps naturally oblivious to magic.

Ron bought her ticket for the ferry and pointed the ship out to her on the pier. It seemed monstrously huge to her and strangely unreal with its gleaming white hull and fluorescent lights gleaming out from the interior, but so much of London seemed strange to her. She thought it might have been terribly exciting under normal circumstances, but at the moment it just made her feel uneasy and vaguely homesick.

They settled on a bench outside overlooking the Thames so Natalie could look out across the river rather than around her, and it seemed to help settle some of her queasiness. Hermione thought she was

already starting to get used to it, but she didn't want to be left alone in it either.

"You'll be okay," Ron said.

"You don't know that," she said.

"You survived Lucius bloody Malfoy. I doubt Paris is going to be much of a challenge."

Her mouth twitched a bit, but settled again.

"Better the danger you know . . ." she said. "Besides, I had Draco and my friends then."

He snorted. "Yeah, I think you might have done better on your own."

She looked away, annoyed. He was hardly in a position to criticize, but she didn't want to start an argument. Not now.

"I wish they were here."

"Why?" Natalie muttered. "It would only make things harder."

"I would have liked to say goodbye. I don't know when I'll see them again."

"Probably this summer. Draco will be seventeen and travel to France is permitted now, and Harry's always coming and going. God, even the Weaslette was talking about going. Bill Weasley and her little friend from the tourney are there."

"She's right," Ron agreed reluctantly. "They'll find you sooner or later."

Hermione smiled at them gratefully. When they said it like that, it wasn't so scary. She had always wanted to see Paris, even before Harry had described what a beautiful and strange city it really was. Sometimes, when she was depressed, she would imagine what it would have been like to run to Beauxbatons, hide away in the

catacomb libraries, wander the museums and galleries, steal into the lectures at the city universities . . . just any number of little things. When Harry and Draco came or she could finally come home, she would have so much to tell them. Her own little adventure.

"Thank you."

A voice boomed from somewhere above them in English and then in French, calling for passengers to begin loading. Suddenly, Hermione's tentative happiness fled her, but she forced herself to keep smiling. Natalie and Ron walked her down to the boarding gate.

"Is there anything you want me to tell them?" Natalie asked.

"A thousand things," she said sadly, "But I can only think of the obvious ones right now. Take care of yourself. I'll miss you. I love you. That sort of thing."

"Would you mind terribly if I slipped in a 'And Natalie can borrow anything she likes from my closet' somewhere in there?"

Hermione rolled her eyes.

"Just be careful around the bunny slippers. They've been known to nibble."

She turned to Ron to thank him for what he and his brothers had done to help her.

He leaned in and kissed her. Her cheeks were suddenly burning, but she didn't pull away until he did. She slapped him, mostly by instinct, and then turned even redder. He gave her an embarrassed little half smile.

"Sorry. Just in case, you know."

She nodded dumbly. She hadn't actually minded really.

Somewhere behind her, Natalie made gagging noises.

Ron glared at her for a half second, then turned back Hermione, and she thought he might try and kiss her again when he leaned in a second time. But all he did was whisper in her ear.

"I know I should have been better to you, and I'm sorry that I wasn't."

Book VI

Chapter 26:

"Harry."

He opened his eyes, but the cabin was dark. The moon was outside the window somewhere, a waning gibbous behind the clouds. The fire in the iron stove had burned down to dark red embers.

On either side of him, he felt and heard the steady breathing of several people pressed around him. The icy air within the cabin pressed against his eyelids and nipped at his cheeks, but in his little cocoon of blankets and bedfellows he felt decidedly comfortable. He felt no desire to move, and he doubted Sirius would have wanted him to either, if he were awake to protest. Fatigued from his ordeal, a mild fever had fallen over him shortly after his arrival at the colony, and Sirius had predictably overreacted. His godfather had ordered him to bed, and he had barely left it in the last three days.

Harry spent his waking hours staring at the ceiling and wondering about Hermione and Voldemort and Draco, and his sleeping hours in fitful dreams he didn't remember upon waking. He didn't see Sirius for the most part until he came to bed, but he was never left alone. If Remus wasn't there, then one of the healers would be or some other guardian was there to watch him and ensure he wasn't disturbed. Or didn't run off.

Who had woken him now?

Had it only been a dream?

He closed his eyes and settled back again. Weight suddenly pressed down on his legs, and he sat up with a start. Groaning and shuffling ensued as he disturbed the bed, but no one woke. He made to shout, but a hand quickly covered his mouth. A small hand, rough and callused though it was.

"Harry."

This time he recognized the voice. He relaxed and gently pulled the other's hand from his mouth.

"Luna, what are you doing here?" he whispered.

As far as he knew she wasn't even supposed to be in the Goddess Colony, but at another colony further north.

"Someone has come to see you," she whispered, and he could feel her warm breath brush against his face. She was very close.

"In the middle of the night?" he asked suspiciously. A part of him had forgiven her for her loyalty to Greyback, but that didn't mean he completely trusted her yet.

"She risked much to find you. Come."

Suddenly, her weight disappeared, and he felt her presence move away, even though there was no sound until the door to the cabin groaned slightly as it opened and closed. A draft of cold air struck his bare arms and face, making him shiver. It smelled of snow.

Briefly, he entertained the idea of lying back down, going back to sleep, and opting out of whatever little game Luna was playing. But only briefly. Luna hadn't named his guest, but it sounded as if Hermione herself may have come to find him. That wasn't something he could ignore. Reluctantly and cautiously, he climbed out from under the blankets and towards the end of the bed while trying not to wake anyone in the process.

As soon as he was free of the bed he began to shiver in earnest. He had only a sleeveless wool nightshirt and his trousers, and the floor felt like ice against his bare feet. He fumbled blindly about the room for a bit until he found the fur cloaks hanging on the wall and several pairs of leather boots beneath them. He slipped into the warmest he could find by touch alone. It wasn't ideal. The boots and cloak were both too big, but he didn't dare delay by looking for his own clothes. If Sirius caught him, he'd be stuck in bed once again and there was no telling how long Luna would bother to wait for him.

Wrapping the borrowed cloak tightly around himself, he braced himself against the cold and slipped out the door. It wasn't snowing like he had thought, but there was a thin layer of it on the ground.

He spotted Luna immediately. At least, he assumed it was Luna. He had forgotten to grab his glasses, and in the flickering light of the torch it was difficult to make out the figure holding it. White against white, Luna was barely distinguishable from the surrounding snow in her white furs. Carefully, he moved to meet her, but she was already turning to lead the way.

"Luna, wait," he called softly. Sirius would be furious if he woke and saw him missing. Whether Luna heard him or not, she didn't stop or turn around. He could not run to catch up, and he didn't dare allow her to get too far ahead that he couldn't follow. Nervously, he trudged after her.

It didn't take him long to figure out she was taking him towards the wall, which further convinced him of the possibility of Hermione visiting. If it had been another werewolf, there would have been no reason to travel that far. Within minutes they reached the wall, now spread three times the length it had been last time he had seen it, and fire cisterns had been lit along the walkway while archers patrolled between them. Harry hesitated at the sight of those shadowy figures, but Luna continued forward without hesitation and finally he followed after her.

One of the figures on the wall stopped as he spotted Luna's approach and climbed down a nearby ladder to greet her. They spoke for a moment, and the guard turned to Harry and then nodded before climbing back up the wall. Harry couldn't help but wonder at it. How was it she could convince the guards to go against Sirius orders of keeping him within the colony? It made him decidedly nervous.

This time Luna waited for Harry until he had reached her.

"What are we doing out here?"

"One of the guards came to me when she arrived. They didn't dare let her in, but they were afraid to send her away. They are afraid of her. But I'm not, and you will not be."

That didn't sound like Hermione.

"Why didn't they go to Sirius?"

Luna smiled a bit at that.

"Have you ever woken him up when he doesn't want to be? He is like a bear in winter."

That was true, but not a wholly satisfying answer. He started to ask her why they came to her then instead of someone else, but she was already slipping away through a narrow door and out the other side. He hesitated a moment longer, knowing what he was doing was reckless and foolish, and yet still he needed to know. It still could possibly be Hermione.

He followed.

Luna waited for him by the door, and as he exited she suddenly leaned forward and kissed his eyelids. Her lips and her magic felt warm against his skin, and as he opened his eyes he could see her clearly again. The light from her torch cast everything in a yellow and orange glow, but her pupils were blown wide and encircled with the thinnest band of shimmering silver. It made him think of deep wells and lunar eclipses. Snow had caught in her hair, turning it almost as white as her furs. She could have been the moon Herself come down in human form, he felt for just a moment before he remembered he couldn't afford to fall in love with her and turned away.

His attention was caught almost immediately by another. This one was pale with raven hair and eyes that glowed icy blue. He knew her at once.

If Luna were the moon, then Selufiare was the winter night. Simultaneously dark and pale, cold and fierce, beautiful and deadly. She was cloaked in black, and one pale hand stroked the narrow

head of her black faerie mount so that the darkness all around her framed the stark paleness of her face and hands. She had a very lovely face and hands.

Bobby had said she may be the next Midnight Queen, the Winter Goddess, and looking at her now he could easily believe it.

He felt his heart suddenly pounding. He felt suddenly flush. She was an Enchantress he reminded himself. The only reason he was reacting so strongly was because his magic was too depleted to help him resist her natural charms. Yes, he told himself, that is the only reason. Don't get carried away.

It helped to think of how ridiculous he probably looked right now; bed-tossed hair, oversized fur cloak, pale skinny legs sticking out the bottom, and boots nearly falling off. But it didn't help much. She wasn't any less lovely for his own ridiculousness.

"My lady," he said, trying to keep his voice steady. "What an unexpected pleasure."

Her cool expression softened and warmed, thawing the impression of winter about her.

"Unexpected, no doubt, but a pleasure? I wonder."

"You helped Bobby and me escape. I am grateful to you for that."

She seemed pleased by his words, but her expression was touched with sadness.

"And a dear price was paid. Did your God Eater tell you what he did to our city? Did he gloat?"

Harry wouldn't necessarily call it gloating, but the Dark Lord certainly hadn't been ashamed to go into the details of his own little adventure into Hausteheim. He hadn't known what to think of it at the time, and eventually he hadn't bothered to stop and think about it at all. There had been so many other things to occupy his thoughts.

"He told me, my Lady."

"I suppose I have no right to complain. We received what we asked for in the end. That's not why I am here, however."

"I admit I am a little confused," Harry said. "How did you find me? Does your father know where you are? Where I am?"

"While Lord Gulandri would indeed be interested in your whereabouts, he is currently too preoccupied to concern himself with either of us. As for how I found you..."

She slipped her hand into her cloak, and Harry found himself suddenly tensing. He mentally applauded himself for not turning completely into a love-sick fool. When she pulled her hand free something shiny was dangling by a chain in her hand. At first he thought it was a medallion, but a closer look revealed it to be a watch.

His watch.

"Oh."

"Yes," she said. "Your bond with this object is very strong. I can feel its longing for you whenever I hold it. Have you missed it too?"

He stared, mesmerized, as the watch twirled and gleamed faintly in the torchlight. His hands twitched. Had he missed it? Every single day. Out of everything he owned, he probably only would have missed his wand more.

And suddenly, it was gone again, disappearing into Selufiare's cloak. He looked away quickly to hide the sudden flare of anguish caused by its absence, his eyes roving in search of some possible threat that might have snuck up during his distraction. All he saw was empty woods and Luna, watching intently. He flushed, this time in embarrassment. He had forgotten she was there.

"It led me here," the naga continued. "But I cannot stay long. Days are passing in Hausteheim for the hours I spend here, and eventually Lord Gulandri will begin to wonder."

"Then why come? This place isn't safe. If my godfather found you or some random wizard..."

"Then it is best I not linger. I have come to make a bargain with you, Harry Potter, Twilight Seeker, Gihalmelan."

A chill ran down his spine. Bargains with faeries were dangerous. Bargains with anyone were dangerous but especially with faeries. Still, Selufiare had never been anything less than generous and kind to him, and she deserved to be heard.

"I am listening."

"In Hausteheim I asked for a kiss, but I had nothing worth trading to you. I have something now."

Harry could feel his ears burning and was very aware of Luna's eyes on his back. He coughed uncomfortably in his hand.

"Ah... that's... Do the same rules apply? You will not try to enchant me or bind me to you?"

"As tempting as that would be... I swear I shall not cast my magic over you."

"It doesn't seem like much of a trade," Harry pointed out.

She gave him an ironic smile.

"I may not take you, gentle sir, but I assure you I will not leave empty handed."

That didn't sound good. He looked to Luna. Luna looked at Harry.

"If you like, I'll kill her if she tries anything," she offered.

Harry stared at her. How messed up was he that he found her offer endearing? More importantly, even with the backup, was it worth the risk? For all its sentimental value, it was just a watch. If he wanted he

could transfigure one just like it or have Hermione... No, he couldn't ask Hermione to make him another. He couldn't ask Hermione for anything. One way or another, she might be gone from his life forever.

It was the first gift Hermione had ever given him. It was the first thing he ever felt truly belonged to him. It was the only thing to have followed him and survived his every adventure and mishap aside from his wand (had actually followed him more faithfully than his wand). At some point, the watch had become his talisman, his lucky charm, and he felt anxious and depressed whenever he reached for it only to find it wasn't there. Selufiare said there was a bond between him and it. That bond could not be replaced any more than his bond with Hermione could be.

He needed it back.

What was the harm in a little kiss?

He came to stand before her. He felt his ears burning as he drew near, her loveliness growing with every approaching step. She was so pale, and yet there was just a touch of rosy pink to her cheeks and the tip of her nose from the cold, and it complimented the soft pink of her full lips. Closer still he could make out the faintest diamond pattern of her skin, which served to remind him she was a naga and not a human, but her exoticism did nothing to detract from her beauty.

However, reminding himself that beneath those pretty lips was a set of fangs filled with the same poison that had withered the Dark Lord's arm into a blackened husk within minutes helped him keep his reserve. Mostly.

"I accept."

There was no time given for him to wonder about Selufiare's diamond-patterned skin or her fangs or the terrible danger he had just put himself in. He had no sooner spoken the words, then she reached out to take his face in her hands and guide him to her lips. Her touch was icy cold against his feverish skin but soft, like her magic that lapped up against his senses the moment they connected.

The kiss itself was chaste, no more than two pairs of lips touching gently, but her magic made it intimate. He could feel it prodding and measuring his mind and body and soul, not invading or corrupting as a true spell would, but rather taking mold of all that he was, had ever been, and, possibly, what he might yet become.

It wasn't the deepest kiss he had ever had, but it was the longest, over a minute without moving, and when he pulled away he found Selufiare was crying.

Harry felt as if he had been crying too, empty and tired, but his eyes were dry. Maybe it was just the fever?

"What's wrong?" he asked.

She blinked and took a shaky breath, taking a step back.

"Yours is such a sad story. Sad, but beautiful." She forced herself to smile weakly. "And a bit odd."

That made him smile despite how obviously he had distressed her. So even the faeries thought he was a bit odd? He couldn't say he was surprised. He had stopped looking too closely at the absurdity of his own existence years ago. That way laid madness.

He held out his hand, and she laid his watch in it.

A bitter sweet pleasure filled him. He had missed his watch terribly, but even so it was a poor substitute for the friend that had given it to him. It would be a great comfort and a sad reminder in the days to come.

A hand touched his arm, too warm to be Selufiare's, and he felt suddenly embarrassed.

"Yes, Luna?" he asked without looking away from his watch.

"Let's go."

He didn't recognize her tone. Anger, maybe? Resignation? He turned to her, but she was already moving away. He turned to Selufiare who was already climbing onto her mount.

"Before you go," he said. "Will you tell me what happened to Carrigan's box? Did Gulandri ever get it open?"

Selufiare smiled, a touch of genuine amusement in her eyes at his question though they still remained shiny with tears.

"As a matter of fact, he hasn't. His magic does not lean towards uncovering mysteries, nor is he particularly curious by nature. By now, he has probably forgotten about it."

This pleased Harry, although at this point he didn't know why. While the contents of the box had been important to Carrigan, his past incarnation, they had also been things related to Lord Voldemort, whom Harry was deeply inclined to take a cricket bat to these days. Still, Gulandri was no friend of his. There was no telling what was in that box or how its contents might be used against him.

"I don't suppose you would be willing to trade..."

A snowball collided with the back of his head, icy flakes slid down his neck and into the back of his cloak. Luna was losing her patience with him.

Selufiare, however, looked intrigued.

"And what would you be willing to give for it?"

"What does my Lady desire?"

She smiled.

"A secret."

"I have given you all of mine with that kiss."

"Another's secret, then."

"What sort of secret?"

"An important one. One only you know. One that might destroy them."

Harry's first thought was of Ron and his attempted murder, but then he remembered Snape knew of that too. He thought of Hermione, but he would never betray her like that. Voldemort came to mind quickly, but while it was true he knew many secrets about the Dark Lord only he was privy to, he didn't know any he thought would destroy the other wizard. Even if he did, he wasn't so sure he should give it to Selufiare. She had a score to settle with the Dark Lord, and while Harry did too, death wasn't his end game. As much as he hated Voldemort these days, they shared a history that could not be forgotten. Hermione's fate was not yet sealed, and until it was he thought he might still be able to forgive the other wizard.

Maybe.

"I have no such secret," he admitted.

"Fortunately, I don't have the box with me either. By the time you have the one, I shall have the other," she said, turned, and rode away.

She disappeared within moments, and he began making the trek back to the cabin and his warm bed. He could no longer feel his toes or fingers, and the wetness seeping down his head and back were a small torture. Luna waited for him at the wall and let him warm his fingers over her torch for a bit.

"Am I dreaming, Luna?" he asked. "This doesn't seem quite real."

She stared across the torchlight at him for a moment, and he stared back into the black depths of her eyes and wondered what lay at the bottom. Once there had been a goddess there, but now there were a hundred other things that made Luna who and what she was.

"You are not sleeping," she said finally. "But you may yet be dreaming. Do you dream of me often?"

Heat rose to his face that had nothing to do with the fire.

"I would not call it an unusual occurrence."

Her smile was a bit sad.

"I wish you would dream of me more often. I miss you terribly, Harry."

When he woke again, the sun was shining and the bed was empty. The stove fire had been rebuilt at some point so that Harry felt stifled under the pile of furs. Beneath his pillow he felt something metal and round gripped in his hand. He pulled out the watch and stared at it for several minutes.

It hadn't been a dream.

A rustle of feathers drew his attention upwards. Elsbeth and Bobby stared down at him intently from their perch on a support beam. He let out small gasp and, after considerable effort, managed to push the furs off of him so that he could sit up.

"Good morning," he said.

"Afternoon, actually," Bobby corrected and fluttered down. Elsbeth tilted her head this way and that, looking at him curiously before joining the raven on the bed. There was a package tied to her leg.

"It's good to see you. Have you heard about what happened?"

"Some of it. Snape wasn't feeling particularly chatty."

"You spoke to Snape?"

"He wanted me to deliver a message. One he didn't want to risk writing down in case it was intercepted."

"And the message?"

"She's in France."

Harry let out a raspy little laugh which quickly turned to coughing, but he couldn't stop smiling. Hermione had escaped! Draco must have found some way to warn her. Who cared how, really? She was safe. For now, she was safe.

"Praise the Goddess," he sighed in relief.

"Raecellos deserves a bit of praise there too, if you don't mind. He is the god of travelers, after all."

Harry smiled at him gratefully.

"Absolutely. I'll make an offering as soon as I can."

"Don't push yourself. You look a fright."

"I'll rest easier now. Thank you, Bobby."

The raven puffed and preened under his praise. Elsbeth turned up her beak and ignored him. Harry offered her a few gentle strokes down her breast and a promise of some fresh mice (the granary always had full traps in the mornings) and untied the package. Inside was a newspaper, a letter, and a book. The newspaper was spouting the rather obnoxious headline 'Honor Student Prime Suspect in Christmas Massacre!' and a picture of Hermione that must have been taken at a Dueling Competition, her dark uniform and scowl making her look uncharacteristically fierce. He eyed it dubiously before setting it aside. He would read it eventually, if only to find out what the public was going to be led to believe, but he knew once he read it his good mood would turn sour.

He picked up the letter and opened it. Bobby hopped up onto his shoulder so that he could read it as well.

Potter

The situation will keep until you return to Hogwarts. Don't do anything stupid. Read a book or something.

S.S.

"Loquacious he is not," Bobby quipped. "Do you believe him?"

"Yeah, I suppose so. He's definitely taking extra care that no one finds out about her being in France. If he's telling me not to try anything, maybe he's already got something in works to keep her safe or find the real culprit and doesn't want me messing with it."

"Or maybe he just wants to keep you out of the way."

Harry sighed.

"He doesn't have to worry much about that. I'm not going anywhere any time soon."

He looked at the book Snape had supposedly sent him to read. It was his potions textbook. Typical.

He let out a sigh.

"I don't suppose you would be able to find Hermione in France?"

"Am I capable of it? Certainly. Will I? No."

"Why not?"

"For one thing, I'm not your owl."

Elsbeth let out an indignant hoot at that.

"For another, you can't be left unsupervised."

Harry scowled at him.

"I'm plenty supervised, thank you very much. In fact, I've got more supervision than I can stand at the moment."

"And yet... where did you get the watch, Harry?"

The Hotel Raoulin was not the sort of place Hermione would have ever considered staying in of her own volition back home, but her brief stint at the Persnickety Inn had given her some perspective that she was grateful for now. The hotel was old and a bit run down, but clean and vermin-free. The little white vase on her bedside table had a chip in it, but the five daisies were fresh, and though her bed was narrow and squeaked, the sheets were pristine white, the comforter was thick, and the pillows smelled pleasantly of hops. A second bed stood on the other side of the room from hers, a basket of folded laundry on top of it waiting to be put away and a little book of poetry on the pillow.

The other bed belonged to her roommate, Enid, who had a sweet smile despite a missing tooth and kept a tidy space. Hermione thought they would get along just fine, and she admitted she wasn't opposed to the company. The last three days had been the loneliest she had ever known.

The ferry ride to France had been nerve-wracking, but uneventful. There had been a moment of panic when a uniformed muggle had asked to see her ID before letting her off the dock, but he had barely glanced at it before letting her through, trunk and all.

After that, things got complicated.

She spent three days walking around the city trying to find the wizarding sections, trying to find a place to stay, and trying to find work. Four pickpocket attempts (that she knew about), a near miss with a automobile, a not-miss with a bicycle (for which the cyclist refused to apologize), more time spent lost than she would ever admit to anyone, eight job postings she was turned down outright for because her French wasn't good enough or she didn't have a wand she could use, and a terrifying moment when she spotted her own face staring back at her from a newspaper. Three nights spent in a hostel with complete strangers, one spent dying her hair black and styling it to the local fashion by a muggle girl with five facial piercings and fangs, another avoiding the amorous attentions of a traveling American student, and one foiled attempt to steal her trunk while she was sleeping.

It had all been so exhausting, and she had little to show for it but a new hair cut she sort of liked and a painful education about the hazards of pedestrian traffic in the muggle world. She had tried to take some time every day just to stop and look around her and appreciate the fact that she was in Paris, one of the most beautiful and historically significant cities in the world, muggle and wizarding alike. Sometimes it helped. Usually, it didn't.

But on the fourth day, this day, she had found a job and a place to stay all in one, and she felt happy. Relieved and happy. Madam Prewitt was a French-born witch who had married a British wizard and spent many happy years together. She was widowed during the war when her husband returned to Britain to find his siblings and never returned. She kept a hotel and had staffed it entirely with British refugees, mostly young women who were at risk of falling into prostitution. The pay was miserable, but Madam Prewitt offered free room and discounted board for those who wanted it. She was a hard, stubborn woman who liked things done her way, but her heart was in the right place. Hermione's position as maid and Thursday night receptionist wasn't particularly glamorous or even interesting, but she wasn't in a position to be choosy.

Hermione took a deep breath and let it out. This was home for now. She would make it work.

She set her trunk at the end of the bed, pulled out a few items for later, put away her extra money in the hidden side compartment, and went downstairs.

"Heloise!" Mrs. Prewitt barked as she came into view, hands on her plump hips. "Ztop dallying about, girl, and get your cloak! You will go with Enid to pick up groceries. She will show you 'round."

"Yes, Madam," she said, and hurried to obey.

Enid was already waiting for her with her cloak and offered her another smile as she led her out onto the street. Enid was English born and spoke fluently, but with a slight French accent that would probably only get worse with time.

"She doesn't normally send us out at night," the girl said as they exited the backdoor of the hotel, "But the cook, Andrew, gave Lorelei a pinch for making fun of him and she dropped an entire batch of eggs that he needs for cake and then there's the breakfast crowd tomorrow... Anyway, she normally doesn't like us going out at night. I think she's afraid someone is going to just up and run off with us."

Enid laughed at this, but it was a nervous sort of laugh and her eyes flitted to the dark corners of the street.

"Does that happen?" Hermione asked, looking around. The street had an abundance of light, but also an abundance of dark nooks and alleys, and while the street was busy it seemed to be inhabited mostly by bar hoppers and young couples.

"Well... not really run off with, but, you know... You hear about things happening sometimes. Not a lot, mind, but enough that you shouldn't ever come out here alone at night. Mrs. Prewitt is right about that. But during the day, it's alright."

Hermione considered. This neighborhood wasn't the safest or prettiest, but she couldn't afford either and as long as she kept her wits about her, she should be fine. It wasn't like she had many reasons to go wandering around alone at night.

"I'll remember. Thank you, Enid."

The girl gave her a bashful grin and shook her head.

"Oh, don't think noth'n of it miss. Us girls got to look out for each other. Ruby did it for me when I started working here, and now I'll be doing it for you. It's the right way of doing things."

"Yes, that's the right way," Hermione agreed, smiling back.

Viktor turned his head sharply and paused mid-step. Goethe followed a moment later, only turning back to look directly at his Master.

"Something wrong?"

Viktor blinked, then continued walking as if nothing had happened.

"I thought I recognized someone. All English girls sound alike, I suppose."

"An English girl? Is that your type, then?"

"My type of vot?"

Goethe just grinned.

"I'll ask you about your English wench later, but right now I think we should be more concerned about the fools following us rather than the fool that let you slip away."

"My friend, if you value your tongue I suggest you use it more wisely. I knew we were being followed since the Rue du St. Claire."

"And what do you intend to do with him?"

"Da same thing I did vith da last two."

"I wish you would reconsider. The last two murders have set the Aurors against us."

"Da Aurors are set against no one. Dey do not know who is to blame."

"They will if you kill this one. Let him follow for a while and then lose him. No doubt there are a dozen like him wandering around following the Master's people, as well."

"Assuming he did not set this one on our scent himself."

"Or perhaps despite that fact. Aurors do not trust vampires. It is a sad fact. We really are quite loveable creatures."

"Hurting you becomes increasingly tempting, my friend."

"If that is the case, please take it out on the fool."

"Perhaps we should go pay da Master a visit and take it out on him."

"Like I said, 'the fool'."

Viktor smiled grimly.

It had been nearly a week since Bobby and Elsbeth's arrival, and he had started to go a little stir crazy. Sirius had confined him to the cabin, and no amount of pleading or reasoning would let him relent, despite the gradual return of both his strength and his magic. Not that there was much time to argue his case. Sirius was Head Alpha, and while winter was a quiet season, there were still responsibilities that required his attention throughout the day so that Harry often saw him only when he came to sleep or occasionally shared lunch or dinner with him. Remus was sympathetic but unmoved.

"We love you, Harry, and in many ways you are the most honorable and trustworthy person I know. But when it comes to doing what is best for yourself, well..."

"I promised I wouldn't run off. I promised."

Remus looked at him fondly and ruffled his hair.

"I know. I believe you, but... Luna is here."

Harry's hand twitched.

"So?"

"So if she offered you the means to protect your friend, what would you be willing to do for it?"

He frowned, ready to argue that Luna wouldn't do that. That she hadn't done that, but he couldn't say that without revealing that he had snuck out that night, and that he had done just the sort of stupid thing Remus was afraid of. His godfather used his temporary speechlessness to continue his animagus lessons, which wouldn't have been so bad except his magic was still too weak for practice

(and he was almost certain Gulandri forced transformation would make it much easier to do it purposefully if he only had the magic) and was left to learn theory. Tedious though the lessons could be, he still missed Remus when he had to leave to assist Sirius or attend his own duties.

Elsbeth came and went almost every day, bearing letters and newspapers. The idea was to keep Harry informed of what was happening in the wizarding world and with Hermione in particular, but the newspapers were unhelpfully sensationalist and the letters were usually as vague and uninformative as Snape's first letter. The only comfort he derived from them was the knowledge that Hermione was still free and a few minutes' distraction. Bobby was good company when he showed himself, but like Sirius he was absent more frequently than not, patrolling the woods for fae and exploring its mysteries. Harry imagined what it would be like when he mastered his animagus form and would be able to accompany his brother in his travels and explorations. Such thoughts only served to make him more anxious to do something.

When left alone with his thoughts, he was left in constant and exhausting battle with his own anxiety. His mind twisted in on itself. Not just about Hermione, though she made the bulk of his fears, but about Voldemort and what this all meant for them, Draco who was now a Lord and whose friendship he was now uncertain of, Snape whose allegiance had always been tenuous, Inspector Amelon who seemed to take the entire investigation as a game, and Ron who may once again be exposed to danger and endangering his family by proxy. Then there was Britain itself. Her general was dead while they were at war. Every day he opened the paper and expected to hear news of some sort of raid in England or massive counterattack in Germany. Even with the battlefields silent, the reorganization of Culties and Court of Foreign Intelligence made him nervous, Lestranger's promotion not the least among his concerns. What was the Dark Lord thinking?

One afternoon he spent three hours composing a letter to that effect, which eventually turned into a treatise, and then into kindling for the stove when he reminded himself that he was feuding with Voldemort

and therefore in no position to advise him in anything and likewise wasn't speaking at all to him if he could help it. Not yet, anyway.

The day the school owl arrived, Harry was contemplating the advantages and disadvantages of knocking himself unconscious. Sirius brought the bird himself, looking none too pleased when it shrieked at him any time he tried to reach for the package around its leg. Remus appeared behind him and slapped him upside the head.

"You know better."

Sirius reluctantly handed the strange owl to Harry, who fed it a mouse (he always made sure he had some on hand for Elsbeth in the absence of owl treats) and removed the package while its sharp beak was thus occupied. Inside was a change of school clothes, an overnight kit, a note, and his wand. He slid his fingers over his wand reverently for moment before turning to the note.

Potter,

I have enclosed the necessary items for your return to civilization. I will retrieve you at 9:00 AM, tomorrow. Prepare yourself.

S.S.

Harry stared, then turned to his godfathers.

"What day is it?"

"Second semester starts the day after tomorrow," Remus said by way of answer. Sirius just crossed his arms and scowled.

"The Hogwarts Express," Harry murmured.

He had almost forgotten about school. The train would leave tomorrow, carrying the students back for the new semester. Snape was going to have him ride the train with everyone else rather than simply go directly back from the colony to the school. Why? And why so early? The train didn't leave until 11:00. A press conference

perhaps? Voldemort? Maybe he had something he needed to say to Harry himself.

Prepare yourself.

Well, thanks a lot for the bloody warning. Might help if you told me what I needed to prepare myself for.

That night, Sirius bundled him up in warm clothes and took him out to the memorial. The sky was clear so that the stones seemed to glow a bluish white in the moonlight, a few shades darker than the patches of unmelted snow. So many stones for so many lives lost. It seemed a lifetime ago, but Harry could still feel that special sort of agony only grief could cause when he stared at them. For a long time, they stood side by side without speaking.

"Don't make me bury you here," Sirius said at last. "I won't forgive you if you do."

Finally, they made to leave, but just as they were about to move over a small hill and out of sight of the memorial, Harry turned for one last look. His breath caught.

Luna stood just where they had been standing a moment before, staring at the stones in just the same way. The white of her fur cloak and her natural paleness made her glow like the stones, like she were one of them; beautiful, unmoving, and sad. A new grief, a new agony welled up inside of him as he stared at her. She was alone. She was more alone than Harry had ever been or ever likely would be. His decision that he would never love her because he could never trust her now seemed so selfish and petty.

From out of the darkness, another form appeared, also pale and clothed in white. Jane. The Daughter of the Moon. Her gaze settled briefly on Luna or perhaps the stones, but then slowly she turned her gaze to Harry. Her expression was blank, but he felt recrimination in her heavy stare. For what, he wondered. For the massacre of the colony? For Luna? For denying his role as shaman and divine puppet? For some other, unnamed sin?

He didn't know and didn't want to. He turned away and quickened his pace to catch up with Sirius.

That night he could not sleep. His mind raced with what he had seen that night and what was to come in the morning. He stared up into the darkness of the cabin's ceiling, trying to catch Bobby's silhouette and follow the soft rustle of feathers. Beside him, he could feel and hear Sirius' breathing and knew if he turned his head he might catch the faint glitter of his eyes watching him in an equally sleepless fashion. He wanted to speak, to offer some words of reassurance and comfort, but he didn't think he would be believed and there were others curled warmly around them who would wake at the first whispered syllable.

So he said nothing, and they shared their sleeplessness and worry in silence.

Harry must have fallen asleep at some point, because he was woken early the next morning by the werewolves stirring from their sleep. He let himself be rolled and jostled about as they climbed out of the bed, then settled himself back to doze like he had every morning since his arrival. Today, however, Remus shook him back to wakefulness.

"Up and at'em, Prongslet. No sleeping in today."

Reluctantly, he pulled himself out of the nice warm bed and dressed with everyone else in the chilly cabin before stumbling half-asleep out into the predawn morning. Breakfast at the Goddess Colony, like most things, was communal and therefore everyone played their part in its preparation. The women did most of the actual baking, while children gathered things like milk and eggs, and the men began the day's chores by cutting wood and stoking the fires. Harry, still of questionable health, was kept out of the kitchen and sent to the communal bathhouse to light the furnace and pump up fresh water. He could have used his wand, but it felt like cheating when no one else did, even those who could.

By the time he was done, breakfast was already started, and he slipped into place beside Sirius. Sirius spared him a glance, but gave no other indication that he was there. They were still maintaining the ruse that Harry's position was an honor given out of necessity rather

than preference, and what protectiveness and affection the alpha allowed himself to demonstrate could easily be misinterpreted purely as possessiveness and dominance displays. Harry was okay with that. He understood well the need to keep up appearances.

He took a moment to look for Luna along the breakfast tables, but she was nowhere to be seen.

After a short and quiet breakfast, Harry was sent out to help others with their chores, reestablishing the bonds of community that had been weakened during his absence. He helped mend the roof of the smokehouse, harvested branches for arrows in the woods, and helped slaughter sheep. All the while he made conversation with his pack, gossiping about new marriages, how well or badly the other colonies were doing, who was making trouble for Blackbone, and who Blackbone was making trouble for.

No one asked how he had gotten hurt or about his life outside the colony, and he did not offer an explanation. The one thing Sirius and Fenrir had in common was their distinct lack of interest in wizarding affairs, and it was a disinterest they encouraged in their pack. Harry was left to figure out how to live with the dichotomy of his life by himself. Usually, he thought he did fairly well. Other times, it just made him feel lonely.

Dawn came and shortly after so did Remus, who hurried him along to the bathhouse to enjoy the fruits of his own labor. He was simultaneously sweaty and chilled from his chores outside, and the baths (three monstrosly large wooden tubs lined in waterproof canvas) were hot and heavenly. Remus scrubbed his now fully grown hair like it was a recalcitrant bit of laundry and poured bucket after bucket of water over him.

"Your hair holds our scent the most," Remus explained.

"I am not ashamed of you. I'm not ashamed to smell like you either" he said. He actually found their unique scent to be rather comforting. It was vaguely musky with other earthy scents mixed in, like woodsmoke and hay.

"That's because you're a remarkable young man. It makes others nervous how comfortable you are with your own uniqueness. If you wish to help your friend, it's best not to remind others how different you are. They may underestimate you."

Harry felt both flattered and embarrassed by this and let his godfather practically scrub his hair free of his scalp without another word of protest. Once clean and dried, he changed into his school clothes and felt immediately alien. The sense of wrongness only grew as he made his way out of the colony, earning the uneasy looks of the werewolves. Were they uneasy of him or for him? Did they worry what he would bring down on them or what he was being sent away to face without his pack? Sirius' thoughts on the matter were clear enough, however.

"They make you look like a little school boy," Sirius grumbled, looking him up and down.

"Well, technically speaking, I am a school boy."

The alpha just snorted as if he'd said something ridiculous. It made Harry want to smile, and now that they were near the border of their territory and alone, he allowed himself to indulge. The corner of Sirius' lip twitched upwards, but he managed to smother it with a deeper frown. Remus laughed into his hand behind his back.

Snape came into sight as they neared the edge of the territory. He was on the other side of the barrier, more symbolic than anything these days given the ease with which Sirius and Remus were both able to cross it, waiting impassively. His eyes narrowed at the sight of Harry's godfathers, but he didn't move forward or away.

"I should go the rest of the way alone. You'll all just start sniping at each other," Harry said.

Sirius grunted but didn't disagree. Remus squeezed his shoulder and handed him the bundle of items he had accumulated during his stay; the clothes he had arrived in, his potions book, the various letters and papers Elsbeth had brought, and hidden deep within its folds was his watch, carefully tucked away so no one could find it. He longed to

carry it in his pocket, to run his fingers over of the cool metal cover, but he didn't dare. He didn't want to have to explain its sudden reappearance.

They said their goodbyes with silent nods and intent stares, conveying what needed to be said without needing the words to say them. Then, he moved away from them and their world of werewolves to join Snape back in the world of wizardry.

Bobby appeared suddenly and alighted on his shoulder along the way.

"See anything while you were out there?" he asked the raven.

"This and that. Nothing to concern yourself with now that you're leaving."

Harry gave him a curious look. "And if I had stayed?"

"I would have highly recommended to your godfathers not to let you out of that cabin. Ever."

"Fae? Are the others in danger?"

"Fae do not concern themselves with werewolves... so long as werewolves don't concern themselves with fae. I can't say I'd want to be between them if they ever found a bone to fight over."

"Gulandri?"

That might make return visits more complicated.

"Not in person. Might have been anyone. They may have only been curious. You keep making yourself known to them, Harry. They're bound to take an interest."

"I'll try to make myself more boring from now on," he said gloomily. By then, Snape had come into hearing range and offered him a sardonic smile and a remark.

"A worthwhile ambition in your case, to be sure."

"How are you, Headmaster? And Ira?"

"Tired, Mr. Potter. We're both very tired."

He turned and began walking the trail towards the edge of the forest and Harry fell into step beside him.

"I am sorry," he said, and he meant it.

"It is the nature of these circumstances. Funerals are always exhausting to plan, and a Malfoy funeral is even more so."

"How is Draco taking it?"

"Draco does the Malfoy name and Slytherin House credit, but he is clearly out of his depth at the moment. I am not certain he will be returning to Hogwarts this semester, or if he does, that he will complete the term."

Harry gave him an alarmed look.

"Are things really that bad?"

"They are. I won't go into detail with you. That will be up to Draco."

Harry nodded, even though he was disappointed. He was still Draco's friend, although he was no longer certain the sentiment was returned, and he wanted to know what was going on in his life. Perhaps Natalie would be more forthcoming.

"So what now?"

"Now? Now we go to breakfast, we run some errands, and I leave you at the Hogwarts Express."

"I already had breakfast."

"I haven't and neither has the twenty some odd reporters who will soon be following us."

Harry mentally groaned. So that was what Snape had meant by 'prepare yourself'. Bobby quickly excused himself, not wanting any pictures of Harry including him to appear in the papers, and promised to meet up with him again later.

It didn't take long for the press to find him. When they finally reached the road, there were already reporters and photographers waiting for them, or rather for Harry. He was rather glad for Remus' extra attention that morning, ensuring that he looked properly shined and polished before sending him out. Left to his own devices, he was certain the photos that would be appearing in the next edition of the Daily Prophet would have featured himself looking as if he had rolled straight out of his sick bed on his way to the nearest open grave. Now he was tired, but tidy and very clearly not dead.

"Is it true your heart stopped after you were thrown down the stairs?!"

"What did you argue about with Lord Malfoy before the accident!"

"Do you have anything you'd like to say to Lord Malfoy's and Bartemius Crouch's family?!"

"Why were you not at the funeral?"

"Is it true you conspired to run away and elope with Hermione Granger?"

Harry grit his teeth and kept his expression set and unmovable. He had done this plenty of times before, but it was exceptionally difficult today. There were things he wanted to say and accusations he wanted to deny, but he knew better. Voldemort, Snape, Hermione, and Draco had all told him it was useless to try to explain anything to the press. They would twist whatever he said to suit themselves, and do him more harm than good. Eventually, he might release an official statement or allow for a one-to-one interview with someone a bit more trustworthy, but it wasn't going to happen today, and it wasn't going to be while standing in the middle of the road.

As per Snape's instructions, they apparated to Diagon Alley.

The press followed them, of course, but not into the Leaky Cauldron itself. They seemed distinctly frightened of Tom, the owner of the tavern who Harry strongly suspected of being a vampire, but no one else seemed to notice or else just didn't mind. He welcomed Snape by his first name and Harry with a polite nod and let them seat themselves. Their table was unfortunately next to one of the few windows with open shutters in the grubby-looking tavern. A dozen faces were instantly pressed against the glass and ogling them like fish in a bowl.

"It's not much to look at," Snape said, "But the owner is discreet and food isn't bad."

"How's the tea?"

"Better than anything you've made that I have tried."

Harry bit his lip to keep from smiling. Most of the tea Snape had tried of his making had been Animagus tea and not the sort of thing he would ever recommend drinking for its flavor. A woman with stringy hair and ruddy cheeks, likely the maid, came and took their order before disappearing. They talked off and on of errands and school year expectations to kill the time and create the pretense to their watchers that everything was fine. The maid brought him tea and Snape breakfast. Feeling sufficiently observed, Snape abruptly closed the shutters to eat.

"Any word on Hermione?" Harry asked softly.

"Nothing that I haven't told you before. No one has heard from her."

Which meant she was in France, but they weren't sure where. Harry wondered if that made Snape as nervous as it did him. The muggle world had its own sort of dangers, and Hermione hadn't been brought up to recognize what precisely those were. She was very clever, but she couldn't know what she didn't know, and trial by error had never been her preferred method of learning. However, there was nothing either of them could do about that now.

"The press?"

"Wizarding Weekly is presenting her as some sort of desperate woman driven to extremes, and The Daily Prophet has her as some sort of sociopathic seductress plotting to inherit the Malfoy family estates and manipulate you into marriage. Rita Skeeter is having a grand old time painting it both ways. According to her, Hermione is a poor, abused little girl who fell desperately in love with you, and after years of infatuation her feelings were finally returned, only for her to learn that she was not free to love anyone because of an arranged marriage with Bartemius Crouch, who in this fairytale is an innocently infatuated little sod blind to his betrothed's love for another man."

"I'm rather glad I decided not to eat anything else."

"You both conspired to run away together during the night of the Christmas Ball, but Lucius found out and tried to stop you. Lucius confronted you on the stairs and you fell. Meanwhile, Hermione, hiding behind a curtain or something, sees and cast the Imperius Curse on Crouch, who is helpless in his misbegotten love for her, and exacts revenge under her control and consequently dies. Then she fled into the night, never to be heard from again... unless she washes up on the shore of Thames or something equally Harlequin."

"That's the stupidest thing I've ever heard."

"Not entirely. She did guess the Imperius Curse correctly. The Necrotists found traces of it on Crouch's body."

"Really?"

"Really. And unfortunately, her lucky guess will give rather more credence to her theory than it deserves. They'll be announcement about the curse this afternoon."

Harry hated it. Skeeter was turning what had happened into some sort of cheap romance novel. Harry loved Hermione, but it had never been that kind of love. It had been steadier than that, deeper. Their friendship had made him a better person, grounded and more thoughtful, not inspired him to selfishness and lust. He liked to think

he had made her more confident in herself and more adventurous, not turned her into a lovesick damsel in need of saving. He hated the idea of others seeing it that way and mocking it. He didn't know how to stop it or even if he could.

"What do I do?"

"You could try dating a boy. That might dispel the rumors for a while. Just not Draco. That would make everything worse."

"Ha ha."

"I'm afraid it's too late for any real sort of damage control. Adults generally lack the time and imagination so they rely on the press to think for them. Your classmates, however, suffer from an overabundance of free time and imagination and will likely turn this whole sordid affair into something even more frightful, but entertaining. You know how they are."

He did, indeed, know how they were.

"So I just ignore it, try not to punch anyone in the face, and wait for it to blow over."

"Essentially."

"I don't suppose Draco would be willing let me hide at his house for the rest of the semester?"

"I refer to the previous statement against dating Draco. Shacking up with him isn't going to improve the situation."

Harry wasn't sure if he wanted to laugh or cry. He also wasn't sure if Snape was actually worried about Draco's reputation or if he wanted to distance both boys from each other.

"And what about the Dark Lord? Is he satisfied that everyone is suitably distracted?" He doesn't bother to hide the touch of bitterness in his voice. Snape doesn't bother to hide his either.

"As far as I can tell, he has forgotten about her. He is busy dealing with more pressing matters at the moment."

Harry's hands tightened around his teacup. He should have known. Hermione was precious to him, but she was only fodder to Voldemort. Why should he care one way or the other whether she was caught so long as she fulfilled the purpose he had assigned to her? This wasn't necessarily a bad thing, he knew. So long as Voldemort didn't hold an active dislike for Hermione, he might still be open to negotiating if an alternative to her persecution presented itself. That was good, but it didn't make the Dark Lord's disinterest any less demeaning.

He closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and sipped his tea. It was no use getting angry at Voldemort. There were others who required his more immediate attention.

Snape left Harry at Platform 9 $\frac{3}{4}$ with a crowd of eager reporters and curious onlookers, as well as instructions to visit Ira before the welcoming feast. He was fortunate not to have anything with him other than the package under his arm, because he didn't like the odds of him navigating through the throng with his trunk and Elsbeth's cage. At least, not until he found himself suddenly surrounded by several Culties.

"This way, Ambassador Potter," came a familiar voice, and the press of hand against his back, guiding him towards the train that had not yet started admitting passengers.

"Reggy!" Harry said, recognizing the man. He gave him a once over. "You've been promoted," he noted, staring at the extra bangle on his uniform.

"Thank you for noticing. It's Captain Stratus now, for all the good it does me," he said, grinning despite the words. "General Lestrage is busting my chops regardless."

Harry grimaced at the mention of the unpleasant woman.

"She sent you?"

"Ordered me, of course. I'm supposed to boss you around the train and stick your nose in the corner somewhere like a naughty child. Remind you who's boss. Which is funny, because whoever that is, it isn't me. You outrank me." Which didn't keep Stratus from escorting him onto the empty train and to an equally empty compartment. There were no noses in corners, however, and Reggy made himself comfortable sitting across from him.

"I out rank her too, outside of combat situations," Harry pointed out.

"A point I highly recommend bringing to her attention next time you see her, preferably while I'm there to witness."

Harry chuckled softly. Stratus smiled back, but his expression sobered.

"It is good to see you. I was worried about you."

"Thank you, but I'm okay. The same can't be said of others."

"It's an ugly affair all around," Stratus agreed with a sigh. "Harry, there's something I feel the need to tell you. I don't know that it makes any difference now, but I didn't want you to find out about it and think I was keeping secrets from you."

Harry wasn't sure he wanted to know. He had plenty on his plate already without adding something else, but the other wizard didn't seem particularly disturbed and hadn't bothered to close the compartment door so it couldn't have been much of a secret to begin with.

"Okay."

"At the time of his death, Bartemius Crouch wasn't Hermione's betrothed."

"Oh, that. Yes, I know."

"I was."

Harry stared at him.

"What?"

Stratus explained about Lucius' intention to betroth Hermione to him, and his own acceptance.

"You... why?"

Stratus smiled ruefully.

"A number of reasons. The fact that I found Miss Granger to be a most formidable young woman not least among them. She would have had to have been to have inspired both your loyalty and affection."

Harry frowned at him.

"You liked her because I liked her?"

"Essentially, but there were other factors involved. I won't lie, some of them were political. I got on with the late Lord Malfoy well enough, but I wasn't in any position to advance my career that way. My best chances of advancement, particularly while under his command, were through nepotism."

"That is bluntly honest."

But not particularly flattering towards the man's character. Stratus shook his head.

"I know what you're thinking. You're thinking I was taking advantage of your friend's unfortunate circumstances for the sake of my career. I assure you I had no such intentions, but it seemed the best way to protect the both of us from General Malfoy's anger. I was very careful to ensure Miss Granger had the time and the opportunity to remove herself from any commitment to me. I made it a part of the betrothal contract that she be allowed to complete her education, both at Hogwarts and University if she chose to do so. This would have placed her well into legal age where she may annul a marriage

contract. You could ask your friend, Draco Malfoy, if you like. I'm sure he's been made aware of the contract by now."

"And General Malfoy allowed that?"

"I don't think it ever occurred to him that she would emancipate herself. She would, after all, not only lose her dowry but the protection of the Malfoy family and her status."

"You know about the emancipation?"

"Just about everyone involved knows about the emancipation. That Skeeter woman swears up and down the documentation exists, but Lord Malfoy refuses to reveal its existence to the public. Unless there's a trial, I doubt it will ever see the light of day."

Harry rubbed his forehead.

"Thank you, Reggy, for being honest with me. I appreciate that."

"I am sorry, Harry. I never intended her any harm. I did actually hope that we would develop a genuine affection for each other."

"I believe you."

Mostly. He wanted to believe the other wizard. He seemed like a nice guy, and he had proven himself very brave in Hausteheim, but he could never be entirely sure. He worked for Lucius after all. He couldn't have been entirely without guile.

"Thank you. I also wanted you to know, I believe Miss Granger to be completely innocent of the crimes she's been accused of," he said earnestly. Harry looked up at him. "If there is anything I can do to help prove that, I am at your service."

"I... Thank you," he said, and this time he meant it. Stratus had been Lucius' personal assistant, and if anyone knew Lucius' enemies and their motivations it would be him. On top of that, he seemed to be following the investigation closely and might know things that neither

Harry nor his friends would have access to. "I don't suppose you have any suspects?"

"A number of them. Lucius was loved by his troops, but headquarters was another matter. He fostered a lot of rivalries and stepped on a lot of toes, and his erratic behavior over the last couple of months didn't improve matters. With rumors of a falling out with the Dark Lord, they must have smelt blood in the water."

"But to kill the man under his own roof?"

"A crime of opportunity, most likely. Reckless. Sloppy. They might still get away with it if Amelon keeps handling the case like some sort of board game and doesn't start taking it seriously."

"You don't think Amelon will find them?"

"I don't think he's trying to. Why should he bother? The Dark Lord doesn't care, and he gets to poke his nose into everybody's business in the meantime."

Harry sagged in his seat.

"Merlin, this is a mess."

"I'm sorry I couldn't bring you better news."

"It's alright. I'd know how I'd like things to stand, but knowing how they really stand is more useful."

"Just the same, I-"

"Sir!"

A Cultie interrupted, looking nervous at doing so. Stratus gave him an annoyed look.

"Yes?"

"They've started loading the other passengers, sir."

Stratus let out an exasperated huff.

"That, unfortunately, is my cue to leave."

"You're not escorting me to Hogwarts?"

"Unfortunately, my orders are to make a nuisance of myself and then shove off before there are any witnesses. General Lestrangle's position is still tenuous at best. She can't afford to have rumors of her abusing her new position so soon."

"Do you think she will last?"

"She might manage it, but she'll never be General Malfoy no matter how hard she tries."

"Thank the gods for small favors."

Stratus laughed. It was more than a little hypocritical, but Harry thought less of him for it. Lucius Malfoy, not only his boss but his potential in-law, hadn't been a likeable man, but the new captain seemed entirely cavalier about his death for all that he claimed to care for Hermione, a girl he must have only known in passing and word of mouth. It touched him as vaguely suspicious or at the very least callous. He was careful not to let his misgivings show. He didn't know Stratus very well and certainly not enough to judge his character, and his own sensibilities were a touch raw at the moment.

Fortunately, Stratus decided not to linger.

"There will be a Sentinel stationed in the car once I'm gone. He's here to guard the entire car, but he'll stay at this end to make sure no one you don't want here bothers you."

The gesture brought a flash of guilt for his own ungenerous thoughts, and Harry stood to shake his hand before he left.

"Thank you, Reggy."

Reggy smiled and shook it firmly.

"It's my pleasure, Harry. I'll be in touch."

"I look forward to it."

As promised, a Sentinel stood guard outside his door and though Harry kept his door open to keep an eye out for his friends, no one tried to stick their head in or call out to him. In fact, everyone who came into his car seemed to fall into a subdued silence, and some turned right around and went the other way. It made Harry uneasy to think what things would be like back at Hogwarts, where he would be forced to share space with hundreds of people who didn't seem to know quite what to do with him. He wondered if Draco had the same worries.

He found out soon enough. The train was nearly full when the subdued atmosphere of the car suddenly plummeted into a tense and awkward silence. Harry stuck his head out the compartment door to see what had happened and spotted Draco stalking down the aisle towards him. Harry swallowed thickly. The Slytherin boy looked terrible and yet somehow impeccable at the same time. His clothes and hair were stylish and neat, but their clean perfection only made the gauntness of Draco's expression and the shadows under his eyes stand out more vividly, like a walking corpse still in its funeral attire. Following behind him was Natalie, haughty as ever but clearly tired, and Ronald Weasley of all people looking his typical constipated self. Harry told the Sentinel to let them through, and once they filed into the compartment, Ron slammed the door shut and threw up several privacy spells.

"Draco-" he started, but the other boy held up his hand to silence him until he had settled himself across from him and closest to the window. Natalie sat beside her housemate, and Ron merely leaned against the door, too agitated to sit. An awkward silence fell, during which time Draco maintained an unreadable look Harry had only ever seen on Snape.

He waited for Draco to speak first. After a moment, the Slytherin turned from Harry to stare out the window and spoke.

"We will not discuss her. Not here. Not at Hogwarts. Not to our teachers. Not to our friends. Not to defend her honor. Not to reminisce. Not anywhere and not to anyone. Ever. Is that clear?"

For a moment, Harry was stunned. This only lasted a moment before his emotions ran the gamut of confusion, hurt, and anger until finally settling on fear. His eyes scanned the compartment anxiously. By the goddess, he had not chosen this compartment. Stratus had chosen it for him in advance. Stratus who worked for Lestrage and Voldemort and whom Harry had thought was trying just a touch too hard to be friends with him.

"Okay," he agreed, and Draco nodded without looking at him.

"Draco..."

Natalie looked directly at him and shook her head.

"Let him be for awhile, Harry. He needs a little time to unwind."

"... Okay. So... is there anything we can actually talk about?"

"Sure," Ron said, his expression darkening. "Fred and George were arrested."

Harry straightened.

"What? Why?"

"They were looking for that person we're never discussing and thought for some reason she'd stop into The Red Weasel for a pint."

"Are they still...?"

"They had to let them go. They've got nothing on them. Fined them through the roof though. They lost whatever holiday profits they pulled for the year. George's got himself a shiner he won't talk about."

"Shit. Does your mum know?"

"No, and neither does Ginny, and it's going to stay that way. You leave her alone from now on, got it? You're not dragging her into this mess."

"She won't understand-"

"She understands just fine. I made sure of it before I ever let her get on the bloody train."

Harry wondered how precisely that conversation had gone, and if it was really as effective as Ron seemed to think it was. Ginny came off as mild-mannered and sweet, but she was still a Gryffindor.

By the time Ron and Natalie had caught Harry up on the various rumors floating about, however, he was starting to think Ron was right to want to keep his sister as far away from him as possible.

The press had been on the hunt, trying to track down whatever dirt they could on Hermione and the Malfoys and Crouch, and at the head of the pack was Skeeter. Rivals and well-meaning friends alike had been providing enough speculation and gossip to fill entire books regarding the supposed scandal surrounding Lucius' death and Hermione's disappearance. Draco had suffered the worst of it; the matter of his sudden inheritance was the fodder for conspiracy theorists and his own struggle to manage an estate now under siege by greedy relatives and business rivals was itself topic of growing scandal. He couldn't step foot off the manor without being mobbed by reporters and anyone found in his company was soon caught in the cross fire. Not even Natalie had escaped unscathed. She had moved into Malfoy Manor for the remainder of the holiday, and the papers had printed several snide insinuations about her for just being a descent friend.

Harry knew his turn was coming. He had only read a couple of articles from the Daily Prophet, and those had been bad enough. He was no longer sheltered by the isolation of the Goddess Colony, and he doubted Voldemort was going to shield him this time around. Whatever shelter Hogwarts offered from the world would be negated

by their own peers, eager to believe anything to relieve the monotony of school life.

He was prepared for that. Or at least, he hoped he was. It would hardly be the first time he had been the subject of controversy. More than what was being said (and what would be said by everyone else), it was what was being left unsaid that worried Harry.

Draco had not said a word since declaring Hermione's name a proverbial taboo. Caution or exhaustion had rendered the pale boy quiet and distant, when all Harry wanted him to do was speak. Why was Draco returning to Hogwarts, when Snape had said he had too much to concern himself with at home? What was happening at Malfoy Manor that required so much of his attention and had left him so worn? Was it merely grief? Stress? What about Lady Malfoy? Wasn't she supposed to be handling things?

It was possible that Draco had no intention of remaining quiet about Hermione and was merely waiting until he could find somewhere more secure to discuss some sort of plan he had or information he had uncovered. Involving Harry or even Snape in some sort of plot was the only justification that Harry could think of, but he didn't dare ask. For now, Draco's intentions were his own.

Harry and Ron apparated to the boundary of Hogwart's wards from the Hogsmeade Station. Draco had been in no fit state to attempt it himself, and Natalie had remained behind with him. There were reporters waiting in Hogsmeade, and while it wasn't terribly difficult to avoid them it was easier to do it without them all huddled together, so they had gone on ahead. Climbing the hill towards the castle, they could look back and see the black carriages by the light of the hanging lanterns as they slowly drifting out from the little village and made their way up the road.

"Are your brothers alright?" Harry asked Ron now that they were alone. Ron was always reticent to discuss his family, and even more so in front of other Slytherins.

"Yeah. Hermione's fine too, last I saw her. She got away safe."

"So the twins did manage to help her?"

"No, they were arrested before she ever got to the Red Weasel. It was a good bit of luck, that." He went on to explain how Natalie had come to the tavern, and from there how Ron had involved himself in Hermione's rescue. They had definitely been lucky. By the end of the tale, Harry let out a sigh of relief, even though he had known how it would end.

There was still another matter he wanted to ask Ron about though.

"Did you kill Lucius?" he asked.

"Funny, I was about to ask you the same thing," Ron said, smiling grimly. "Besides, you know I couldn't have. I took that oath, remember? And I wasn't even there."

That was true. Ron had taken a Wizardign Oath not to attempt harm to Lucius again in exchange for Harry breaking the curse, for all the good it had done in the end. They didn't say anything more as they made their way to the castle in the dark.

They were the first students to arrive. The house elves, still scurrying to sort out the student luggage, were sent into a frenzy at their early arrival until Harry handed one of them his small bundle of possession to take care of and gave another a list of items he would be needing as quickly as possible. Ron gave him an odd look at his request, but said nothing further as they parted ways. The Slytherin went to the Great Hall and Harry headed for the Astronomy Tower. There was something he needed to do, and he wanted to do it before dinner ended and anyone might come looking for him.

He took his time on the way to the tower, taking the hidden passageways to avoid any students who might have lingered during the holiday or the odd professor or ghost, and by the time he reached the tower the things he had asked for had been placed in a neat little pile on the floor.

"What are you up to?" came a familiar voice, and Harry looked up to find Bobby sitting atop the giant astrolabe just recently replaced.

"I'm making offerings," Harry said and went to work.

It took the better part of an hour to create the floating lanterns. He was very careful not to use any sort of magic and had been left constructing them solely with fire-resistant vellum, twine, and various odds and ends. The two lanterns came out a bit lop-sided and awkward, but he thought they would work. In one basket he placed a candle, a lock of his hair, three silver sickles with runes carved in the back, and small bundle of dried lavender. In the other basket, he placed a candle, a handful of owl feathers, five knuts with runes carved in the back, and a handful of rice. He took the lanterns out onto the crows nest and lit the candles.

The paper lanterns inflated and slowly they rose, taking the baskets and his offerings into the sky. Harry watched them go, warm red orbs rising higher and higher until a wind caught them and pushed them out towards the west, over the Forbidden Forest. For a little while, Harry feared the candles would be snuffed out in the open air, but they did not did not even flicker.

Watching them float gracefully in the air, unfettered and unhurried, Harry felt a sort of peace. Silently, he sent out his words of gratitude to Raecellos and Madris.

Beside him, Bobby nodded his approval. It had been a lovely offering, if a bit unconventional.

A soft creak behind him threw Harry from his diligent prayers, and he spun around with his wand snapping into his hand. Bobby let out a startled caw and dove from his perch to take flight. Inside the tower, all was dark, but he could make out the still darker silhouette of a man frozen in place near the entrance door. It was difficult to see, but he thought he might have caught the man by surprise.

"Who are you? Identify yourself! Lumos!"

Light swelled and sprung from the tip of his wand, bursting into the room and illuminating everything in a blue-white glow that made his

eyes water slightly from its intensity. The man was now clearly visible, and Harry felt a jolt of surprise.

"Inquisitor Amelon?"

"Lord Potter," the detective greeted sheepishly. "Good evening."

Harry just stared at him for a moment. He had not seen Amelon since the day he had awoken at Malfoy Manor, and he hadn't honestly expected to see the man again either, although he couldn't say why he had thought he wouldn't. An uneasiness came over him. The Inquisitor was not among his allies. His purpose was to find Lucius' killer true, but unless or until he did it was also his responsibility to supervise the manhunt for Hermione.

Nevertheless, he put his wand away.

"What are you doing here?" he asked instead.

"I might ask you the same thing. You're a very difficult person to get a hold of. First you were holed up with the werewolves, then you disappeared from Hogsmeade Station, and again you were absent from the Great Hall and your dormitory. I am starting see where your reputation for not being where you are supposed to be has come about."

Amelon smiled at this, as if it was a joke, but Harry didn't return it. He doubted the man had come simply to enjoy some pleasant conversation. Silently, he waited for the older man to get to the point.

"Those balloons just now, they were most curious. I am quite surprised at how easily they floated right past the wards," Amelon said pleasantly, but Harry was already aware that he was being interrogated.

"They're just a muggle toy. My mother showed me how to make them when I was small. There's nothing inherently magical about them that the wards would fight against. No more than it would a gust of wind or falling rain."

"Really? Just a muggle toy? Well, isn't that something. Whatever people might say about muggles, they aren't without their own brand of cleverness. You know, I had an aunt by marriage who was a muggle. She passed away before the war, bless her soul, but I remember her always knowing the most wonderful little tricks. There's one in particular I have found particularly useful in my line of work. Why don't you come inside out of the cold, and I'll show it to you."

Reluctantly, Harry did so. He was tired, mentally and physically, and he wasn't prepared for whatever battle of wits Amelon intended. Inside, the tower wasn't much warmer than outside, although sheltered from the wind. His footsteps echoed loudly beneath his feet, and he became increasingly certain Amelon had been sneaking up behind him intentionally. Just another attempt to catch him off guard or were his intentions more sinister? He moved to stand just inside from the outside platform. It was possible, if necessary, that he could transfigure himself into hawk and fly away. Unlikely, but possible. Danger had always made his magic work better and faster.

Amelon did not seem either put off or pleased by his uneasiness or the tension building in the tower. When the Inquisitor reached inside his robe, Harry's hands twitched. The man did not reach for his wand, however, or any other odd magical device. Instead, he pulled out a book. A red book.

Harry took a sharp breath and froze.

Amelon cocked his head to the side when he saw him do it.

"Do you recognize this?"

Harry said nothing.

"No? Are you sure?" the man asked as if he had. "Well, I imagine you see a lot of books, being still in school and ever so studious. I imagine content makes more of an impression than the cover, and really what's inside this rather unremarkable looking bit of text could have possibly attracted your attention? Which brings us back to my aunt's little trick."

Amelon held out the book to him. Harry just stared at it and didn't move. The other wizard sighed.

"Lord Potter, please. I promise it won't hurt."

Stiffly, Harry moved forward to take the book. What else could he do? But before his fingers could brush the red cover, Amelon smirked and deliberately dropped it. The book landed on its spine and fell open with an echoing wabang in the empty tower, causing Harry to flinch. Harry turned to glare at Amelon for the pettiness of the gesture, but the man just smiled back.

"The trick, Lord Potter," he said and pointed down.

Harry looked down at the book that had fallen open to a very specific page. A page Harry knew very well, as he had spent nights studying it and could almost recite its entire contents word for word.

The Curse.

"Tell me," Amelon said, "do you recognize it now?"

Book VI

Chapter 27: Lies Within Truth, Truth Within Lies

Harry stared at Inquisitor Amelon for a moment, his expression blank. Then he tilted his head to the side and shrugged.

"It looks vaguely familiar."

Amelon chuckled, the cut of his beard making his grin appear to stretch across the width of his face.

"And the curse? Do you recognize that?"

"I know it," he admitted as if it didn't mean a thing.

There was still a chance it wouldn't. Voldemort already knew about the curse. Sort of. Harry had told the Dark Lord there was a curse on Malfoy and had never been asked to go into detail. No one had, except for Snape, who kept the secret for reasons of his own. "How do you?"

He asked it both out of genuine curiosity and as a distraction.

"A pair of mutual acquaintances mentioned it in passing," Amelon explained.

"Ah... you interrogated the Weasley twins then."

Ron had told him about them being arrested for potentially hiding Hermione, so it was only natural that Amelon would have asked them questions about Harry. How had it come around to the matter of the stolen book? Was it happenstance or had the book they had previously questioned in their last letter still left them suspicious, particularly after the death of a known and formidable foe not long after?

"They were very reticent to discuss anything about you at first. A couple of my boys wanted to have a go at them to see who could

make them talk first, but I've always preferred a good Truth Potion. More efficient. More humane."

"You've obviously never studied how a truth potion is made, sir," he snapped irritably. The truth was he didn't really care about the rather unpleasant methodology involved in brewing that particular potion, but he felt indignant on the Weasley twins' behalf. The thought of anyone dosing him with Veritaserum and interrogating him was too horrifying to contemplate for a variety of reasons. If he didn't handle this situation properly, however, he had a feeling that was exactly what Amelon would try to do to him.

"We removed the memory of the interrogation itself," Amelon continued as if he hadn't been interrupted. "Couldn't have them running off to warn you of the secrets they spilled. Not that it would have made a difference. I doubt they would have been able to find you or get to you even if they had. Not even I could do that, and I have to tell you that's a first for me."

Harry rolled his eyes and clapped.

"Bravo! Well done! You've caught your man at last. I had Fred and George steal the book from the library. I cast that curse on Lucius Malfoy. I'm sure a clever man like you can guess why."

Amelon did not seem the least bit put off by the mockery.

"To blackmail General Malfoy into calling off Miss Granger's betrothal, I assume."

"Exactly. You've figured it all out. The only problem is that it has absolutely nothing to do with your case. I broke that curse weeks before the Christmas ball, as soon as I got what I wanted. I even told the Dark Lord what I intended to do. And Snape. And Draco Malfoy found out about it later. Merlin, I can't even call it a secret given how many people know about it. General Malfoy knew about it, even if he couldn't prove it. It was all just a game. A dangerous, twisted game. Lord Voldemort would be so proud."

The Inquisitor shook his head and wagged his finger at Harry as if he were a naughty child.

"Mmm... no, I don't think so. I talked to the Dark Lord already about this. He knew you intended to blackmail Malfoy and break the spell, but he didn't say anything about knowing you cast the curse."

Harry turned away and started to pace the room in agitation.

"Do you think he would ever admit to such a thing? It would have been admitting he helped to nearly destroy Malfoy, his right hand. Not the sort of gossip you want floating around the office. It makes the employees nervous about pursuing a promotion."

"True, but whatever the level of the Dark Lord's involvement, I seriously doubt he would have allowed you to cast a curse that deteriorated Malfoy's mind as well as his body. His good judgment was rather essential, given his position."

"And you think I would? You think I forgot what it was precisely he did for a living? I despised the man, but I knew the importance of what he did. The spell... it was supposed to make him sick in the body, not the head. I... It was an unexpected side effect. Lord Voldemort didn't know either... at least, I don't think so. You can go back and ask him yourself, if you dare. I'll do it for you if you like."

He would too. Not because he cared about the answer, but because the numbing despair that had plagued him was receding with this newest battle. It was battle of wits, true, not his specialty, but it was a dangerous game just the same. One that might cost him dearly. Might cost others dear to him even more, and while it didn't make him feel happy precisely, he felt distinctly alive. Alive and angry and reckless and wanting a fight, a battle, a target to unleash those barbed emotions that had been tearing him up inside the longer he kept them to himself. Amelon was a start, but he couldn't be the final triumph. Even if somehow he managed to walk away having convinced the Inquisitor of his lies and that his current line of investigation was fruitless, he couldn't imagine it as any sort of victory. This little verbal spar was nothing more than the beating of war drums, something to

stir the blood in preparation for something more. Something dangerous. Something worse.

Amelon's eyes stared at him, wide and unblinking, but it was not fear Harry saw there. It was anticipation. It suddenly occurred to him this man wanted the same thing Harry did, only as an observer rather than a participant. He wondered what it was the man hoped he would see. Was it a sadistic need to watch curses inflicted and pain dealt out or was it something else? A need to see the veneer of societal tranquility and politeness fall away to reveal... what? Harry didn't know the name of it or the words to describe it. Perhaps it was simply 'insanity'.

He resented it being reduced to a sideshow for a gawker, whatever it was.

"I may take you up on that, Lord Potter, but I would like to ask you a few more questions before involving a third party."

Harry sighed in frustration and started to pace again.

"Ask then."

"Where is the original book?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"The book you used originally to cast the curse, of course. This book here is the second copy you used to break the curse."

Harry's steps slowed.

"I don't know what you mean."

"There's no point in being evasive now, young man. You've been proudly open about your roguish behavior up to this point."

The younger wizard said nothing. Amelon sighed.

"I know this was not the original book you used. You already admitted that you cast the curse as a means of manipulating General Malfoy into breaking off Miss Granger's betrothal, which you could not have been made aware of until this previous summer. At that time, London was still being occupied by the Italians. Despite your reputation, I still find it highly unlikely that you planned a trip to the library in the middle of a war zone, broke through the building's defenses, and navigated your way to the archives to browse through several hundred thousand volumes in search of a spell you had no prior knowledge of existing."

Harry thought to argue, but quickly realized how easily his own explanations would fail. He could not say he had gone himself. Amelon would question how he had done it, and Harry couldn't bluff something that required so much detail. If he said he sent someone else, he would have to say who and explain again why he hadn't sent the same person a second time instead of enlisting Fred and George. And how would he explain knowing about the book in the first place?

"It was destroyed," Harry said instead.

"I figured as much. It was an accident, I assume, rather than an attempt to destroy evidence. You did intend to end the curse, after all, so it would have been more practical to keep it than attempt to find another copy. It is very rare. Only three known copies, in fact."

Harry knew that. He had been incredibly lucky to find even one intact, and that one had been something of a nightmare to obtain. It made Amelon's next question rather obvious, but still uncomfortable.

"Which begs the question of where you found the first copy. I'm having some of my people track down the other two, but perhaps you might spare them the tedium by just telling me? Was it amongst one of the Dark Lord's private libraries, perhaps? A curious piece of literature brought to you by a classmate familiar with your studies in the Old Magics?"

Harry stopped pacing. Amelon waited. Harry waited. Amelon broke first.

"Ah, you have no benign explanation to give me, do you? It was not something you merely stumbled upon. Someone showed it to you. Someone with very bad intentions."

Harry shook his head and started to pace again.

"This is pointless. Whatever or whoever was involved with that book, it had nothing to do with Lucius' death."

"You don't think so? Or you don't want it to? After all, most of my suspects are friends and close associates of yours. Headmaster Snape, your guardian and mentor. A former Death Eater and with a complex relationship with the general, he certainly has the capability and the cunning. Your missing friend, Hermione Granger, a known bibliophile and scholar, she may have stumbled upon the book any number of places, and she certainly has plenty of reasons to see her foster father dead. Lord Draco Malfoy, also a friend, who stands to inherit his father's wealth and titles and simultaneously relieve himself of his father's overbearing supervision and censure regarding his... affections... for his muggleborn foster sister."

"None of them showed me the book in the first place. They never even knew of the spell's existence. If you keep following this it's going to lead you absolutely nowhere, and if you waste Lord Voldemort's time with it, he'll kill you."

"Hhmm..." Amelon looked speculative but not convinced. "That's very gentlemanly of you to warn me, under the circumstances. Expelliarmus."

Harry's arm jerked sharply as his wand flew from his sleeve and into the Inquisitor's hand. He sprung after it but had to pull back when Amelon's wand pointed itself squarely at his chest.

"What are you doing?!" he demanded.

"No worries, Lord Potter," the elder wizard said amicably. "I have every intention of returning it to you. I imagine at the end of things you'll walk away from all this one murderous friend fewer, but otherwise unscathed. It is only that I intend to lock you in this tower- I

know it's a terrible cliché- while I go to the Dark Lord to get my warrant."

"You're arresting me?"

"No, but I am going to interrogate you. Unfortunately, for someone of your rank and association with the Dark Lord, his permission is required before I can administer Veritaserum."

Harry recoiled as if Amelon had suddenly burst into oozing pustules.

"Yes, that tends to be most people's reactions. Hence, I am borrowing your wand. It wouldn't do for you to run away or attempt to warn one of your little conspirators or something equally inconvenient. Sentinel Burrows! Sentinel Underhill!"

The door to the tower swung open, and two wizards marched into the room. They were both tall and rangy, and if not for the last names Harry would have thought they were brothers. Though it was Amelon who had summoned them, their eyes remained fixed on the unarmed wizard in the tower instead, looking him over from head to toe without giving away what they had concluded.

"Sentinel Burrows and Sentinel Underhill will remain here to make sure you're comfortable," Amelon said. "I might be gone for a while. Try to keep out of trouble."

Harry made a rude gesture in response, which only made the Inquisitor smile as he ambled out of the room. Once the man was gone, he started to pace again, his fingers twitching at his side for want of a wand, a weapon, a broom, anything that would get him out of his current predicament. His guards did not move or speak, but their eyes followed his every movement and gesture. Harry found he hated them for no reason at all.

"I don't suppose either of you would mind if I pop off to the loo for a minute?"

In an eerie synchronization, both men crossed their arms. Neither said a word.

Harry let out a sigh and stalked out onto the balcony. He intentionally stood in view of the doorway, not wanting them to follow him outside. Leaning over the side of the balcony, he took a deep breath and tried to think. He was hours, maybe only minutes away from being interrogated under Veritaserum which would not only reveal Ron's involvement with the curse, but also Snape's complicity, the knowledge that Hermione was somewhere in France, and any number of other secrets that might slip out. He had no wand and was surrounded by guards. Competent guards at that.

He was just contemplating the chances of successfully achieving an animagus transformation now that his exhaustion seemed to have been replaced with anger and whether he could achieve it quickly enough to escape his guards before they stopped him, when he spotted Bobby fluttering up and down trying to catch his attention. Harry glanced back behind him quickly to see if the guards had noticed him, but their attention seemed firmly planted on him so that when he turned back around he made it a point to only look at the raven out of the corner of his eye.

He whispered a name, and no sooner was it said than Bobby disappeared, his inky black body fading into the shadows of the castle.

Predictably, the Headmaster Office's windows were locked, and even a magical practitioner of Bobby's skill would have been hard pressed to open them. So he went down the chimney. This was not in any way ideal, since in addition to having to put out the fire burning in the hearth, there was also an unfortunate amount of soot and ash that followed him as he burst into the little room.

His unexpected entrance was greeted with the expected results. Snape, previously working diligently at his desk, jumped to his feet in surprise and started tossing out curses and colorful invectives every which way, half blinded by the black cloud that had enveloped him. Bobby dipped and dived to avoid being blasted to pieces, until he found the opportunity to speak.

"Stop, stop, you madman! It's just me!" he cawed indignantly and swooped to avoid a spell that melted one of the frames on the wall into purplish goo. The portrait previously occupying the frame had luckily ducked into his neighbor's frame but had a few invectives of his own to share with Snape.

"What do you think you're doing bursting in here like that? Look what you did to my office!" Snape snarled.

"It was just a little soot! I'm not the one who started flinging around curses."

Snape raised his wand, this time with perfect aim, and Bobby knew he would be in trouble if he didn't talk fast.

"Amelon locked Harry in the tower!"

The headmaster paused, blinked, scowled, and lowered his wand.

"Explain."

Bobby hurriedly told him what he had overheard in the Astronomy tower and that Amelon would be returning shortly with a warrant. The more the raven said the less expression Snape seemed to have until the messenger might as well have been speaking to a wall. When Bobby was done, the headmaster moved to sit back in his chair and tap the ends of his fingertips together thoughtfully. Bobby hopped about anxiously on his desk, waiting for the man to do something. When Snape's thoughts finally seemed to reach their conclusion, he set his hands on the armrests and let out a shout that nearly startled him out of his feathers.

"HINKY!"

A moment later, a house elf 'popped' into existence in the middle of the room. She was a dainty little thing with exceptionally long hands and feet so that she rather resembled a tailless wallaby. Her large eyes scanned the room with the nervous quickness of a bird.

"Oh, Headmaster, sir, your office! It's in such a state! Oh! A bird's gotten in! Poor thing, poor thing! Hinky will set it out, sir, right away!"

"Never mind the bird, Hinky!" Snape said sharply, derailing her from her helpful intentions. "I need you to find Ronald Weasley and bring him here immediately. Then get my potions case from my quarters. The black and silver one in the linen closet. It's imperative it be done quickly."

"Yes, Headmaster, sir. Hinky will get it done, sir. Might I just-"

She made vague gesture towards the raven on his desk, which puffed indignantly. Snape's bland expression hardened.

"I have given you your task, Hinky. Don't make me repeat myself."

"Yes, sir! I mean no, sir! Hinky goes, sir!"

She disappeared as quickly as she appeared. Bobby asked Snape what he had planned and how he was going to help Harry, but the headmaster ignored him in favor of thinking silently to himself. Minutes seemed to crawl by as Bobby waited for Snape to speak, for Ronald Weasley to appear, for Amelon and his warrant, for anything to happen. He thought about Snape's possible plan, as he clearly had one, if it would save Harry or doom him, and what sort of scenario might unfold for either to occur. He wondered if Harry was waiting as anxiously as he was or if he had done something rash. He hadn't missed the speculative look the young wizard had given the distance between the tower balcony and the ground.

Finally, finally, there was a knock on the door and Snape bid entrance. Ronald Weasley shuffled in with a sulky, cautious look that only worsened when he took in the state of the headmaster's office.

"I had absolutely nothing to do with it," he said defensively.

"If you are referring to the soot, then I assure you there is no need to convince me of your innocence, but as for the reason I summoned you, I am afraid you are unquestionably complicit. Unfortunately for

you, the latter is a graver matter than the former. Sit down, Mr. Weasley."

Ron did so and found himself staring face-to-face with the raven. He inched his chair away from it.

"Potter's familiar," Snape explained.

"I thought he had the snake."

"And an owl. And a raven as well now. But I did not call you here to discuss Potter's growing menagerie. Inquisitor Amelon has become aware of the curse you cast on Lucius Malfoy."

Ron went rigid in his chair. His eyes darted around the room, as if expecting the man to suddenly appear from a shadowy corner.

"He is not yet aware it is you who cast it, but he has deduced that Mr. Potter was in some way involved. He has gone to retrieve a warrant to interrogate him under Veritaserum. I suspect he will have his warrant and that the Dark Lord will come to witness the interrogation himself. Do I need to tell you how badly this could turn out for you?"

Ron said nothing, but the suddenly vivid contrast of his freckles against white skin made an answer redundant.

"What are you going to do?" the boy asked instead.

Snape steepled his fingers and looked at him steadily for a moment.

"I am going to save you, Mr. Weasley, and then you are going to owe me a life debt. Something I have always found useful to have."

Ron stared back at him for a long time, then seemed to realize how stupid that was to do with a Legilimens and looked down. He nodded. What other choice did he have?

A sudden pop made everyone flinch, but it was only Hinky with Snape's potion case. Once she had deposited it on Snape's desk as

instructed, she looked once more to the raven still perched there. He cawed at her in annoyance.

"You may return in ten minutes to clean the room, Hinky," the Headmaster said.

"And, er... the bird, sir?"

"Ten minutes, Hinky, and if it is still here you may fry it up and eat it for all I care."

"Oh, sir, yes! I mean, not that I would eat it, sir. I mean... ten minutes!"

She disappeared yet again.

Snape wasted no time and opened the case. Neither Ron nor Bobby was in any position to see what was inside, but they could hear the distinct sound of glass clinking together. Finally, the elder wizard pulled out a vial of transparent blue liquid and another, smaller vial that appeared to be empty. He poured some of the blue liquid into the smaller vial, then capped it.

"Come here," he said, holding out an empty hand to the raven. Reluctantly, Bobby climbed onto it, and Snape took him to the nearest window. Softly, so that Ron wouldn't hear, he whispered his instructions to the raven and handed it a vial, which it clutched tightly to its own body so that it was left to stand on only one leg. Snape opened the window, letting in a gust of cold winter air and letting out his avian messenger.

He shut the window again and turned to Ron.

"This is what we're going to do."

Viktor found himself at the newsstand once again, where he often seemed to find himself these days, looking for some glimmer of a feeling he had once held for humanity. Most nights he felt little more than disappointment. Goethe had told him this apathy was to be expected. Eventually, he would cease to identify himself with humans

at all, muggle or wizard, and then life... un-life would finally feel like it was moving forward again.

The idea made him uneasy. It made him feel disloyal, but to what or whom he couldn't say.

Tonight, however, he was not feeling his usual apathy. In fact, he thought he might have just fallen in love.

Again.

"Hhhmm, she is a pretty little thing, isn't she?" Goethe chuckled in his ear, his chin coming to rest on his shoulder. "With a taste for blood it would seem. We should invite her around for a cup of tea."

Viktor shoved him off and approached the stand. The crowd of customers parted for him like a school of fish from a shark. The owner of the stand merely looked at him curiously, having long become used to his brooding visitor.

"How old is this paper?" he asked in French roughened by his native accent.

"It is six days since it was published in England, Monsieur. That is the soonest we can get them through customs," the owner said.

"Do you have any others?"

"Other English papers?"

"Yes."

"I have the Daily Prophet as well, but it always arrives eight days after print. Customs always hacks it to pieces before they send it through."

Krum gave a disappointed sigh, but the owner spoke again.

"You are following the investigation of that double murder in England? I have French articles too!"

There were indeed several newspapers carrying articles similar to the British paper, but none of them carried a photograph of the girl that had caught his attention in the first place. Nevertheless, he bought them along with the Wizards Weekly.

Goethe needled and teased him for the rest of the night, but Viktor tolerated it. He deserved to be taunted after all. It was foolish to still love her. Foolish and a little bit wonderful too to realize he was still capable of it.

It was after eight by the time Amelon reached the military headquarters in Bristol, but the offices were still full and chaotic. No one had kept banking hours since Malfoy and Crouch's deaths had led to a major reorganization across several departments and a major counter offensive strike by the Germans was expected at any moment. Amelon kept that in mind as he was shuffled from department to department, office to office, bureaucratic peon to officious idiot over the course of an hour and a half in pursuit of his warrant. It could have been worse, he reminded himself. The Dark Lord might have been gone for the night, and he would have had to wait until morning.

Eventually, he was brought to the Dark Lord's office and only had to wait another thirty minutes in the reception area before he was shown inside. Voldemort greeted him with a blood-red glare that gave him pause, but he decided it was fortuitous to have his attention so quickly. Normally, he had to work much harder.

"Lord Potter just confessed to casting dark magic against General Malfoy and blackmail."

Voldemort smirked.

"Oh, really? A confession makes the need for a Truth Potion seem rather redundant," the Dark Lord said, tapping the request for the warrant with his finger. Amelon was momentarily taken back then delighted.

"He said you knew he had cast the curse."

"He lied. He denied ever knowing the curse's origin, and I believed him. He's typically more direct about his intentions. Gryffindor, you know. Is that the curse?"

His red eyes flickered to the red book tucked beneath the Inquisitor's arm. Amelon looked for recognition but saw only curiosity. He handed it to the Dark Lord to see if he would open it to the correct page, but he checked the index first and thumbed through it until he found a likely selection.

"This one, yes?" he said, not bothering to look up. "Oh, this is lovely. Very artful, even for the Old Magics."

"Lord Potter lied about the book as well. There was another copy, but it was destroyed. I believe someone else cast the spell or else tricked him into casting it for them."

"I doubt Harry could have been tricked into casting this. It is in every way a curse requiring will. He would have had to will Lucius dead. To be honest I don't think he had it in him to cast this spell at all. To break it certainly, just as he said he did, but to cast it? He didn't like Lucius, but he didn't know him well enough to hate him."

"Not even for Miss Granger's sake?"

"If Lucius had actually harmed her rather than simply threatened her, then maybe. But he didn't... An accomplice is highly likely. Hhhmm... have you read this?"

"I have. I am afraid it didn't make much sense to me."

"It's just very curious. Lucius was diagnosed with a sort of wasting sickness caused by excessive exposure to dark magic. It is what caused his deterioration both physically and mentally months previously, but this spell doesn't cause these things. Not directly, in any event."

"Then how does it work?"

"I am not entirely sure. Let's go ask Harry."

Although it had taken nearly two hours to reach the Dark Lord, it had barely taken two minutes for the man to secure his office, inform his secretary to rearrange his schedule, and secure a private floo into Hogsmeade. When Amelon pointed out that they hadn't retrieved any Veritaserum, the Dark Lord pointed out that the school always had a supply on hand.

"For educational purposes," he clarified. "Although I suppose the headmasters have found use for it from time to time. I am not certain it will be necessary to use it."

Amelon actually hesitated for a moment. Voldemort rolled his eyes.

"I'm not going to torture the boy."

"I would never imply such a thing, my Lord."

"Why not? I've done it plenty of times before."

The Inquisitor had no response to that and Voldemort felt no need to tease him. In truth, he was hoping that neither Veritaserum nor torture would be necessary. He was well aware his relationship with Harry had suffered upon Malfoy and Crouch's death. While he maintained the certainty that sacrificing Miss Granger to the press was still the right decision, he also understood Harry's anger regarding the matter.

Harry's anger was a formidable thing. Not something he was afraid of, per se, but it could make things difficult in the future, especially since he still had plans for Harry that required cooperation. Then there was of course the number of his secrets his protégé currently possessed. Civic duty might stay his tongue for a while, but Voldemort knew if he didn't curb some of his resentment there was no telling what Harry would say eventually and to whom.

Amelon may have just provided the opportunity he needed to push Harry back to his side. If the boy's accomplice turned out to be someone close to the boy, then Voldemort thought he would be sufficiently motivated to negotiate their pardon. There would be a punishment, for both Harry and his accomplice, there was no way

either could walk away from this unscathed, but it needn't be devastating. The accomplice would know he owed Voldemort his life and his freedom. Harry would be understandably conflicted between gratitude, resentment, and admiration... which was pretty much how things had been before. If he were lucky, Harry might come to understand Granger's sacrifice wasn't meant as a punishment against Harry and take a moment to look at the bigger picture.

He didn't hold out much hope for that, but there would always be other opportunities.

If all of this eventually revealed Lucius and Bartemius' killer, then so much the better. If Harry's accomplice turned out to be the killer, then Harry would have some other party to feel betrayed by and to blame the Granger girl's disgrace on. If it wasn't the accomplice, then perhaps there was still the possibility of tracking down the true killer. If it led to the girl's pardon, then so be it. If it didn't, the Dark Lord would still have his own revenge to look forward to.

Hagrid's cabin was sweltering even on the coldest winter nights, courtesy of an oversized furnace that doubled as a dragon egg incubator. For once Charlie was thankful for this as he tramped through the door, frozen stiff from traveling between his mother and aunt's house to the remote wilds of the dragon reserve. Hot air enveloped him like a blanket as he entered, and he stripped off his coat and gloves quickly to enjoy it.

"Charlie," Hagrid boomed in greeting. "Welcome back! 'Ow was the visit with the family?"

"Mum only cried once and no one was seriously injured, so I count it a success," he said with a laugh. "Something smells good."

"I'm making lamb stew," McGunny said, bent over the stove in concentration. Their amnesic guest had been with them half a year now, and if Charlie had any misgivings about taking him in they had disappeared completely by now. McGunny had greatly improved under Hagrid's gentle, patient, and somewhat bumbling care. His memory was still spotty, but he now had some sense of who he had been, and as long as he wasn't distracted he could complete tasks

given to him, although he often forgot he had done them later in the day. He had even taken to cooking regularly, without prompting, from whatever Hagrid had available.

Charlie thought it was unfortunate that McGunny couldn't have spent the holidays with his family. By now they must have thought him dead, and if learning he was alive wouldn't have been a blessing enough then learning he was so much improved from the condition he had been found in certainly would have. However, no one was certain revealing his survival and location was a good idea, so they hadn't gone looking for his kin. Charlie consoled himself by remembering that Hagrid was McGunny's closest friend and family these days, and Hagrid didn't deserve to spend his holidays alone.

"Sounds wonderful. So how was your holiday?" Charlie asked them both.

"Much like any oth'r day, which lately 'ave all been pretty good," Hagrid answered. He grinned and tilted his head towards McGunny. "Horace got some good news though."

"Oh? What sort of good news?" he asked.

McGunny continued to stare intently at the stew pot, making sure it wasn't about ready to burn on the old wood stove. They waited a minute to see if he would stop to pick up the conversation, but he refused to be distracted. They shared a look and Hagrid just smiled.

"Gotta lett'r back from a publishing company down in Oxford. They're interested in 'Orace's book."

"That's wonderful!"

And it was. The Dragon Sanctuary was small and funded by government tax dollars, tax dollars that had become harder and harder to justify with the war with Germany draining so much of their resources for their military and national security. There was a lot of competition nowadays with other organizations for the funds that remained, and Charlie could certainly benefit from having two 'scholars' on staff contributing to the scientific and educational

communities with published work. Charlie had a few papers of his own published from time to time, but no books and certainly nothing as comprehensive as McGunny had been working on.

"I'm so proud of you both. You've been working so hard at the sanctuary and then to write the book on top of it. It's really a wonder."

Hagrid tried to hide his proud grin, but it was plain enough to see even beneath his mad beard.

"Thanks, Charlie. Tha' means the world com'n from ya. I was wonder'n if you'd be will'n to do us a fav'r."

"Certainly, what is it?"

"Well, the publishers want to meet. Negotiate, I think. I ain't got the 'ead for that sort of thing, and 'Orace... well, I wouldn'a send 'im out alone. Do you suppose you could go with 'im?"

While it was true Hagrid had no experience with negotiating, Charlie thought, sadly, that wasn't the real reason he didn't want to go. Despite the half-giant's tendency towards obliviousness of social decorum, he was very aware that he didn't fit in most circles and certainly not with a bunch of professional eggheads. He thought if he went to meet the publishers they would change their minds about printing anything contributed by him, and the sad truth of the matter was that he was probably right.

"Sure, I can do that for you," he said pleasantly, not even hinting that he knew the real reason. Hagrid had his pride, after all, and Charlie wasn't going to prick it.

"Great! I'll let ya write'm back with a date an' time. 'Ow do ya like tha' 'Orace?"

McGunny, who hadn't said a word through any of this, suddenly looked up in confusion.

"About what?"

"Meet'n the publishers? In Oxford?"

"Oh... Do you still need to get some Christmas shopping done?"

Hagrid sighed affectionately and shook his head, not bothering to mention Christmas had passed over a week ago.

"E's excited to go, as ya can see."

"Did I already add lamb?"

"Yes, Horace, you added the lamb," Charlie confirmed, although he had no way of knowing. It didn't matter, because McGunny was already concentrating on dinner again and didn't appear to have heard him anyway. Or rather, it appeared that McGunny was concentrating on dinner. While it was true he was not what one might call a multi-tasker, and even routine tasks up a great deal of his concentration, he had improved enough over the last couple of months that he was now able to hold two thoughts in his head rather than one, and the one he was most preoccupied with had nothing to do with the stew and only a very little to do with the Oxford publishers. His primary thought was that there was probably an owlery in Oxford and that he should write a letter.

He wasn't precisely sure who that letter should be addressed to, but he thought it was probably Harry Potter. What it should say, he hadn't even that slight notion. Merry Christmas, maybe? That sounded daft even to him. Wasn't Potter a pagan? Or was that the Dark Lord? At least he knew he wasn't supposed to send a letter to the Dark Lord.

For the time being, his questions weren't urgent. Most things at the sanctuary very rarely were. Eventually, he would figure it out. He had been figuring out so many things these days. An overwhelming number of things, even if at the end of the day he still felt like he knew very little. Hagrid didn't mind though, and Charlie didn't either (at least not now that he could remember the man's name was Charlie, although he still had no idea what the man actually did at the sanctuary except visit Hagrid occasionally), so that was fine too.

Tomorrow he would concentrate on his letter. Tonight, he would concentrate on stew.

Hogwarts was silent as Voldemort and Amelon entered. Curfew was about to start, and after a long day of travel and a heavy meal at dinner, no one was lingering in the halls to challenge it. The doors to the Great Hall were closed, the lanterns in the hall burned low, and their footsteps echoed loudly in the corridors. Sentinels posted at various points around the castle stood at attention as they passed, saluted, and offered a muted 'My Lord'. That had not been nearly so welcoming when Amelon had visited alone, and a part of the Inquisitor was reassured by that. It wouldn't do for the guardians of the nation's most talented and valuable children to be lax in their duties. It was why he wasn't surprised that within five minutes of their arrival, the headmaster made an appearance.

He appeared at the end of a corridor, slipping through a secret passageway, coming into being like a shadow cast by the sudden movement of a candle. He was dressed as austere and elegant as usual, no hint that he had been in the process of retiring for the evening when the news arrived. He spared Amelon an irritated glare before settling his attention on Voldemort.

"My Lord."

"Severus," Voldemort greeted, as unsurprised to see the headmaster as the headmaster appeared to be to see them. "Do you know why I am here?"

"I imagine it has something to do with why Mr. Potter is currently under guard in the Astronomy Tower."

Amelon felt slightly disappointed. He had known it was unlikely that Snape wouldn't have discovered Harry's confinement before they returned, but he had hoped to catch the man off guard. Still, they had a few more opportunities left to surprise the man.

"Yes, he has just confessed to cursing Lucius," the Inquisitor said.

"Oh... that."

For a moment, the hall was so silent Amelon fancied someone cast a Silencing Charm. Voldemort stared at Snape. Snape stared back. The Dark Lord refused to ask something so obvious as 'you knew?', but for a moment not even he was certain what he should say. Finally, however, he spoke.

"You will explain yourself."

"Of course, My Lord. Perhaps it would be best to take this conversation to the privacy of my office?"

That was precisely what they did. Amelon would have preferred to retrieve Lord Potter first, but no one was asking his opinion. From this point on, he knew he was little more than an observer to what happened next. When they reached the office, Voldemort moved to the headmaster's chair and took a seat, while the other two wizards were left to take the chairs across the desk. The significance was lost on no one.

"When did you discover that Harry had cast a curse on General Malfoy?" Voldemort asked without preamble. The headmaster settled himself in the chair and steepled his fingers so that the tips of his fingers tapped lightly against his mouth as he considered the question.

"I was aware of it from the beginning. It was my idea."

Amelon marveled.

"This seems to be a night of quick confessions. For someone who seems so unaffected by the truth, you were not so bold to admit it prior to this," the Inquisitor said.

Snape gave him a contemptuous glance out of the corner of his eye before turning back to the Dark Lord, who was waiting for an elaboration.

"It was never my intention to have my involvement in the curse known, for the sake of my relationship with the Malfoy family. After his death, I saw no reason to bring it up."

"Why, Severus? Tell me why," Voldemort demanded.

"For the same reason as Mr. Potter. I wished to protect Miss Granger. Nothing more. Nothing less."

Amelon leaned towards him, eying his expressions intently.

"But why curse General Malfoy? Weren't you two friends? He was the best man at your wedding. You are the godfather to his children."

"If you have to ask," Snape said without looking away from Voldemort, "then you haven't been as thorough in your investigations as you seem to believe. We were always as much enemies as we were friends. Ever since we went to Hogwarts together, Lucius has worked to make me dependent upon him. He sabotaged relationships, experiments, employment opportunities, civil ventures, anything and everything that would have allowed me to regain my rights and titles as the last living descendent of the Prince family and establish a professional reputation separate from him."

"Really, Severus, are you still bitter about all of that?" Voldemort asked with a touch of mocking. "He protected you, as well. You were never well liked amongst the other Death Eaters, Bella in particular, and you never would have come this far without his support. I rather thought he had stopped being so overbearing in the last two or three years."

Snape nodded.

"I acknowledge this. I no more intended him true harm than he ever intended it for me. The curse was just a means to an end."

Amelon didn't believe him, or at least he didn't believe that was the whole story. His answers felt strangely rehearsed, his demeanor too relaxed to be natural.

"And how did you discover the curse? Or even the book for that matter?"

"In point of fact, I did not discover it myself. Nor did Mr. Potter. Neither of us could afford to have it known we were in possession of such a book when Lucius' symptoms first started to appear. I sent Mr. Ronald Weasley, a student here, to search for a book of Old Magic curses. He has some familiarity with the Old Magics through his association with Mr. Potter, so he knew what to look for."

"And why, precisely, would Mr. Weasley have done this errand for you? And how could you be certain he would keep his task a secret?" Amelon asked.

Snape smiled, but there was nothing pleasant about it.

"Mr. Weasley could not afford to do anything else. He is currently the leader of a smuggling ring within the school, importing and exporting materials that haven't gone through the proper security checks. I could have expelled him, but I decided to make use of him instead."

"And why Old Magics? Why not something more... conventional?"

"Old Magics are harder to recognize, harder still to trace, and impossible to counteract unless one knows what they're doing. I wanted Lucius to suspect both Harry and the Dark Lord, but unable to prove anything either way, and likewise he would need to be dependent on Harry for a cure. He had to be willing to negotiate."

Amelon asked him where the book had come from and Snape gave him an address in Coventry. He would double check to make sure that Snape's story checked out and the time lines matched, but he suspected that at least that part of the man's story was true. And yet, still, he couldn't help but think that Snape was hiding something. Voldemort seemed to sense it as well.

"Why didn't you tell me this part of your plan?" Voldemort asked, a touch of warning in his voice. "I would have been particularly interested in the part where the general of my armies became suspicious that I meant to kill him."

"Forgive me, my Lord, if either I or Mr. Potter has overstepped our bounds, but you had given us the impression that you suspected this already and simply weren't interested in having it confirmed."

"I had also made it clear that neither Lucius nor Harry could seriously harm the other in their rivalry. This curse was designed to kill, Severus. Not hurt, not itch, not bother, not embarrass. Kill. Not to mention that rather unpleasant side-effect of driving him insane. Don't tell me you misunderstood?"

"My Lord, we did not misunderstand, nor did we intend to overstep our boundaries. According to the book, the curse was intended to wear down the cursed through a series of circumstances over a long period of time, which gave us the breathing room necessary to complete the negotiations and negate the curse before permanent harm was done. There was no mention of insanity. When we became aware of the... miscalculation, I urged Lucius to take up herbal remedies, burning sage to be precise, which seemed particularly effective. Eventually, our plans played out. Lucius called off Hermione's betrothal. Harry called off the curse. All of this being rather a moot point, given what happened shortly thereafter."

"So you do not believe the two events are related?" Amelon asked.

"Is that the polite way of asking whether I killed Lucius and Bartemius? I did not kill them."

"You said before that the curse killed by setting off a series of events that would weaken and destroy the victim. Is it possible that Harry had not removed the curse like he said he did, and the curse did in fact eventually kill General Malfoy?"

For the first time, Snape looked caught off guard and actually turned away from the Dark Lord to stare at the Inquisitor.

"I... I do not believe that was the case. Lucius was making a strong recovery rather than deteriorating like he had been previously. And that wouldn't explain Crouch's death."

"But you don't truly understand the curse, do you? You are not a practitioner of the Old Magics yourself. The curse surprised you more than once. Isn't it possible that it may have gone dormant briefly to throw off suspicion or simply been delayed rather than canceled completely?"

Snape said nothing, his expression hardening into a blank mask.

"I believe the curse was canceled completely prior to Lucius Malfoy's death. I do not believe the curse caused his death in any way, except indirectly by the series of events that followed it."

"Are you willing to verify all of this under Veritaserum?"

"If necessary," he said without inflection.

"And Mr. Potter?"

"Mr. Potter is perfectly capable of answering for himself."

Amelon turned to Voldemort, who was staring at Snape with an expression that could have been surprise and could have been disgust, but was most likely something else completely. Snape stared back stoically. It seemed dangerously defiant to the Inquisitor, but it was difficult to say for sure. The man had surprised him several times already, and Death Eaters had always seemed to have a dangerous and somewhat insane methodology for dealing with confrontation. He supposed they had to given the way Lord Voldemort had run the War.

"Severus," Voldemort said finally, "you have betrayed me."

"My Lord, I-"

"Crucio!"

Amelon jumped up and out of his chair, stumbling back as the headmaster stiffened in his chair before falling to the floor and writhing in unconstrained agony. This was not the first time Amelon had seen the Pain Cursed used, it was considered a necessary skill in his profession in fact, but that made it no less terrible to witness.

Most people lacked the ability to focus enough to resist the curse once it had been cast, but Amelon could tell Snape was resisting it now. He was screaming, but it was a half-strangled sound like he was trying to swallow the noise so no one else could hear it. He was writhing on the floor, but his hands had found the legs of a chair and were gripping them tightly so that he didn't flop around gracelessly.

The curse lasted for over a minute. Amelon didn't blink until it was over. He didn't dare.

When it finally stopped, Snape sagged on the ground and gasped for breath, his entire body trembling in the aftereffects of the curse. Voldemort walked from around the desk to stand over his disobedient servant.

"You've deceived me, Severus. You deceived me repeatedly. I suspect even now you are deceiving me."

He knelt down, crouching over Snape, who managed to squint open one eye to look up at him. The headmaster still hadn't caught his breath enough to speak.

"Amelon is right, you have no real concept of this spell, and you are not so much of a fool that you would use magic that you did not fully understand. Who cast the curse, Severus? It wasn't Harry. I doubt it was you. Why lie? Who are you protecting? Crucio."

Snape let out another strangled cry, but it only lasted a few seconds before it stopped. Nevertheless, he started to shake even more violently than before.

"Have you forgotten, Severus?" the Dark Lord continued. He seized Snape's arm and thrust up the sleeve, revealing the Dark Mark beneath. "Your first loyalty is always to me. Not to Harry, not to your mudblood goddaughter, not anyone else but me. And yet, here you are. Lying to my face. As if I wouldn't know. As if I didn't know you enough to tell."

He dropped Snape's arm and let out a long-suffering sigh.

"I suppose I only have myself to blame. I forgot how willful you could be. I suppose I thought you had grown out of it. We'll just have to fall back on the old ways, won't we? Back to your Death Eater days."

Snape made a muffled sound and tried to push himself up, but Voldemort stood and kicked him over again before he could manage.

"It used to be, when one of you lied to me, I took something from you as compensation. An eye. A tongue. Something you didn't really need but would certainly miss. I think I'll take your fingers, Severus. One for every lie. But no, you need your fingers to write. It's an important part of your job. Ah, I know. I'll take your wife's fingers, but don't worry. I'll let her keep the ring finger."

Snape began struggling in earnest, shoving himself upright even as he winced from the residual pain of the forced movement. Voldemort let him this time.

"NO! My Lord, please-"

"The time for platitudes has passed, Severus. I have invested great faith in you. Entrusted you with those things I value most in this world, and this is how you repay me?"

"Please, my Lord, Ira is innocent. She has no idea-"

"Crucio!"

Snape fell to the floor yet again, smashing his head against the side of the desk as he went, so that when he landed, blood splattered across the floor and smeared along his face. This time the curse lasted for nearly two minutes, and when the Dark Lord finally stopped, Snape rolled over and vomited on floor before collapsing back.

"You've gone soft, Severus," Voldemort said coldly. "There was a time nothing could have moved you, nothing could-"

DOOOOIIIIINNGGG...

The Dark Lord looked up and around, looking for the source of the noise that had startled him.

DOOOOIIIIINNGGG...

Amelon tensed, recognizing the sound immediately.

DOOOOIIIIINNGGG...

Snape took a gasping breath, "That's... that's the alarm. The school... it's under attack."

Harry waited as patiently as he was able out on the tower balcony, his legs dangling between the slates. It was strangely reminiscent of the night Hermione had come up to apologize to him, and he wasn't entirely sure it was his mind playing tricks on him when his watch grew warm in the hand she had reached for. Thinking of her helped to keep him calm and focused, preventing a panic attack from sneaking up on him or from revealing his agitation to the guards watching him. Bobby helped too by huddling in his lap, keeping him company while he kept himself warm. The raven had appeared hours ago, whispering Snape's plan and delivering the vial of anti-Veritaserum. Now there was nothing left to do but wait and hope his guardian's plan worked.

It was straightforward enough. Snape would take responsibility for giving Harry the original book and the idea to blackmail Lucius after Harry came to the man looking for advice on how to help Hermione. Snape would then explain it was never his intention to harm Lucius permanently, nor to drive him crazy, and they had been quick to help relieve the symptoms once they became dangerous. There had been some unexpected hiccups in the plan, but ultimately it had worked. It had nothing to do with Lucius and Bartemius dying, and the events were entirely unrelated. Which was true. They were to swear to it all under the Veritaserum Amelon intended to bring along to their interrogation... Neither the Inquisitor nor Voldemort would be aware that Snape, Harry, and even Ron had dosed themselves with anti-Veritaserum in advance, rendering the potion useless. Voldemort would likely be irritated but satisfied, and Amelon would have to move his investigation elsewhere.

All nice and tidy.

Harry had a bad feeling about it. Snape was an accomplished liar, but it would be easy enough to poke holes in his story if he were interrogated thoroughly, particularly if Harry were questioned afterward. There had been no way to match up their stories in advance, and Harry wasn't sure he could manage to lie convincingly if any inconsistencies were spotted. Then there was Ron. That he was part of the story was a necessity, since it was doubtless someone of Amelon's tenacity would double check everything they said and finding the purchase records of the original book would be the obvious first step. There was no telling how well Ron could lie or if he would buckle under the pressure of both the Dark Lord and an Inquisitor questioning him. There was no guarantee that Snape wouldn't throw the boy to the wolves to save his own skin if it became necessary.

As time went on, Harry started to wonder if that wasn't Snape's intention to begin with. The man had very little sympathy for Weasley or much fondness for his numerous kin, and even if he had he was hardly the self-sacrificing sort. It was possible that the plan Snape had passed on to Bobby was a ruse to keep Harry from doing something reckless until he had settled things to his own satisfaction.

And yet...

He had spared Ron in the first place. Why had he done that? He had said turning in Ron wouldn't have benefited anyone, and that keeping the secret put the boy firmly in their debt. This was probably at least partly true, but not entirely true. He could very easily have turned Ron over and had Lucius in his debt, a far more valuable prize to be sure. A prize he could use to make Lucius call off Hermione's betrothal.

He had to believe there was something more going on. Whether it was something selfish or selfless he couldn't begin to guess, but he would have to keep a little faith and hoped whatever it was that stayed his hand in the first place had carried over to tonight. It wasn't like he had any better plan himself.

A sharp wind drew him from his thoughts, and he tightened his robes around himself. He didn't normally mind the cold, but tonight it was particularly harsh. Still, he made no move to go inside. The only thing waiting for him there was the cool, suspicious stares of his guards and a lot of pacing. At least outside, he had a beautiful view and Bobby warmly nestled up against him.

Below him he could see the lights and shadows that formed an approximate shape and character of Hogwarts, beautiful and mysterious in ways it couldn't be in the daylight. Aside from the sconces lighting the outside, he could see several windows still aglow, the shadows of the occupants passing by though there were fewer and fewer of these with every passing hour. Still further down he could see the black, glittering waters of the moat, stretching into the lake, and beside those the dark rolling hills surrounding the castle until both lake and hills suddenly fell to a wall of such utter blackness Harry could not have defined as forest if he hadn't known what it was previously. Above him the sky was a blanket of gray, black, and deep purple clouds floating over the obscure, distant light of the quarter moon. The wind that bit so deeply into him now had begun to drive the clouds away so that with every passing minute the moon seemed to glow just a little bit brighter, the shape just slightly more distinct.

It made him think of Sirius and Remus and Luna and wonder if they could see the moon clearly from wherever they were. He wondered if Hermione saw the same thing from France and was wondering about him in return.

Transfixed as he was upon the moon, he was immediately made aware when a small spot in the distance passed over it, only to disappear a moment later. Harry blinked and wondered for a moment if it had been an owl. Then another shadow and another and still another passed over it, and Harry suddenly sat up straight. Bobby lifted his head to look at him.

"What is it?" Bobby whispered.

"I saw something."

"Was it Amelon coming back?"

"No. They were flying."

"They?"

Harry suddenly realized the heat he was feeling in his hand wasn't from his watch, but from the scars left by the Sword of Gryffindor.

"You have to go now, Bobby. Sorry."

He climbed to his feet, pitching the raven off his lap and over the side of the balcony. Bobby flapped gracelessly for a moment before catching the air in his open wings and righting himself. Harry didn't stay to watch but moved inside. The guards tensed as he entered, but he ignored them in favor of moving to one of the Astronomy Tower's smaller telescopes. He aimed it haphazardly to a spot just beneath the moon and adjusted the knobs at the side for focus and light sensitivity.

He looked through the eyepiece.

The little dots stood out clearly now, revealing a shape he would recognize anywhere and in numbers that made his heart begin pounding in his chest.

"No," he breathed. "Oh, please, no."

He stood up straight and turned to the guards.

"Sound the alarm. We have visitors."

The guards did not move to sound the alarm or do anything other than stare at him skeptically. They didn't believe him.

"Look for yourself, if you don't believe me! There's hundreds of them! Maybe a thousand!" he snapped at them.

"A thousand?" Burrows said blandly. "Why not just say a million?"

Underhill just snorted.

For a moment, Harry could only stand there and stare at them in horror. They weren't going to do anything. Bearing down on them at that moment was a force ten times what Hogwarts had faced before, when it had been fully intact. Now the castle still hadn't completed its repairs, the stone guardians were half their usual number, the great ward around the castle could not withstand a force of that number, and the students were exhausted from traveling from London and mostly asleep. They needed as much forewarning as they could get, but the guards wouldn't do it. They wouldn't believe him. They wouldn't even look.

He mentally revised his estimation of them as competent.

Taking a deep breath, he turned and walked back outside to the balcony. If they wouldn't do anything, he would have to find a way to warn them himself. He climbed onto the railing of the balcony and spread his arms.

"You can do this, Harry," he told himself and took two deep calming breathes. He closed his eyes and flinched as he felt himself start to lose his balance. Not yet. He couldn't fall yet until he...

Animancy did not require a wand. It was a sort of magic that had existed before wands, before there was even a word for what it was. It was the sort of magic Harry loved best, raw and pure in a way wand magic and spoken magic never could be. It was something that had to be understood and mastered at the very core of one's magic.

He searched for that core now, feeling out those pathways of energy that flowed through his body like blood in his veins and searched out the source of it. It was familiar to him now. He had felt it the first time he had held his wand, but had only truly understood what it was when Voldemort had showed it to him that Solstice day in the garden. It was not a power he liked to focus on directly. It scared him in some ways, knowing how powerful it was and how badly he could hurt himself if he handled it carelessly.

But his need was urgent. The castle needed him. He needed to fly.

The core of his magic surged as he focused on it, not increasing in power so much as extending what it had outward, feeling out what it was he needed and wanted from it. He took two more deep breaths and brought up the image of the falcon, recalled the feeling of that form Gulandri had first forced upon him, and urging his magic to take that form once again willingly.

His fingers started to tingle and felt himself growing warm. Excitement swelled in him. It was working! He was going to fly! He was going to-

The Stunning Hex caught him square in the back, shattering his concentration and his magic. The only sensation he was aware of was a sudden moment of panic as he felt himself fall forward, but then there was nothing but a swirling mass of sensory confusion that left him unable to regain control of his body or his magic. He didn't even feel it when the Levicorpus spell caught him and pulled him back into the safety of the tower, and he didn't understand the curious mix of sounds hovering above him was voices and the odd prodding feeling was the Sentinels checking him over for injuries and possible weapons.

"Merlin, what was that?" Burrows said, his voice raised in alarm. "What was he trying to do?"

"You don't think he's suicidal, do you?" Underhill asked uncertainly.

"I wouldn't have thought it, but you know, if he's guilty... He might have seen it as the only way out."

"Maybe he can fly."

Burrows gave him a look that stated clearly how stupid he thought that statement was.

"You never know! He probably can do some wandless magic."

They looked down at the limp form splayed out between them. Unfortunately, Harry had nothing to contribute to this conversation except to groan and loll his head slightly to the left. They gave each other a worried look.

"Do you think we'll get in trouble for this?" Underhill asked.

Burrows shrugged.

"Let's wake him up and see what-"

A high-pitched whistling sound cut him off, like the sound of a firework lifting off. Instinct and training had them both throwing up blocking spells without thought, covering the three of them in a cocoon of magic. Above them the roof suddenly exploded, raining down stone and wood and more trouble than any of them were prepared to face.

Book VI:

Chapter 28: The Final Battle of Hogwarts

"They wouldn't dare try the same thing twice . . ." Voldemort said, marveling at the very notion. At his feet, Snape was struggling to get up, and this time the Dark Lord let him and moved to the nearest window. He had better night vision than most, but his eyes weren't adjusted, and he could see nothing. Nevertheless something was making the hair on the back of his neck stand on end.

He turned back towards Snape who had managed to right himself with Amelon's help and leaned heavily against the wall where an ancient schematic of the castle was hung behind a pane of glass, hundreds of little colored dots scurrying across it. The Headmaster was tracing invisible runes across the map, activating the castle's additional defenses and setting off the alarms for the rest of the castle. Bloody fingerprints trailed wherever he touched.

"How many this time?" Voldemort asked.

"I don't know . . . they won't show up until they're within at least a hundred feet of the castle," Snape said breathlessly and closed his eyes tightly for a moment to clear his thoughts. Amelon, who was already studying the map, continued for him.

"If the black dots are the attackers . . . we already have some in the high towers. A little less than a dozen."

"The towers will all seal against intruders once the wards are activated, except for the dormitories, which won't let anyone not of the proper house in regardless," Snape said without opening his eyes. "All the entrances are sealed, along with any window large enough for a person to fit through."

Amelon sucked in a sharp breath, his own fingers suddenly hovering over the schematic as if searching for something. Or someone. They stopped abruptly.

"What is it, Amelon?" Voldemort demanded distractedly, half his attention already formulating the potential threat and how to deal with it.

"Lord Potter is still in the Astronomy Tower."

Voldemort stiffened and stalked towards them. He followed Amelon's finger to the little red dot with 'Potter' hovering beneath it surrounded by six nameless black dots and two orange dots. One of the orange dots suddenly disappeared, and the Dark Lord clenched his fists. He watched for several more seconds, and to his surprise the black dots moved away, congregating around what was the doorway that led from the Astronomy Tower and into the main building. Neither Harry's red dot nor the remaining orange dot moved. Had they been stunned? But then at least one person should have stood guard over them or tried to take them somewhere more secure. Did they think Harry was already dead? What was going on?

He turned to Snape, who had lurched away to order the portraits to gather information about the castle.

"There are no portraits in the Astronomy Tower," Snape said before the Dark Lord could ask.

"Is there any way in or out of there without deactivating the wards?"

"No . . . but—"

"There's another dozen coming through the portcullis. They've already torn down the wards there," Amelon interrupted. For the first time, his excitement had taken on a nervous edge. "More inside . . . no, they're on the roof of the South Wing. The courtyard . . . another tower on the east end . . . more crossing the moat . . . they just keep coming!"

"Where are the staff and students?" the Headmaster demanded, stumbling back towards the map. The little red, green, yellow, blue, and orange dots that had been relatively still only a few moments before were now swarming across the map, like bees in a hive. There were too many to keep track of individually, but the flowing swirl of

color they made as they moved through the castle gave Snape a general impression of what was happening.

"Good . . . they're moving into position to defend the castle."

"Severus," Voldemort said, calling back his attention. "The Astronomy Tower . . . ?"

The Headmaster nodded without looking away from the map.

"There's no way in or out from there now for Harry, but the castle elves should be able to get to him. Hinky!"

The house elf appeared in the room in a frantic flailing of gangly limbs.

"M-m-master! The c-castle! It's-it's-it's . . . Eeekk! Headmaster, sir, you's is bleeding!"

"I am aware of the situation, Hinky. Mr. Potter is in the Astronomy Tower. Do what you can for him. That is your mission."

The house elf's eyes grew enormous, and she started to tremble, but she nodded her head just the same.

"Wait!" Amelon said, hurrying over to her. She flinched away as if expecting to be hit, but he only took out a wand from his pocket and handed it to her. "This is Lord Potter's. He will need it."

Hinky looked vaguely horrified at touching something as important as a wand, but sensing the urgency of the situation, she snatched it from his hand and disappeared. Amelon turned to Voldemort for some sort of instructions, the situation far beyond anything he was prepared for, but the Dark Lord was looking at Snape. The two wizards, only moments before caught in their own private game of betrayal and pain, sought a resolution without words and a truce without conditions. There was no time for them to negotiate. Eventually, Snape nodded.

"Where am I needed most?" Voldemort asked.

"The main entrance."

The Dark Lord nodded and made his way to the door, leaving Amelon alone with the headmaster. As he left, he heard Snape telling the Inquisitor to secure the door. He glanced back briefly, watching the staircase to the office turn and seal itself. Voldemort had a general idea of what the response to this sort of attack entailed. If things went according to plan, then Sentinel Seidler should appear shortly with reinforcements to protect the headmaster and the security wards that he controlled. Elsewhere in the castle, the students, staff, and other Sentinels were arranging themselves at the intersection of every hallway and staircase in the school, blocking off entrances without boxing themselves in, while the castle itself let its defenses pick off, disorient, and scatter the attackers. Alarms were sounding across Britain in Court offices and Culties headquarters, alerting the nation's defenses to Hogwarts' plight. In ten to twenty minutes, reinforcements would arrive to fend off the attack, and more would continue to arrive until the enemy was driven back or destroyed.

It had worked well during the first battle, but Voldemort knew things wouldn't go as smoothly this time around. He could sense the enemy was more formidable and better prepared. Already the enemy had breached some of the towers, something the Italians had not managed to achieve.

He took a deep breath, calling upon his magic and clearing his mind for the spells he would need. He reached out one hand to touch the cool stone, while the other drew his wand. Immediately, he felt the magic of the castle reach back to him. The magic seemed to shiver beneath his palm, in fear and rage and excitement. He knew this feeling. It was the same feeling he had known the day of the Solstice ritual, when he had returned to the castle to hunt the madman, Moody, his mind and body blazing with magic. It felt strangely muted now, without the extra power singing through him, but it was still recognizable. The castle still turned to him as a defender.

Softly, he began to murmur the beginnings of a spell.

Halfway down the corridor a row of windows exploded in a flash of glass and orange sparks, and a witch sprang through the opening. Behind her the wall of ancient stones suddenly seemed to boil, rolling

into one another, the windows that had been there moments before swallowed up so that the hallway became a tunnel with only the wall sconces to see by.

She had just enough time to look around and spot him a few yards from her, her dark eyes fiercely seeking out an enemy, before the candles suddenly went out. He didn't know if she had seen him clearly enough to recognize him, but he was almost certain she knew who it was that killed her when his spell caught her, her blood and organs spilling out onto the stones at her feet.

An offering, he chanted, an offering of blood and magic.

Beneath his hand, the castle trembled, the fear from before replaced by hunger.

The alarm went off in Bristol just as Tom was pouring his second cup of coffee for the night and flirting with one of the mail room censors in the break room. Lestrangle had gone home for the evening, leaving him behind to 'tidy up' the office. He'd handed the job off to one of the secretaries and used the opportunity to . . . make friends, as it were.

Tonight, it was Mindy the mail room censor, who was just bursting with gossip she wasn't allowed to talk about except of course to those of sufficient security clearance. Later, he would make a run to the barracks and play a few rounds of cards with Lestrangle's personal guards to insure they continued to despise her.

Or at least, that had been his plan until the telltale gong of the alarm shook the entire complex, and he spilled hot coffee on his hand. He swore, dropped the pot, and ran for the door. In the hallway, witches and wizards stood frozen, looking upwards as if the sound were descending from heaven itself. Tom mentally sneered at them and hurried out of the offices towards the barracks. As he had predicted, Lestrangle's personal guard, some thirty-odd men and women, were still awake and killing time with a game of cards or reading, only now their pursuits had been abandoned at the peculiar alarm sounding throughout the compound. They were familiar with most alarms, but they had been fighting in Germany when this sound had first been heard and didn't know its meaning.

"We getting an earthquake or something, Captain?" a soldier joked nervously as Tom burst through the door.

"No. You all have three minutes to get dressed and get your gear. That's an order!" he snarled.

They jumped at the command, abandoning their game and books to scurry into the rest of their uniforms and gather up their fighting gear. Tom waited impatiently from the doorway for them to be ready, eying the other barracks anxiously as lights were turned on and he could make out movement in the windows. Others were finally starting to catch on. He needed to get his troops ready and to the floo before any of the others.

The alarm was an opportunity, he knew it, but it could just as easily turn into someone else's opportunity if he didn't get his people out to the battlefield quickly.

In three minutes, the Culties were dressed and ready for battle, mentally and physically. It hadn't taken much for them to realize that they were going into a fight, and they were more than willing to get down to it. They had been frontline fighters in Germany before they had been pulled for the tedious and unappreciated role of General Lestranger's flunkies. Captain Stratus had been promising them for weeks that they had a greater chance of rising up the ranks by showing off their abilities at home than in some foreign field. The big wigs rarely left Bristol after all. It seemed it was finally time to find out if Stratus had been telling them the truth or not.

"That alarm you hear right now," Stratus explained as they made their way to the floo station between the barracks and the messhall, "is the alarm for an attack on Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry."

Someone in their column froze mid-step, earning a fierce slap upside the head when it caused the line to kink.

"This is the second time this has happened this year. First was by the Italians, as you probably remember, but the chances are this time it's

the Germans. We do not know their intentions, and we do not know their numbers."

"Doesn't that just paint a cheery fucking picture?" someone muttered down the column.

"We're going to be the first in. We're going to take stock of the situation, and then I'm going to have five of you turn around and report to the five main branches what to expect. The rest of us are going to stay and make some noise."

A cheer went up. Making noise was something they were good at.

"Grab your brooms and move out. Our entry point is floo Station number nineteen."

They entered the floo station, a long narrow building empty but for the storage lockers filled with brooms on one side and the row of twenty or so large chimneys along the other. Despite the number available, they were restricted to only two floos at a time, making progress slower than Tom would have liked, but even so it took only ten or so minutes to get everyone through. He stopped the last Cultie in the line before he could enter.

"I want you to report to Lestrangle," the captain said. "She should be informed of what is happening."

The Cultie grimaced.

"Someone's probably already told her by now."

"Nevertheless, Yavern, I want to make certain she knows where we went and why. I am making a judgment call in her absence, and I won't have us accused of insubordination later."

He doubted Lestrangle would do any such thing, as she would be eager to claim credit for the quick action, but letting her own soldiers believe she would, and that he wanted to protect them from her supposed pettiness could only work in his favor. Yavern's brow lifted

at the thought, then lowered, and he nodded sullenly. Tom patted him on the shoulder and turned to the floo himself.

"Floo Station Nineteen!" he shouted, and the sickening feeling of being pulled through too little space much too quickly washed over him. After a nearly half a minute, his feet hit the ground heavily and the momentum carried him forward so that he half stumbled out of the fireplace. The fireplace opened up into a large, one room shack. The place was dark except for the candle someone had lit near the door, but there was little to illuminate. A moldering cot was wedged in a corner, a work bench beside it. Ancient herbs and animal pelts hung on the walls, unrecognizable beneath cocoons of cobwebs and dust. A harsh, bitter wind blew through the empty windows.

Tom glanced about, but there was no one else there so he went outside. The Forbidden Forest lay to the right and back and the Shrieking Shack stood ahead of him. Trapped between these two ominous places, the little shack was almost guaranteed privacy, and on the other side of the shack was a little path leading down to the village of Hogsmeade and a good view of the castle little over half a mile in the distance. The Culties were waiting for him outside, rubbing their hands together and muttering spells to keep themselves warm. It was colder up there in the Northern Highlands than what they were used to down in Bristol. The eerie atmosphere didn't help much either.

"Helden went to scout ahead," a witch, Kettersby, said as he stepped out. Tom nodded and tried not to let his impatience show. He told them why Yavern wasn't coming.

"Poor bastard, I wouldn't want to be him when he gives that woman the news," the witch said pityingly. He merely nodded and left to make rounds with the others, making sure they were ready for a fight. Finally, Helden returned, running out from behind the Shrieking Shack as if he were being chased.

"Ah, hell! Ah bloody hell," he gasped as he came up to them. "It's bad, sir! It's really, really bad!"

"Calm down, Private. What did you see? Do you have an estimate on their numbers? Are there any in the village? Are they on brooms?" Tom demanded.

"There has to be at least two thousand, sir! Maybe more!"

Silence followed this statement. Even Tom was taken aback by the number given. He had to be mistaken.

"Get a hold of yourself, Helden. Where are they? How did you count them?"

"They're out over the castle, sir! I think . . . I think half are on brooms and half are on the ground. They . . . they're . . . They're trying to storm the place! You can see the lights when their spells go off!"

Tom tossed the wizard away and stalked around the shack to see for himself. Behind him, the Culties followed. He was barely around the corner when he saw the first tell-tale flashes of spellwork. Pinks and whites and violets reflected against the clouds above, followed by low rumbling like distant thunder. Once past the shack and standing on the edge of the hill, he could see the castle in full and barely managed to swallow a gasp. If anything, Helden's estimate was low.

Tiny black shapes swarmed around the castle like flies around a corpse, visible against the glow of the castle's torches and flashing lights of curses and charms. On the ground, the attackers were even more visible, crowding around the edge of the moat to cast blasting and fire spells at the castle walls and windows while others tried to force their way through the drawbridge and portcullis. They did not appear to have gotten in yet, at least not in any great number, but even a fortress like Hogwarts could not hold against a persistent enemy of that number for long.

"Shit," he muttered and took a deep breath. This was more than he had been expecting to find, but he couldn't turn back now. Hogwarts could not fall. He turned to the Culties. They were staring at the force before them with unabashed horror, their earlier enthusiasm for action dissolving.

"Mount up," he ordered.

"Captain, you can't be serious! We'll be slaughtered!" someone cried.

"Shut up! Do you want us to just let them take Hogwarts?" Kettersby snarled back. "There are over six hundred children in there fighting for their lives!"

"I've a little sister up there," a young wizard said.

"I've got cousins," said another.

"Shouldn't we at least wait for reinforcements? Getting killed won't help anyone."

"Enough!" Tom snarled. "This isn't a discussion. Get on your damn brooms. I have a plan."

Harry regained awareness with a shock and a hand over his mouth. He was lying on his side, cold stone beneath him and the creak of wood above. It was dark but for the slivers of light that slipped down from between the floorboards, and in that fractured light Harry could just make out the glimmer of silver fastenings of a Sentinel. But that form was just out of reach, so who had their hand over his mouth? It was large, rough, and smelled heavily of flour and onions.

There was a moment of confusion. What had happened? He remembered that he was about to attempt an animagus transformation, and now he appeared to be in some sort of crawl space with a Sentinel. He tried to reason out what had happened, but the only conclusion he could reach was that they were apparently hiding and if it was from whom he had seen in the telescope, then he was in a lot of trouble.

He lied there stiff and still, listening to the creak of footsteps above them and the familiar grumbling lilt of frustrated German being tossed about. When his captor was satisfied he would not try to speak out, they removed their hand and Harry took several deep shaky breaths and turned to see who it was. It wasn't the second Sentinel like he

had half suspected. Even in the darkness, he could see the diminutive form of a house elf and the shine of its large eyes.

It crept over his prone body and sought out his hand in the darkness, its long fingers wrapping around his fingers gently before slipping something into his palm. Magic, familiar and warm, surged up his arm. It was his wand.

Quietly, he cast a Silencing Spell around their hiding space and the sounds from above died. He sat up as much as he could in the little space.

"Thank you," he said softly.

"It's a privilege to help a great wizard such as yourself, Lord Potter, sir," the elf gushed happily, revealing 'it' to be a 'she'. Despite her apparent pleasure at being of use to him, she still kept looking up nervously as if she expected discovery at any moment. He felt a little nervous about that himself. He crawled his way over to the Sentinel, and before he even reached out to touch him he could make out the coppery smell of blood.

"Hey, are you awake?" he asked, nudging a leg then quickly pulling away when it came back wet.

"He's in a bad way, sir," the elf said sadly. "The other one was already gone before Hinky arrived. You's was very lucky, sir. You was nearly crushed like them, but you was already lying down between them when the roof come down."

A shiver ran down Harry's spine. So he had yet another brush with death? Hinky hadn't said as much, but his survival seemed to have only been because of his smaller size and because the Sentinels' bodies had propped up the heaviest of the debris. He touched his exposed skin and tested all his limbs. Everything seemed to be fine. He couldn't find so much as a splinter.

"Bloody hell . . . how bad is he?"

At this, Hinky fell very quiet. It was as good an answer as any.

"What's going on? Have they gotten in the castle?"

"Hinky don't know, sir, but they ain't gotten in from here. The tower's done sealed itself. They's trying, but they ain't getting in that way. Not yet anyway."

"That's good," he sighed.

Hinky shook her head.

"That's not good?"

The house elf made a distressed little sound and nibbled nervously at her fingernails.

"The towers is all sealed, sir, so they can't get in, but we can't either. We is trapped here."

Harry swore under his breath. That was very much not good. They might hide there for a while, but for how long? Did anyone even know he was here? Someone must know if Hinky had his wand. Hadn't Amelon taken it? Did that mean Amelon had reached the castle before the attack? Was Voldemort with him?

"Is Lord Voldemort here?"

"Oh! Yes, sir! He is. He is sure to scare them away and rescue us!"

Harry felt a stirring of conflicted feelings. Voldemort being here was certainly better than him not being here, from a purely defensive point of view, but he doubted it would discourage the attackers. If anything, they might become more determined. No one could make a more worthwhile target than the Dark Lord. His destruction would almost guarantee victory for the Germans. Then there were his own personal feelings in regards to the other wizard. It went without saying that he would rather not be rescued by the man and once again be placed in his debt.

But thinking like that was stupid and selfish. There was more at stake now than his wounded feelings.

The Germans were going to take Hogwarts unless something was done, and his friends, classmates, and teachers were all in serious danger. There was no telling how far they would go. People would inevitably be killed in the fighting, but what would happen afterward? Would they execute all of the adults? Snape and the Sentinels at the very least. What about the students? Would they kill the more rebellious ones to make a point? Harry couldn't help but think of his fellow Gryffindors. Their reckless and defiant natures would make them prime targets. Then there were the Dueling Club members with their special skill sets and trained aggression. What would happen to those who lived? Would the Germans try to hold them as hostages in the castle or try to take them back to Germany where they could be held for ransom?

Thinking of it all terrified and infuriated him.

Right now everyone was fighting for their lives, possibly dying, and what was he doing? He couldn't hide forever. He wasn't at all certain what he could do, but nothing wasn't an option. Even now, right above him, the enemy was trying to break into the castle, and not even Hinky seemed to think the defenses would hold up for long.

"Hinky, listen to me," he said, and of course the house elf immediately obeyed. "I need you to be very quiet. I'm going to take down the Silencing Charm. When I do that, I want you to watch after him." He pointed to the unconscious Sentinel. "No matter what happens, I need you to stay quiet and not interfere, understand?"

In the darkness, he could just make out the elf chewing her fingers again anxiously.

"Oh, sir, please don't—"

"Sshh!"

He removed the Silencing Charm with a flick of his wand, forcing Hinky to silence her protestations. Her hands were now clamped over

her mouth as if to keep herself from screaming. Harry felt sorry for her but not enough to stop what he intended to do. Above him the sound of several Germans talking at once immediately filtered down.

"This is taking too long!"

"I'm working on it. Your griping isn't helping my concentrating."

"What's the problem? You were taught the spell!"

"Well, the old codger was wrong about it! There's another spell here. I've got to get through it before I can get to other! So shut up!"

Amelon had locked the door with magic when he left, Harry remembered. It was ironic that it should prove helpful in such a completely unrelated situation. Carefully, he sat up and twisted himself so that he could look up through a crack in the floor board. A Lumos Charm had been cast, and from his limited viewpoint Harry could see three people crowded together directly over where the Sentinel lay unconscious. There had been a fourth voice, but he could not see where that person might be standing.

Carefully, he lied down on the stone floor, and gripping his wand with both hands, he aimed it through the crack. The scars on his palm began to grow hot.

"CONFRINGO!"

Magic surged through his scar and into his wand, adding more magical force than he had thought he could manage and more than he had wanted. The force of the Blasting Curse tore up the floor above him completely, smashed into the unsuspecting Germans, and through the wall of the castle. Harry found himself chocking on a rain of sawdust and splinters, and hurled himself upright. The Astronomy Tower was unrecognizable. Half the roof had collapsed inward, burying the furniture and telescopes in rubble and revealing an open sky with an army of witches and wizards flitting by on broomsticks. The giant astrolabe seemed to be the only thing that had kept the rest of the roof from coming down as well, and even that was now starting to tilt from the force of Harry's spell. The spell had also had the

unintended consequence of shattering both Amelon's spell and the castle's defensive spell, tearing open a hole in the wall large enough to fit a small dragon through. The upside was that none of the Germans seemed to be alive to take advantage of it, and the wall itself was starting to close up on itself.

"Shit, shit, shit . . . Hinky! Get him inside!" Harry yelled, struggling to climb out of the hole. The tower shook, throwing him off balance and back into the crawl space. A flash of bright green light flared above him, and he felt the sharp burn of dark magic brush against his skin.

The Killing Curse.

The fourth voice.

The tower shuddered again and lurched sideways. It was coming down, and it was coming down now.

He threw himself to his feet, throwing out a Cutting Hex as he did. Again his scar flared hot and the magic surged stronger than he had intended. The Cutting Hex gave no light like some spells, but Harry could still see when the curse, which was useful for its wide arching sweep when aiming was difficult, struck the wizard by the sparks that flew as the curse tore through the astrolabe he had taken cover behind and through his body. For the briefest moment, Harry could see the stunned expression of the wizard as his head flew from his body.

Horror flitted through Harry and then left just as quickly. His mind and his body refused to stop and think of what he had just done. Survival was what mattered now.

"POTTER, SIR!" came Hinky's terrified cry as the tower started to tilt still further. He turned towards the opening and could see her standing just inside the opening with her hand held out to him, the Sentinel unconscious at her feet, and the wall closing quickly around them. He threw himself out of the hole and stumbled towards the opening, but the roof was starting to come down as the tower tilted and the astrolabe began to roll away.

He would never make it.

He turned again and rushed for the only escape available for him.

The sky and open air greeted him with a blast of icy wind and the terrifying thrill of falling. Behind him the tower was falling too, falling towards him, coming down on top of him. He thought of feathers and talons and his magical core, the world slowing down around him, but still moving too fast. He couldn't spare the concentration to fear whether he would be fast enough.

His magic was boiling beneath his skin, in his scarred hands, and the air around him. He reached and pulled and prayed and—

A hand seized his arm, jerking him around and onto the back of a broom. His concentration was shattered, and for a second time that night the animagus spell dissolved into nothing.

"I've got you!" the witch that had caught him crowed in German. "Hold on tight! I don't think I can manage that a second time."

Harry could only sit there, stunned. Had he just been saved? By a German? The broom swerved sharply to the left, startling him into grabbing hold of her so he didn't fall off. A ball of fire fell behind them, and he watched as it hit the ground and exploded, taking out several ground troops in the process. He looked upwards to see where it had come from.

The sky above was not the sky he had seen before. The moon was gone, and in its place was thick, roiling blanket of clouds rolling downwards. As he watched he could see flashes of spells and fire burst through the cloud cover and fall to the earth, where the magic exploded in fire or glass or some other nasty surprise.

"Bastards," the witch he held snarled. "Hiding like cowards! Mind casting a few curses up there while I steer? It's hard to dodge and cast spells at the same time."

Harry wondered if the woman was utterly starkers. Then he realized she thought he was one of her comrades. A quick look around

revealed why. Everyone was dressed in black robes. So was he, the lighting was bad, and she hadn't had time to look at him closely before catching him in mid-air.

Well, that was . . . lucky?

"Are you awake back there? Now is not the time to space off, buddy."

Before he could think of a reply, she turned to see what was the matter. This time she was close and even in the flickering light, the trademark green glow in his eyes was unmistakable. She stiffened and then swung around to point her wand. He caught her arm and threw his weight to the side. Momentum and weight did the rest of the work, throwing them both from the broom. Screaming, she fell away, and Harry let her go, throwing up his hand to the sky.

"Come!"

He had not flown a broom in nearly two years and had not uttered that spell in even longer, but the broom came to him with a familiar slap to his palm and found its way beneath him as if it had always been there. His descent immediately stopped and instead he shot upwards, instinctively seeking out the higher vantage point just as he had in his Quidditch Seeker days. His eyes scanned the skies, now for curses rather than snitches, but the only danger came from the falling curses above which he avoided nimbly with only half a thought. It seemed, even now, no one had recognized him.

Now what?

Above him someone was doing what they could to fight against so many. Should he go up there and see if he could help? He decided against it almost immediately. If the Germans couldn't tell the difference between him and they, then the chances were whoever was up there wouldn't be able to either. Should he sneak back into the castle? There was a secret entrance into Slytherin's lair in the Forbidden Forest he could sneak back in through. But that would mean stumbling around at night in the Forbidden Forest to look for the entrance, which he wasn't entirely certain he could find nor did he know if it would have sealed itself off like the rest of the castle had.

The towers, he realized. The invaders had nearly gotten through the Astronomy Tower's seal and only Amelon's additional spell had probably stopped them. They had said they knew the spell to get inside. That meant the towers were vulnerable, and at least some of them had been breached already. He could find a tower, get inside through there, and then seal it off again behind him. After that, he could tell Voldemort or Snape what he had seen and then work with everyone to drive out the invaders for good.

It sounded like a ridiculous plan even to him, but it was the only plan he had.

He pulled up his hood and began to circle the castle, hoping no one would recognize him if he kept moving. The hood wasn't going to do him much good against curses or the cold, but it might help him get close enough to follow through with his plan. Already he could see the Astronomy Tower was not the only one to have collapsed. The Arithmancy Tower and the Owlery (thank Merlin Elsbeth had remained at the werewolf colony) had also been destroyed, as if the castle itself were excising its vulnerable places away from itself. Gryffindor Tower still stood, and Harry could see spellwork not only being aimed at it but also spells being cast out from it. That meant it was still being held by the students. He looked for the old Divination Tower, long abandoned, and the West Tower where the Beauxbaton students had lived during the Triwizard tournament, but neither seemed to have been breached yet.

It wasn't until he circled around to the southeast end of the castle that he spotted the entry point. Unlike Gryffindor Tower with its spire roof, Ravenclaw Tower was designed as a watchtower with a large flat platform roof and only a hatch to lock out the intruders. As Harry watched, half a dozen Germans were casting spells on the hatch, while three times that number hovered around them in a defensive circle, and still more were trading curses through the narrow wandslits* in the tower wall with the students trapped inside. Despite the defensive position, the students couldn't aim at the main threat trying to smash in the roof above them, and the gargoyles that had previously guarded the tower had been obliterated already.

Harry began to circle the tower, careful not to appear too obvious or lose track of the curses still falling down from the cloud cover above. No one paid him any mind, but his heart was pounding in his chest. Hundreds, maybe thousands of witches and wizards willing and wanting to kill him were flying around him, oblivious. He might have laughed at the absurdity of it, but at the moment he was too sickened by what was happening.

Minutes stretched, and the battle continued on with a great deal of noise and movement, but not much change. The castle's natural and magical fortifications held most of the invaders at bay, while a few brave souls from within cast out curses from wandslits and broken windows, only to have a dozen counterattacks flung back. Curses continued to fall from the sky above, but there was no way to aim through the cloud cover, and the spells did little more than cause a little confusion below and take out the odd flying witch or wizard. The invaders congregated at the perceived weak points, as many as could fit in each nook and cranny and batted at the castle defenses, while those who could not find a particular target flew or ran back and forth to defend those who did.

Harry knew that he would be horrified later by the damage they were inflicting. Parts of the castle had already fallen into piles of rubble, and the Germans seemed intent on tearing it down to the very foundations. But grief was for off the battlefield. For now, he would need to rely on his anger and fear, and yes, his exhilaration.

The hatch into Ravenclaw Tower finally gave way, exploding upward and outward so that the spell casters were tossed partially aside. Harry didn't hesitate. Throwing himself forward, he aimed his broom for the now gaping hole in the tower. He drew his wand from his sleeve, mentally preparing himself for the maneuver that would spin him around to cast the Web Hex* at the open hatch and keep him from breaking his neck in the process. Curses cast from the castle defenders flew past him like a blast of heat in the icy air, tingling against his senses but never connecting as he flashed passed the invaders who seemed to be floating still around him.

Faster and faster, though there was little distance to go. He had to be the first through to close the entryway behind him.

From inside the dark opening in the hatch there appeared a red glow, and the scar in Harry's hand suddenly burned hot. Instinctively, he tried to pull up at the last moment but only managed to turn his body so the fire struck his side rather than his face. His broom and wand were torn from his grip by the blast and his body would have been thrown from the tower completely, if he hadn't hit the crenellations around its rim first. For a moment, Harry was too stunned to move. Shock quickly gave way to panic.

He let out a shout of pain and started to roll on the ground, struggling with his cloak until the burning material was finally torn off. Harry's face and hands stung, but didn't think he had been burned too badly. He crawled towards the edge of the tower and propped himself against the crenellations to catch his breath and gather his senses. Looking towards the hatch door, he could see flames still billowing out of it, and there was a sort of roaring noise to be heard through the ringing of his ears.

It seemed he had survived his second bungled plan for the night, and the Ravensclaws hadn't needed his help to protect their tower after all. He would have been proud of them if it weren't for the unfair resentment of being set on fire.

For a minute or two after the blast, which had stunned more than just Harry when it had gone off, no one paid the boy huddled atop the tower any mind. They were much too busy checking their people for injuries and trying to quell the magical fire to pay him much mind. But eventually, someone did notice him.

"Hey!"

Harry turned reflexively. Three wizards standing at the edge of the tower stared back at him, their eyes widening in disbelief. Harry was suddenly reminded that he had just thrown off his cloak, and if his school robes weren't hard enough to miss, his face was damn near impossible.

Luckily, he was quicker to get over his surprise than they were.

"Accio wand!" he summoned even as he leaped to his feet. His body screamed in protest and his head swam, but he kept moving forward. The wizards who had spotted him lifted their wands hastily, but they were still recovering from surprise, and when they didn't let out a spell fast enough Harry rammed bodily straight through the middle of them, knocking all four of them over the edge of the tower. Harry's free hand was already wrapped around a broom as they went over, and he was flying away before anyone could think to stop him. There were shouts of protest over the terrified screams of the falling wizards, and Harry knew his ruse was over.

His makeshift disguise was lost. His attempt to enter the castle had failed. He had already been recognized and as soon as everyone else realized what was going on, it would be hopeless.

The only option left to him was escape, and it would be a miracle if he managed that.

He tried to rise higher, hoping to make a break for the cloud cover above, but he was already being pursued, and although he was a faster, better flier, he wasn't good enough to outfly half a dozen hexes at once. He had to fly lower to seek protection amongst the enemy, dodging around them to keep his pursuers from getting a clear shot. Witches and wizards swerved and dived around him, hexes shooting in every direction, not all of them aimed at him even if he felt as if they were. His heart was pounding in his ears, and he was half deaf to the noise of the battlefield.

A wizard appeared just ahead of him, his wand thrown up as soon as Harry was in his line of sight, forcing him to turn sharply back towards the castle. Mentally, he swore. They had begun circling around to cut him off and there was no telling which wizards were targeting him and which were still oblivious. He was tempted to start throwing curses at everyone, seriously tempted, but there were too many, and it would only have made his situation worse.

He dove lower, turned sharper, flew faster, and tried to find an opening to break away. No matter what he did, he couldn't veer away to escape. Whenever he tried, the crowd thinned and the curses came raining down from every direction. He had to do something and

quick. He had almost circled the castle, and the lake was coming up. There was no one on the water and barely anyone flying above it. He'd be an easy target.

He needed a distraction.

His eyes danced around the field looking for incoming curses and inspiration. They inevitably found their way to the castle entrance where hundreds of the enemy had amassed in their attempt to break through. He made a sharp turn and headed straight for it.

There were nearly a dozen wizards after him now, coming from every direction, trying to box him in, but he still had the instincts of a Quidditch Seeker, and twisted away or feinted or dodged everything they threw at him. There were too many close calls. Two curses thrown at him from either side forced him to duck dangerously low, his feet skimming the ground and bowling over an unsuspecting witch. An attack from directly to his left made him throw up a counter-curse and threw him off balance so that he nearly ran into the Whomping Willow.

But he reached the castle and turned to follow closely along the wall over the moat. He was exposed there, but there was no good place to aim at him except from directly to his right where he threw up the strongest blocking charms he knew. He raced towards the drawbridge, his wand up and ready. Curses and hexes pounded against his shields, wind bit against his exposed hands, but the scars on his hand burned hotter the closer death crept towards him.

He rounded the bend of the castle, and the drawbridge was in his line of sight, witches and wizards crowded tightly onto it. If he could have, he would have used the Old Magic. Something magnificent and terrible and awe-inspiring. The Old Magic was good for that. If you weren't in its path of destruction, and therefore dead, it would demand the attention of anyone there to witness it. It would have been a marvelous distraction as well as an attack.

But he didn't have the time nor the concentration to spare for it. He had to settle for an amplified Burning Hex instead.

And that was why he failed.

No sooner then he had released the hex, the witches and wizards on the bridge threw up a wall of shields. None of them would have been able to block Harry's spell on their own, but there were dozens, and as his curse struck the wall of magic it rebounded back towards him. Another wall of fire was speeding towards him.

His momentum was too great to stop or avoid the fire barreling towards him, so he threw himself off his broom and fell. When he landed, he thought for an instant he had hit the ground and been smashed to pieces, the violence of the impact was so jarring, but then it was the cold, wet rush of water that stunned him. His eyes were wide open as he stared above him at the fire burning above him through the distorted haze of lake water. He continued to stare as he sank quickly to the bottom until his back and head touched the muddy bottom below.

He nearly gasped in lake water when he realized he might drown . . . again. He floundered for a moment to pull himself upright and struggle back towards the surface. He stuck his wand, amazingly still clutched in a death grip in his hand, in his mouth and swam as hard as he could for the surface. He could not swim directly upwards. Fire still burned at the surface of the water, and he was forced to swim much further to the nearest dark space he could see.

The water was freezing, a reminder of other, unpleasant memories and fears. The exhilaration of battle was washed away instantly, and in its absence the cold rushed in, stealing his strength and his senses. But he was still alive, so he struggled on, struggled to keep the darkness creeping in, from taking him completely, struggled to move leaden limbs, and struggled to keep from gasping lake water to drench the burning in his lungs.

He broke the surface, gasping air hot with fire and magic and swallowed a scream.

Above him it was dark, but loud and echoing with voices and the thud of feet against wood. He was directly beneath the drawbridge. The moat was fortunately shallow, and the gentle flow had pushed him to

the only safe place for him to come up for air. The bridge was low and wide, meaning he was shielded from view from both those on the bridge and those on the shore. One side of the bridge was still burning hotly from Harry's spell, which meant no one was going to try looking in on his hiding space on that side, at least.

His senses dulled by cold and panic, it took him a ridiculously long time to figure this out. He still wasn't safe. He needed out of the water. It was killing him. Weakening him, pulling him back down to smother him. But he couldn't get out.

One side of the bridge was burning; the other left him exposed to the Germans. He had no broom. He couldn't apparate this close to the castle. If he tried to blow up the bridge above him as he had in the Astronomy Tower, he would be trapped under the debris and drowned. If he did nothing and just hid, he would either freeze, drown, or be found and killed.

It looked like it was going to be one of those nights.

"They have inside help," Amelon noted, his eyes flitting over the map, trying to take it all in. The number of the enemy was only half the problem. "They've found all the weakest points."

"I know," Snape said without inflection. He was still bleeding and hadn't been able to keep steady on his feet, but if he was concussed the Inquisitor couldn't tell. The Headmaster was currently seated at his desk, staring up at the gallery of paintings all around him. Most of the frames were empty, but occasionally a headmaster, red and puffing, would appear and tell him something about the progress of the battle and the condition of the students and staff. Amelon relayed what he could from the map. It was difficult. The castle was large, the occupants were numerous, and he was unfamiliar with both. Still, he could see things were going badly.

Snape took a deep breath and let it out slowly.

"Would you locate my wife, Inquisitor Amelon? She will be a violet dot like the staff. She should have been in the dungeons before the attack."

"Headmaster, this really isn't—"

"Inquisitor Amelon," Snape interrupted, turning his black eyes towards the other. Amelon could see murder in his eyes, and he suddenly remembered he had stood there while the Dark Lord had threatened to mutilate the other's wife. "There are six wizards currently headed in our direction with every intention of breaking down the door and killing me. I likely will not have the opportunity to ask again. You likely will not have the opportunity to look."

". . . I don't know whether you're being a pessimist or a romantic."

Snape didn't reply, but Amelon was already looking. Fortunately, there were only a few violet dots to sort through.

"She appears to be going towards the infirmary. There are students with her."

"Collecting the wounded," Snape murmured to himself, then frowned. "Where is the Dark Lord?"

"He's only on the second floor."

Given the time that had passed since he left, he could easily have made his way to the main entrance and back again, but he was only halfway there. Amelon couldn't account for it, but Snape didn't seem concerned.

"What about—"

There was a sudden 'whoosh' sound, followed by a rapid drop in pressure that threatened to rupture their eardrums, and immediately followed by the office trembling. Dust rained down from the ceiling, and frames fell from the wall, smashing to splinters. Snape closed his eyes again and leaned back in his chair.

"They're here. Flip the map and hide if you can."

Amelon did as he was ordered and hid himself inside of an alcove off to the side of the desk, casting a spell to make the wall on either side of him appear smooth and continuous. It wouldn't stand up to a serious search, but if he were lucky they would never even think to look for him. Snape remained seated behind his desk, turned away from the portraits now in favor of the door across the room. Amelon watched transfixed as the Headmaster lifted his wand and slowly started to tap it against his desk, slow and even, like the ticking of a clock. Blood ran down the length of his face, dripping off the tip of his long nose and sharp chin, his expression frozen in a cold anger. He closed his eyes.

There was another 'whoosh', pressure drop, and shudder. Fifteen seconds later, it happened again only this time something gave. The magic broke and door burst inward, sending shards of stone and wood flying across the room. Dust and splinters rained down on the seated wizard, catching in his sticky blood and sweat.

"Surrender now or we'll kill you," someone shouted in accented English from the other side of the gaping doorway.

Snape continued to tap his wand and said nothing. There was a drawn out silence where no one spoke on either side of the door, and only the shuffle of robes and the tapping wand could be heard. Finally, however, a figure appeared at the doorway, moving through the haze of dust into the room. Snape opened his eyes and stopped tapping.

Black eyes stared at the intruder, slightly older with dark hair and an aquiline nose more generous in proportion than his own. Blue eyes stared back. Their wands remained trained on each other.

"Do you surrender?" the wizard asked in a thick Italian accent, challenging him to decline. Snape was a Slytherin, however, and uninterested in games of bravado.

"And just who would I be surrendering to?"

The captain hesitated, caught off guard by the seemingly quick capitulation.

"Captain Mandalari—"

"And do you actually have the authority negotiate the terms of surrender?" the Headmaster asked skeptically.

"I do."

"Then what are your terms?"

"You will surrender your wand—"

"For the school, you nitwit."

Mandalari scowled and his hand tightened around his wand, but he answered.

"You will order the students and staff to surrender, relinquish their wands, and gather peaceably in the dining hall. You will deactivate the castle defenses. Do this and you'll save lives."

"Whose lives? The student's lives? Or your lives?"

"You can't win this, but there is no reason more people need to die than necessary."

Snape let out a snort.

"You're dead, Mandalari. All of your people are dead, just like the last time you tried to take this school."

" . . . Obstringo!"

"Nigerimortus vitis!"

The Captain's binding spell hit dead center, trapping Snape rigidly to his chair and causing his wand to fall from his hand. He wasn't, however, fast enough to stop the Headmaster's spell. Rather than strike the captain though, the magic hit the desk, and from the center rose a black shadowy stain that radiated outwards. Within seconds the shadows had condensed into black tendrils that continued to

creep their way off the desk and around the room. The tendrils slithered down to the ground, crept across the floor, up the furniture and walls, over the portraits and wall hangings, and beneath the rugs. The Captain stumbled away from the encroaching vines until he was backed all the way to the door.

"Enfeugo!" he snarled and waved his wand. The tendrils burned and writhed, turning to ash readily, but only on a small patch, and within moments more tendrils had grown to cover the empty patch again. Worse, the new growth immediately sprouted two inch long thorns that glowed faintly violet at the tips.

"Careful," Snape warned, frozen to his chair but looking unaffected by his defenselessness. "The thorns are filled with poison."

From outside the door there came a string of German, fast and angry, followed by another voice, and then there quickly drew an argument that reminded Snape like nothing so much as a flock of angry geese bickering at each other. Mandalari's expression darkened, and he snarled something that had all of them falling silent.

Snape smiled coldly.

"They sound rather high strung. Are they worried the Dark Lord will come back? It's a pity, you just missed him."

Mandalari froze, while beyond the wall several Germans broke out into excited conversation. It seemed at least one of them knew what he had said.

"Do you understand now?" Snape continued as if speaking to particularly dim students. "He's here in the castle. That's why you're all dead."

"You're lying," Mandalari said.

"Would I be this calm if I were?"

". . . Why are you bleeding?"

Snape just continued to smile, the answer a secret he would gladly torment him with until his dying breath. Mandalari lifted his wand threateningly.

"Where is he?"

"Where he can kill as many of you as possible, of course."

The Captain turned on his heel and retreated the rest of the way out of the office and into the hall, where four German witches and wizards waited anxiously for him.

"I'm going to find him," he stated plainly in German.

"What about the rest of us?" a witch protested.

"The four of you will stay here and do what you can to deactivate the wards. I'm sure you'll manage to figure out something."

"You can't take the Dark Lord on your own!"

"I'm never alone . . ." he said, his free hand finding the crucifix and squeezing it gently. The witched wasn't impressed, but didn't bother arguing. There was no point arguing with fanatics.

"What about the Headmaster?" she asked instead.

"If you can't make him cooperate . . . kill him."

Harry could feel himself dying. The cold and weakness seeping into him was too familiar for him not to recognize it. He might have already drowned if not for the slight embankment of stones and debris against the castle wall, which had gave him something to stand on rather than swim. He was shivering so badly he had to holster his wand back up his sleeve or risk dropping it. A mere half foot above him, the bridge rumbled with footsteps and voices over the ringing in his ears.

If his own situation was bad, the castle's wasn't much better. He could feel the walls trembling just as his hands did, and it made his

heart ache to think that they might fall together that day. On the bridge, the Germans cast spell after spell in unison, while those on brooms standing guard over them cheered and shouted encouragement.

Harry hated them.

Harry hated that he could do nothing about it.

Exhausted, freezing, and surrounded by the enemy, he could think of nothing to get out of his situation. His palm burned, ready to cast a spell, but he could think of nothing to cast. If he blew up the bridge above him it would collapse on top of him. If he tried to move from his hiding spot, he would become the target of hundreds of curses at once. His animagus form would drown if he attempted it here. Even warming charms were useless while submerged in water.

Merlin, he was tired.

He closed his eyes and rested his forehead against the stones of the castle.

"I'm sorry. I don't know what to do. I'm sorry . . ."

Beneath his hands the castle suddenly felt warm.

Oh . . . oh! The castle was alive. The castle had always been alive. He knew this. He had known this for years, had sensed it from the day he first saw it. It had been alive, but he had never felt it stirring like this before. He could feel its magic beating like heart, filled with so many emotions. Like a restless spirit.

Or god.

"Please," he prayed. "Help me protect you. Tell me how."

The stones beneath his hand began to tingle with magic, but he received no answer. Perhaps there was no answer to give. Perhaps it didn't know. A violent shiver ran through him, and he felt his vision darkening. He tried again.

"Madris, please help me protect my home," he prayed, calling upon the older, wiser goddess. "I will make this castle your temple if you will only help me save it."

Water surged up from beneath, submerging him and pushing him upwards so that he knocked his head on the bridge above him. The water receded again, leaving Harry sputtering and floundering, and with a nasty bruise forming on the back of his head. On the right side of the bridge, the water was rising up from the mysterious surge, and above him he could hear shouts of panic. Even as he floundered frantically trying to keep his head above water, he suddenly knew what he had to do.

Harry's element was water, especially cold water. He knew one day it would probably lead to his death, but that had done nothing to diminish its affinity to him. Indeed, it had probably only strengthened it. It would serve him now.

Taking a deep, calming breath, Harry let himself sink below the icy waters. The water was no warmer than it had been before, and the burning of his scarred hand was the only heat to be found. He accepted it. Accepted the cold and the darkness and the crushing pressure. Accepted it and let it embrace him and let his magic reach out to embrace it in return. A current began to flow, circling him like the center of a whirlpool. Slowly at first, then faster and faster.

Harry reached deeply inside himself for his own magic, the scars' magic, Madris' magic, any source of magic he could draw upon. Even the castle's magic seemed to be flowing into him and then out of him into the frigid waters, making them boil and churn.

There were spells that controlled water, both ancient and modern, but he didn't know them. He didn't even know the names of the gods he might call upon for the answer, and wouldn't have dared try to summon yet another when his first prayer had just been answered. So in his usual, reckless fashion, he made a gamble that could save or destroy everything he was trying to achieve.

"Magic, do thy will."

The whirlpool collapsed, the water surged sideways, and Harry was swept away. Immediately, he lost all sense of direction as he went tumbling into the violent current. The water was boiling with magic around him, but still so cold and now threatening to smash into something and shatter him to pieces.

If he didn't drown first.

He could do nothing more except curl up, cover his head, pray, and try not gasp in a lungful of moat water in a panic. His head ached, everything ached, his lungs burned, his stomach churned, and there seemed to be no end to it. 'Live or die,' he thought wildly, but the thought would go no further. 'Live or die'. His choice or the gods?

Then it stopped as abruptly as it had started, the waters throwing him roughly to smooth stone and then withdrawing like ocean waves receding from the shore. The force of it made him gasp and choke on the mixture of air and water. He struggled to breathe in the air and cough out the water simultaneously, until he started to retch. When at last his struggles to breathe had been won, he rolled over onto his back and opened his eyes.

Above him he could make out a very blurry stone ceiling and large timber beams lit by torchlight.

He was in the castle.

How?

He tried to move, to get up and look around, but all he managed to do was uncurl himself so that he lay prone on his back. His wet clothes felt like lead weighing him down. It was a struggle just to keep his eyes open, and there wasn't much to see. He had lost his glasses in the water. Despite all this, he felt rather pleasantly numb or partially drunk, and even the cold seemed somehow more bearable while lying inside Hogwarts.

He wanted to sleep. He had done enough, hadn't he? Everything he could, for better or ill. He didn't think he had anything else left to give.

Something grabbed his ankle and spun him around, then dragged him swiftly across the floor. Water Harry hadn't even realized he was lying in sloshed around him as he went. He turned his head just enough to see a dazed and wet German wizard attempting to climb to his feet as he passed by. At least, he thought it was a German. It might have been a Sentinel, it was hard to tell with them all wearing black. With a sense of detachment, he continued to watch from the corner of his eye as the same wizard was hit by a Cutting Hex and collapsed yet again. He hoped that was a German. He turned his attention to the foot he was being dragged by, but there was nothing to see. It dangled in midair by some sort of magic.

"Merlin, Potter, where the hell did you come from?" Angelina's voice demanded in exasperation.

His foot was dropped, and suddenly there were hands pulling him upright and faces hovering close enough that even with his miserable eyesight he was able to recognize some of them.

"H-hey," he greeted through chattering teeth. "D-did I m-miss anything?"

"We should be asking you that. How the hell did you get outside?" a boy asked.

With a bit of squinting and concentration, Harry managed to recognize Gerald St James, Ginny's jealous ex-boyfriend.

"There will be time for that later," Angelina interrupted, drawing back his attention. Now that he was concentrating, he could see she looked terribly pale and there was a dark smear of blood across her cheek and forehead. Her mouth formed into a hard line as she looked him up and down.

She muttered a spell and Harry was suddenly dry. Another spell and his clothes few warm, almost unbearable so, as if they had been left near a fire before he put them on. It felt wonderful, but it made him want to curl up on the floor and sleep more than ever.

"Angelina, slap me," he request sleepily.

She blinked, and did as he said. The sting helped wake him a little.

"I'm here if you want another one," Gerald offered.

Harry forced himself to support his own weight and look around. Two other classmates had been holding him up, but retreated as soon as he proved he could stand on his own. He swayed slightly, but managed to keep his feet. He looked around to get an idea of what had happened.

They were in a large hallway just off the main entrance hall, which was currently flooded with several inches of water and littered with sopping wet witches and wizards, some struggling to orient themselves and others dead or unconscious on the floor. Students, many of them soaking wet themselves, partially hid themselves in adjoining corridors and took shots from behind pillars and statues at the Germans left vulnerable in the open space of the hall. Gargoyles and statues waded through the water, crushing and bashing the invaders with their paws and hooves, killing them remorselessly. Somewhere, someone was laughing hysterically.

A few feet away, he recognized the unmistakable stature of Professor Flitwick and another witch in a large brim hat that had to be McGonagall. There were other forms in dark uniforms around them that were probably Sentinels. Although it was difficult to tell, it seemed that Flitwick and McGonagall were casting some sort of spell that was draining the water out of the hall and using it to create an enormous ice dam in front of the gaping entrance, while the Sentinels protected them from enemy attack. As far as Harry could tell, his wild magic had caused the moat to leap its confines and flow straight into the castle, knocking down the remaining defenses and sweeping Harry and a number of hapless Germans inside in the process.

He was horrified to realize what he had done, accomplishing the very thing the Germans had been striving for. Fortunately, the teachers and students had been faster to recover from Harry's flood than the Germans and were already sealing up the opening once again. He took a step towards the professors, but was immediately overcome

with dizziness. Angelina caught him, and to his surprise so did Gerald. He supposed their disagreements were too petty to bother with under the circumstances. The two put his arms around their necks and half carried him towards the professors. It was slow and awkward, and by the time they managed to cross the mere twenty feet, the professors had moved on from building the ice dam to fortifying with various charms and curses. Harry recognized only a few of them.

"I suppose we have you to thank for this?" McGonagall said by way of greeting. To his surprise, there was little accusation and more a grim sort of approval.

"Yes. I'm sorry," he said sincerely.

"Don't be. You've bought us some time despite yourself. I'm afraid it won't do us much good unless reinforcements arrive soon."

"Any sign of Lord Voldemort?" he asked. It was possible she didn't even know the Dark Lord was in the castle. Sentinel Seitler, however, answered for her.

"The portraits say he's coming in from the Headmaster's office, but he's taking his sweet time. It'll be over by the time he gets here."

Harry tried to think what could be taking the dark wizard so long. Could he have run into trouble on the way? Was he even heading this way? He might have some other scheme to oust the invaders that had nothing to do with holding the front entrance.

"We've held on well so far, but we can't hold out for much longer," Flitwick agreed solemnly. "There's just too many of them, and they know what they're doing. We're trapped here. There's no . . . Wait! Harry?!"

The dwarfish professor abandoned his charms in order to turn to Harry, seizing him by his robes and practically pulling him down to his level on his knees.

"Y-yes?"

"How did you get out of the castle that day Lestrangle locked it down?"

"Um . . . I . . ." He felt a natural reluctance to discuss the Chamber of Secrets, which as its name implied seemed best left just that. A secret. However, when Harry realized what Flitwick was getting at, his eyes widened and he felt some of his former energy returning. "There is a way out through the dungeons. There is a tunnel that leads into the Forbidden Forest."

Flitwick and McGonagall shared a look, briefly, before the Transfiguration professor went back to casting spells on the ice dam.

"Do you think you could lead the castle residents out?" Flitwick asked.

"I . . . yes. I think so." Yet even as he said it, something felt wrong. The entrance to the chamber might be reluctant to allow so many people inside, and the basilisk inside might not be too pleased either. She had grown significantly between his visits, and after all the time that had passed since he last saw her, she might well be bigger than him now and considerably more lethal. But what else could he do? This might be their only chance to get everyone out safely. They had to give it a try.

"Everyone is scattered around the castle . . . and then there's the injured," Flitwick said, mostly to himself. "We can probably get most of them out, but not all. There isn't enough time."

"Patronus," Angelina interrupted. "We can send out patronae to let everyone know to retreat to the dungeons. The portraits and the house elves can help guide them to the fastest, safest routes."

"Good thinking," Flitwick said, looking a little less grim. "We will try to hold them off for as long as we can. Ms. Johnson, gather the students you know who can cast a Patronus and have them carry the evacuation order. Mr. St. James, please inform the portraits and see if you can't summon some elves to assist."

"Sentinel Seitler, if you would be so good as to escort Mr. Potter to the dungeons to await the others. It's imperative that he get there safely to lead everyone out."

Harry almost protested to insist that he could stay and help with the ice dam, but realized that would have been stupid. He was magically and physically spent, and if he were killed or captured there would be no one to open the secret passage, send the away the basilisk, or show them the tunnel that led into the forest. Solemnly, he nodded and accepted Seitler's hold as Gerald and Angelina left to fulfill their own roles. Even as he did so a feeling of wrongness niggled at him.

Harry was too weak to do much more than hobble along with the Sentinel's support. If Seitler thought his role was less than he was qualified for, he was professional enough not to voice his opinion. They made their way towards the dungeons in silence, and despite their circumstances Harry found himself dozing off.

He was startled into wakefulness again when Seitler suddenly went slack and fell out from under his arm. The sudden shift in support and weight caused Harry to lose his balance and fall over on top of the wizard. He struggled to push himself up and off the man. Beneath him, Seitler didn't so much as flinch when Harry's elbows jabbed him in ribs or stomach. Before Harry could figure out what had happened, a hand appeared from behind him, seizing the collar of his shirt and pulling him up and away from his intended protector. Harry panicked and flailed, trying to pull free but only managed to tear his collar and pop a few buttons for his efforts. The hand released his collar only to grab his hair and yank painfully, forcing Harry to arch backwards and fall to his knees. He stared up blearily at the figure hovering above him.

"I know you," the man said in an Italian accent. "You're the devil's apprentice."

Harry grimaced and clawed at the hand with his blunt fingernails. The man hissed as he drew blood, but he didn't let go. Instead he shook his captive sharply, tearing loose tufts of hair as he did so.

"Where is your master?" the man demanded.

"Voldemort?" Harry scoffed defiantly. "Haven't seen him."

"Don't lie to me. I will hurt you."

"If I knew where he was, I would happily tell you, so you could go off to get yourself horribly killed. But I don't so I can't."

He was pulled roughly to his feet, his wand hand seized and pulled harshly behind his back. Harry grunted in pain, which only worsened as he pulled the tendons of his shoulder trying to keep upright and moving as the Italian wizard pushed and pulled him along.

"We will find him together then."

"Vere are de vards?" the witch snarled, leaning over the headmaster with obvious menace. Snape regarded her impassively from his fixed position in his chair.

"I'm sorry, but was that English? I can't tell."

She hissed in frustration and cast a Choking Hex. Snape stiffened but could do nothing else as he felt an invisible force squeezing his throat. He was only just starting to turn red from oxygen deprivation when another wizard who had been busy freezing the black vines, turned and cast the counter-spell. Snape made an effort not to gasp and merely took several deep breaths. The witch and wizard argued fiercely to each other in German for a moment, before the witch gave up and left the Headmaster to her colleague.

"Silly girl," said the wizard, a young blond man with a large scar across his nose. "You should never use that spell during an interrogation. She might have crushed your vindpipe and den how would ve get our answers?" he asked congenially.

Snape knew he was in real trouble now. The witch wasn't particularly clever or inherently cruel, but this wizard was a different matter. He had worked with enough sadists during the last war to recognize one on sight. He had done well enough on stalling up to now. It took a ridiculous amount of time for the Germans to realize Freezing

Charms worked better than Fire Charms on the enchanted vines, but even then disposing of the vines was still proving beyond them. With the vines in place there was no way to search the office properly. Drawers and cabinets were held shut, wall hangings were obscured, and furniture was fixed to the floor. The only real progress they had made was that while the Freezing Charms were in place they could walk through and over the vines without being overwhelmed by them. Even then, it had taken two people at a time to keep the Freezing Charms going, while one wizard guarded the hallway, and the last was left alone to interrogate their prisoner. All Snape had to do was sit there and say nothing. It wasn't as if he had much choice in the matter.

"I prefer de eyes myself," the wizard continued. "Nothing induces a panic like de feeling of vuns eyeball bursting in its socket. People vill do or say almost anything to de save de other."

A thumb came up to press against his eyelid and pushed lightly. Snape reminded himself that eyes were easily replaceable and fell back on his training as an occlumens. He might not be in control of what happened to his body, but he could still control his mind enough not to panic. He would not break so easily.

The thumb pulled away. Snape opened his eye to see the wizard staring back at him with admiration.

"Not doing it for you, is it? Vell, dere's always my second favorite. De hands."

Hands were not nearly as easy to replace as eyes. It was why Voldemort had chosen them as the object of torment during his visit. Snape continued to keep his expression blank, but when the tip of a wand pressed into the top of his hand, the limb twitched against his consent. The interrogator smiled triumphantly.

"Yes, de hands den. Now, where—"

"Aahh!"

The scarred wizard spun around, expecting an attack but saw no one else. He demanded to know what had happened in German, and the witch replied rather frantically. Snape spoke French, not German, but he could follow the conversation enough to realize that the other wizard in the room had carelessly scratched himself on one of the poisoned thorns. The injured wizard couldn't explain this himself, because he was already on the ground, eyes rolling in the back of his head and his veins bulging in the same toxic hue of the violet poison. Seeing an opportunity, Snape spoke up.

"The antidote is in the cupboard in the black potions bag. He'll be dead in two minutes without it."

His interrogator looked startled, then suspicious.

"What is de counter-spell for de vines? Dey're blocking de cabinet."

"Even if I told you, it wouldn't work for you. The spell is tied to me. Only I can cast the counter-spell. If you'd like to give me my wand—no? Well, then the clock is ticking for your friend . . ."

The wizard's expression twisted from its previous congeniality into a hateful sneer. He bit out a Punching Hex that left Snape's jaw aching and his nose broken. Yet more blood gushed down his face, and he wondered if he wasn't going to die of blood loss before he was forced to give anything up. It seemed too optimistic of a possibility to entertain.

For a minute or two, however, the two remaining Germans busied themselves with breaking into the cabinet. During this momentary distraction, Amelon finally decided to make himself useful, and cast the counter-spell on the Binding Charm, freeing the Headmaster. Snape threw himself to the ground behind his desk, and shoved his hands into the mass of writhing black vines. They yielded to him obediently, releasing his wand that had been dropped in the fight and hidden. Pointing his wand through the narrow opening beneath his desk, he didn't waste time with anything clever.

"Avada Kedavra."

The curse struck the nearest set of legs, killing the target instantly. The witch fell dead. The remaining wizard shouted out a spell, and Snape threw himself away from the desk just as it was crushed into kindling from above. Snape wasn't quite fast enough. The curse caught his right leg before he could get away. For an instant he felt nothing, and then his vision went white with agony, and he cried out from the shock of it.

When he finally became coherent, a foot was on his wand wrist and the German wizard was staring down at him in absolute fury. Snape resigned himself to death, his mind settling on the only comforting thought thing he could think of. Voldemort would have no reason to harm Ira now, and Harry, reckless fool though he was, would make sure she was taken care of. He looked up at his death and glared back defiantly.

"Sectumsempra."

Blood sprayed, soaking him. He flinched, expecting yet more pain, but it wasn't his blood. His captor stumbled back, blood gushing from the open gash across his neck and chest. He hit the wall and would have fallen to the floor, but the black vines were already moving over him. They latched onto him and twined their way into every available nook. The wizard let out a burbling scream as the vines found his open wound and slithered inside. Then he was dead.

Snape let his eyes close in relief. It was over. He had been rescued after all, albeit a little later than he would have preferred.

"Severus!"

"Draco?" he coughed.

A presence came to kneel beside him, and when he opened his eyes again it was his godson staring back at him, paler than ever.

"Draco, hand me my wand," he said weakly. There was something he needed to do before he passed out from pain and blood loss. Draco did as he asked, although with some difficulty, as the vines were no

more fond of him than they were the invaders. Eventually, however, he managed to free Snape's wand and shove it into his hand.

"Defloresco!"

The vines writhed and withered, drying into fragile husks until they finally disintegrated into dust.

"Severus," Draco said, his voice steady even as his hands shook. "I'm going to get you out of here. The school is evacuating through the dungeons."

The dungeons are a very long ways away, Snape thought to himself.

"I'm sorry, Draco," Snape said, his vision starting to go. "I'm so sorry."

"Severus, don't . . . you can apologize later . . . when I know what the hell you're talking about."

"He's going into shock, Draco," another voice came, female this time. It must be Natalie. She was the only witch outside of the family who was afforded the privilege of using his godson's first name. "Move over, and I'll see what I can—"

Whatever it was she intended to do, Snape faded into the darkness before he could find out.

Harry wasn't sure how much more he could take. He was magically and physically depleted, ached everywhere, was still mildly hypothermic, and currently being held captive by the enemy. On top of that, Seitler was probably dead, and there was no one left to report his abduction or that evacuating to the dungeons would no longer work. He had never wanted a nap more in his life.

Oh, look, now there were stairs.

"No way," he said tiredly.

His captor tightened his grip on his arm and tugged it harshly at his refusal. Harry grit his teeth and rode out the pain.

"I can barely stand!" he protested. "How am I supposed to get up there?"

Not to mention it was the moving staircase, which in addition to its steep steps that wouldn't cooperate with their trying to move up while the castle's defensive wards were activated. It might very well collapse under their feet if they tried, just as the castle towers had.

"Why don't you ask your gods for strength?" the Italian asked contemptuously. Harry would very much have liked to have told him all the things his gods had done to help him slaughter his soldiers up to this point, but that was likely to earn him a dislocated shoulder or a spell right in the back.

"He wouldn't be up there anyway," Harry said instead. "He's not hiding from you. He'll take the main corridors and stairways."

"And you think I would trust you?" the man snarled in his ear.

Harry took advantage of his proximity to stomp on his foot. His captor let out a yelp of pain and lost his grip on Harry's hair but not his arm. Harry twisted around to face him and pull free, but the man still wouldn't let go. Snarling, the younger wizard tried to leap on him and knock him to the ground. The Italian, however, was larger and in better condition, and he fended off the clumsy attacks with a fist to Harry's gut. The Gryffindor collapsed and hung limp by one arm, gasping for breath and trying not to hurl.

From up the stairs there came a shout of outrage, and Harry feared some young students had stumbled onto them. But it wasn't students. It was house elves. A male and a female, as best Harry could tell. The female was trying fruitlessly to hold her companion back.

"What the devil are those supposed to be?" the Italian snarled and dropped Harry in favor of pulling out his wand. As soon as he was released, the male elf snapped his fingers. A knight's helmet from one of the castle's many suits of armor appeared from thin air and rammed itself down on the wizard's head and spun around. The Italian wizard swung out both his arms blindly in surprise, and Harry

rolled into his feet, causing him to trip and fall. Harry made a grab for the Italian's wand, but clumsy and weak from the gut punch, he couldn't get to it before the wizard started shouting out curses. Harry could barely recognize the words, muffled and distorted as they were by the helmet, but he scrambled away as quickly as he could.

Rough, brown elven hands pushed him to his feet and pulled him away towards the nook beneath the stairs. There was a secret passage under there, Harry remembered, but not where it led. Before he could be dragged away, he pulled his wand and tried one last curse.

"Torpeo!"

The Numbing Jinx was not a very harmful spell, but it required little magic and left the target relatively harmless until something more powerful could be tried. Even this little bit of magic was beyond Harry at that point, and it sputtered and died at the tip of his wand. Unfortunately, the Italian spun towards his voice with his wand. The house elves let out shrieks of alarm and half hurled Harry into the passage under the stairs.

Something hissed unpleasantly behind them where the curse hit the floor.

The passage was dark, but the elves summoned lanterns, illuminating a narrow, twisting passageway draped in cobwebs. Harry followed the elves, who seemed to have some notion of where they needed to go.

"Thank you," he said. "You're the second and third house elves to save my life tonight. I don't know how I managed without you before this."

As predicted, the little bit of flattery pleased the elves to the point of embarrassment and made them more eager to help than ever. Their names were Moxey and Maggy, and they had been gathering up students for the evacuation when they came upon Harry and his assailant.

"Lord Potter, sir, is supposed to be in the dungeons. The Professors will be most worried," Maggy chided gently. "Maggy and Moxy will bring you safe and sound."

She patted his hand comfortingly, which amused Harry.

"I have no doubt, but can we stop for just a moment? My legs feel like rubber."

The elves looked nervous about stopping, but relented. He didn't have long to rest. The sound of running echoed loudly down the passage, and Harry surged to his feet and stumbled as fast as his legs could carry him. There were no forks in the passageway and no nooks to hide in. He wasn't fast enough to get away.

"Can we collapse the passage behind us?" he suggested.

Moxy spun on his heel and rushed back the way they had come. Harry could see he had been aptly named.

"Be careful, my friend!" Maggy called after him, her voice quivering. Harry made a small prayer for him. Surely if house elves had a patron goddess, it would be Madris, Goddess of the Hearth.

A moment later, there was an explosion, and the passage shook, raining down dust and dead spiders. Maggy whimpered nervously, but didn't stop.

They hadn't gotten far when there was another explosion.

"That wasn't Moxy," she fretted.

"I'm sure he's fine. He's a very brave, clever elf."

"Maggy isn't brave or clever. Maggy doesn't know what to do."

"Just keep running."

Yet no matter how much they ran it seemed the passage just kept going on and on, twisting so many times Harry was half convinced

they were going in circles. Breathing became difficult and Harry slowed even more, and no matter how much Maggy tried to pull or push he couldn't go any faster.

"We're almost there!" she cried, only to let out a terrified shriek as she looked back towards him. Harry didn't need to look back to know what she saw. With one last burst of strength, he stumbled into a jog, reaching the end of the passage and flinging himself through the tapestry and out into a corridor. His legs gave out, and he fell and couldn't get back up again.

He was done for. Maggy cried and begged, but when that failed she hooked her hands under his arms and dragged him for all her worth. She made it a good twenty feet before their pursuer burst out from the tapestry after them, his expression murderous.

"Run, Maggy, get away from here," Harry gasped, but she ignored him and continued to drag him despite the futility.

"It's quite alright. I can take care of Harry from here."

Maggy froze. The Italian wizard froze. Harry blinked and choked out a laugh. He could hear the familiar rhythm of boots striding over stone, leisurely but powerful. Maggy very slowly and cautiously laid him down, and from his new position he could watch upside-down as the Dark Lord headed towards them. He was covered from head to toe in a layer of blood. The Italian had called Voldemort the devil, and he certainly looked the part now.

Harry had never been so happy to see him.

"Harry, it's good to see that for once in your life you've managed to not misplace yourself."

Harry just grinned and closed his eyes. Now seemed as good a time as any for a nap.

"And you . . . I know you, don't I?"

"Exsanguinus!"

"Nulta neuro calmea! An Italian? Ah, I remember now. You're Mandalari, the leader of those Catholic vermin we drowned in the lake. Still alive? I suppose your god isn't entirely useless then. One out of two hundred was it? Not a bad score . . . for Him, at least."

Mandalari screamed in rage and let out a stream of curses, each more vicious than the last. Maggy trembled next to Harry, and despite his desire to escape into a rejuvenating sleep, it was impossible with so many deadly spells flying over his head. Voldemort cast shield after shield, counter-curse after counter-curse, over and over again until Mandalari finally seemed to catch on that this wasn't a fight he could win. The Italian made a rush for the secret passage. The Dark Lord finally grew bored of the game and made his move.

"Crucifixatus."

Harry's eyes flew open at the sound of screaming. He held his breath, but the screaming didn't stop. He didn't want to look. He didn't want to know, but his imagination was already painting the images in his mind.

"Tell me, Mandalari," he heard Voldemort say conversationally over the agonized screams. "Does this make you feel closer to God? To suffer as His Son suffered? I personally never understood the fascination, the reverence Christians put into His supposed sacrifice. After all, thousands suffered the same fate or worse before him, and thousands more after him. What made Him so much better than the rest of the demi-gods walking the Earth? Maybe, given your unique perspective, you'll be able to tell me when I get back. House elf, bring his wand. Harry, this is no time for a nap."

Harry made a distressed sound. He didn't think he could move. And he wanted to. He really wanted to get away from the screaming.

"I've got nothing left."

"Ennervate lasca!"

Harry's body spasmed uncomfortably, waking him physically and mentally from the sensory shock. Shaking, he rolled over onto his

hands and knees. He was very careful not to look in Mandalari's direction. Voldemort looked down at him smugly beneath his sheen of blood like a mischievous red devil.

"Do you need another?"

Harry managed to get to his feet, swaying heavily like a new born foal taking its first steps. He still wanted nothing more than to sleep, but he no longer felt he would die if he didn't get it immediately. The pain wasn't exactly making him happy with his choice.

"Good. Now come along. We have an army to massacre."

As they made their way to the main entrance, Voldemort made a point not to mention Harry leaning heavily against his shoulder or his shaking hands, and Harry made a point not to mention that he positively reeked or ask where the blood had all come from. They made their way there, occasionally passing students running or limping in the other direction, occasionally carrying or levitating the wounded behind them.

"Where are they all going?" the Dark Lord queried.

"The dungeons. I'm supposed to be leading them out through the Chamber of Secrets."

Voldemort gave him a half confused, half exasperated look.

"You know it's called the Chamber of Secrets for a reason."

"Desperate times and all that."

"You wouldn't have been able to lead them out regardless. You do remember that magical contract you signed?"

So that was what had been bothering him before. He had completely forgotten.

"They'll be trapped down there."

"They'll be safe down there until I retrieve them. There's really no telling what's going to happen once the spell is released. It is imperative that you don't pass out."

The last part sounded vaguely accusatory. Harry glared back at him in resentment. It was hardly his fault that he was tired.

When they reached the main entrance, only Professor Flitwick and McGonagall were still there, even the Sentinels had gone. McGonagall spun around, aborting one spell in favor of another at the sound of approach. Voldemort raised his own wand in greeting, and she froze.

"M-my Lord!"

The way she said it made it unclear whether she was greeting the Dark Lord or letting out an exclamation. Harry realized seeing the Dark Lord covered in blood might not be as common of a sight as he was used to.

"Professors," Voldemort returned. "Leave."

McGonagall looked to Harry expectantly.

"That wasn't a request," the Dark Lord bit out.

"It's alright, Professor. We'll be along in a minute," the Gryffindor said, smiling weakly.

Her lips thinned into a grimace, but she nodded and gave his shoulder an encouraging squeeze as she passed. Flitwick toddled along after her, looking nervously over his shoulder until they were both out of sight. Harry turned his attention to the ice dam. For all the attention the professors had been giving it, it was already showing signs of strain. Lights danced from the inside, auroras of greens and reds and yellows, and it groaned ominously.

"Do you think it will hold long enough?"

Voldemort wandered into the center of the room where nearly a dozen bodies lay against the now bone dry floor. He picked a German who still appeared to be breathing and made a slashing movement with his wand. Blood flew out from the enemy in a great spray of red, soaking the Dark Lord anew and everything in a ten foot radius. Harry turned away and gagged. He didn't consider himself squeamish, but that was just too much. Even looking away he could hear when Voldemort repeated the process twice more.

"It should hold now."

Harry took three deep, settling breaths and turned back around. His heart leaped into his throat as he looked down to see the pools of blood disappearing into the creases of the stone floor, the castle itself greedily drinking it down. The ice dam was now a disturbing shade of pink. He shuddered at the sight.

"What are we going to do?" he asked, not wanting to linger too long on what had just happened.

"I have been feeding the castle the blood of its enemies since the attack. Twenty-four so far and there may be still more deaths upon the grounds. It has been absorbing the magic of the slain."

"Like the wall along the Forbidden Forest."

"Just so. We are renewing the castle's magic. Recharging it for one great spell to destroy its enemies, and once destroyed to make their strength its own."

Harry felt himself grow cold. This was magic of the darkest kind, and it was being brought into the closest thing he had to a home. And yet, if they didn't do it, he wouldn't have a home and almost everyone he knew would be at the mercy of the enemy.

"What spell?"

"That, Harry, is entirely up to you. I will only be summoning the magic. You will be the one to form it into a spell."

Harry looked at him as if he were mad. The Dark Lord's bloody grin confirmed it.

"You don't expect me to do all the work, do you?"

"If by 'do all the work', you mean, 'kill everyone', then yes, yes I do," Harry said.

"I can't summon the magic and cast the spell simultaneously, nor can I gather the magic and cast the spell afterward. There's simply too much of it. This body, resilient though it may be, cannot hold that much magic all at once. I need you to shape it and release it as it comes."

The back of Harry's head where he had struck it against the bridge began to throb, a migraine building on top of everything else. All he wanted was to sleep. But he couldn't. He had made a promise to Madris, and he couldn't back away from it. More than that, the Dark Lord was relying on him. He was surprised to realize that still meant so much to him, after all the fighting and the resentment, it still felt like one of the most important things to him in the world. He let out a frustrated sigh.

"What should I cast?"

"Whatever feels most natural and can do the most damage to the enemy. I'm quite fond of fire—"

"No."

Harry hated the Germans for what they were doing to his home, but he didn't hate them quite that much.

"—But I understand water is rather more your element. Given the majority of the enemy is outside, I would recommend a weather spell."

"We have some of our own out there," he said, recalling the spells that had been falling from the sky. Maybe he could keep the spell low?

"They're soldiers. They know the risk."

Somehow, Harry doubted anyone would imagine a risk like this. But they couldn't afford to wait to be saved.

"What do I do?"

"There's a bench over there. Let's sit down."

The wooden bench was positioned at the far end of the entryway, directly across from the entrance, where a person might watch the comings and goings of the castle occupants. It felt very surreal to be sitting there with Voldemort to his left, staring at the ice dam with its pinkish hue and flashing colors, the dead spread out at their feet. He started to wonder if he actually had fallen asleep somewhere and simply not noticed.

"Your hand," Voldemort requested, and Harry offered his left hand to him without looking. He grimaced but didn't pull away as he felt the Dark Lord run a knife-sharp nail down his palm, opening the skin. Then he pressed their palms together, and Harry closed his eyes tightly and shuddered. Magic, his magic, flowed back into him, and with it blood that wasn't his.

"Ah... nn . . . uh, this is unpleasant," Harry gritted, his veins burning at the touch of the foreign something. "Bloody hell . . . are you sure this is safe?"

"If it were anyone other than you, they would already be dead. Since the solstice, however, your magic has saturated my blood. Your body should be able to tolerate it. I think."

"You think?"

"Medi-wizardry isn't my specialty. Hush, I need to concentrate."

Harry tried to relax, to concentrate on the almost hypnotic swirl of colors across the ice dam, to think of the only two weather spells he knew that he should use, anything except the toxic feeling radiating

up his arm. The most distracting thought he could come up with was to wonder if he was going to die from the Dark Lord's faulty understanding of magical blood sharing, but at some point Harry had given up on the idea that he was actually going to survive the night, and it was a fleeting thought at best. Voldemort didn't offer anything else by way of conversation, merely fidgeted about and muttered something that sounded vaguely Gaelic.

Then the burning sensation in his hand exploded up his arm straight to his heart. He jerked and jumped away, but Voldemort refused to release him, no matter how hard he struggled.

"You're killing me. Let go. LET GO!" he screamed,

"Cast it out, Harry. You have to cast it out or it will kill you."

Harry's mind had flown to pieces with the pain and the panic. Now he frantically tried to pick out the pieces, looking for a spell, any spell to get rid of the magic threatening to tear him apart.

"Reparo."

The magic went out like a wave, not through Harry's wand, but through his feet and back into the castle, and Harry suddenly felt himself expanding into the stones, the portraits, the near thousand souls, wizard and house elf and ghost alike, scattered throughout the building. He felt parts of himself missing, lost with the fallen towers and spires, its statues and armors shattered, the windows cracked, the dormitories burning. The spell released, pushing broken doors back into places, smothering the fires, putting back the fallen stone and mortar, mending up the torn tapestries, fixing itself . . . healing.

"Wrong spell, Harry," Voldemort hissed angrily in parseltongue, drawing him back into his body. It was more bearable now that the magic was flowing through him and not collecting inside, but his heart still felt like it was trying to escape his ribs. What spell had he needed to cast? A weather spell . . . he knew two. What were they?

"Concentrate."

The Rain Spell. Sprout taught them in Herbology. So convenient for watering the garden. She would be absolutely horrified with him later, he thought vaguely.

"Nimbosio et nimbosio et nimbosio . . ."

His mind flowed back into the castle, back into the stones, and out again through the chimneys and the broken windows and rain spouts as a mist, quickly thickening into fog, then a cloud, soaking the air in icy droplets. He thickened and condensed until the air became too full and too heavy, and he fell. A thousand times he fell and then million and billion and then so much he could not be called rain but a waterfall.

"And thunder. Tonitrio . . . ," Voldemort goaded, his hissing tones echoing through him.

"Et tonirtio et nimbosio et tonitrio et nimbosio et . . ."

Hundreds of the wizards and witches, not of himself, enemies, pierced him, magic flung to cast him off, to shield themselves, to dry him up, to destroy him. Angrily, he threw his magic back with a roar and a crack and a flash of light that swallowed their spells and threw them from the air like children's toys.

"And hail. Grandonio."

"Et tonirtio et grandonio et nimbosio et grandonio et tonitrio et nimbosio et . . ."

From the ground, the witches and wizards threw up more shields, more counter-curses, more magic and desperation that struck him, scattering him into tinier pieces but never destroying him. Never stopping him. He gathered himself into an army and armored himself in ice, flinging himself in marbles and snitches and bludgers, and shattered them as they had tried to shatter him.

"And wind. Flabraborio."

"Et flabraborio et grandonio et nimbosio et flabraborio et tonirtio et nimbosio"

The wind blew up, but he had no control of it. Wind was a part of him and yet outside himself, shapeless and restless and everywhere. It came from between the rain and the thunder and hail. He could not hold it together like the rain or break it with the thunder or beat it back with the hail. It pushed him and threw him and spun him around. It smashed him through windows, tore up his shingles, and shook him like it wished to tear him apart.

"More, Harry. More."

There was screaming now, pain and terror, and the wind swallowed it and laughed.

"Too much."

"Too late. Let it go."

And Harry fell one last time.

Harry could hear again before he could see. There was deep breathing in his ear, and the sound of twigs snapping and snow crunching. He listened for a long time without understanding, but when his arm started to ache he let himself drift back into sleep.

He woke a second time when he felt himself being shifted, not roughly, but noticeably enough to make him aware that he was being carried piggy-back. Squinting his eyes open, he could make out trees, bare and black against the royal blue of the pre-dawn sky. A raven cawed, and Harry smiled. His brother lived.

"Hey, you awake?" someone asked, but he had already closed his eyes and drifted away.

Minutes, maybe hours later, the sound of crying drew him back to consciousness. The broad back he was resting against began to tremble.

"Sshhh . . . keep moving. It's alright, just keep going. It isn't much further," McGonagall urged, her voice drifting closer and then further away. He opened his eyes and peered blearily over the shoulder of the one carrying him.

"What's going on?" he mumbled. "Why does my arm hurt?"

"Don't try and move it," Goyle grunted. The Slytherin appeared to have been drafted to carry him. Harry decided he didn't want to know.

"Is it over? Did we win?" he asked tiredly, already feeling himself drift off.

"I guess so," Goyle replied noncommittally, and Harry fell back to sleep. For now, that was all that mattered.

Author's Notes:

Traditionally, castles had 'arrowslits' built into them so archers could fire out on the enemy with minimal exposure. The idea was adapted to Hogwarts.

A non-lethal Hex that creates a rather large sticky web when cast in a door or window. Notoriously difficult to tear down physically and magically. Potions are typically required.

Book VI:

Epilogue

Hermione was helping Enid fold laundry in preparation for the morning housekeeping when she learned about the battle at Hogwarts. The work was tedious and the small basement room warm from the dried laundry, and she was already half asleep and looking forward to bed when the sound of feet scurrying down the stairs above filled the room. Enid sighed and yawned sleepily into her hand, just as drowsy as her roommate.

"Sounds like Lorelei's coming to tell us something important. I'm think'n she's made up with Miguel...again."

Hermione hadn't been at the Hotel Raoulin for very long, but she had already been made privy to the joke 'Lorelei broke up with Miguel. It must be Wednesday.' Their fellow maid's overly dramatic nature invited a good deal of teasing from the rest of the staff, but since the other girl seemed to thrive on the attention Hermione didn't see the harm in it. It certainly helped break up the monotony of their daily routines.

The laundry room door burst open, admitting Lorelei in all her freckled glory. She was three years older than Hermione, but was so petite and excitable she could have easily been mistaken for someone three years younger. She was flushed and grinning as she hurried into the room.

"Enid, Heloise! I have wonderful, wonderful, wonderful news!" she cried.

Enid rolled her eyes, but smiled indulgently.

"How is Miguel?"

"Miguel? Miguel is an idiot! Who cares about him?! This is much better!"

"Oh? What happened?" Hermione asked, now curious herself. She mentally chided herself. It wouldn't do to get excited over Lorelei's little dramas, which occurred several times throughout the day.

"The war! It's over! Germany has surrendered!" she squealed and jumped up and down before turning on her heel to rush back up the stairs. "I have to tell Andrew! He probably fell asleep in the pantry again."

The girl was gone before Hermione could gather her senses to call her back, a flood of questions filling her mind. What did she mean Germany surrendered? How was that possible? Hadn't the fighting turned in Germany's favor after Lord Voldemort was forced to return to England in the wake of Lucius' death? Had they opted to use the lull in fighting to negotiate for terms of surrender rather than attempt to retaliate? Had there been a battle? Another assassination? Who had told Lorelei the war was over, and why did she believe them?

Of course, Lorelei could be mistaken. If the story was good enough, she didn't seem to be too interested in the facts.

"We should ask Mrs. Prewitt," Hermione said, setting aside her armful of towels.

"Maybe we should finish first," Enid suggested. "She won't be so cross if we ask after we've done what she told us."

"I'll ask her myself if you want, but I don't think I can sit here doing laundry until I know if it's true."

Reluctantly, Enid agreed and followed her out of the basement and up the stairs into the kitchen. Andrew was not sleeping in the pantry, but he definitely looked like he wished he were as Lorelei nattered at him. They entered the hotel lobby and could already see there were people on the stairs and along the hall gossiping.

"Something's definitely happened," she said to Enid.

"Do you think it's true, then? They say once the war is over, Britain will open its borders and we can go back home. I've relatives in the Cotswolds I haven't seen since I was little."

Hermione didn't offer an opinion. It could all be a misunderstanding or rumor gone wild, and her own thoughts and feelings were so tangled up at the notion, she didn't dare speculate what it might mean for her.

"Let's ask Mrs. Prewitt first."

They headed to their employer's office, but when they arrived they found she was not alone. Merle, the night receptionist, Mrs. Rumpall from the apothecary next door, and the elderly couple from Room 2A were all there and huddled around Mrs. Prewitt's radio. There was a man on the radio speaking in a serious, news-anchor tone. It was in French, and Hermione had to struggle to understand it through the crackle of radio static.

She made out the words 'surrender' and 'failed attack' and 'Lord Voldemort' repeatedly, but it was when she made out the word 'Hogwarts' that her heart suddenly began racing in her chest.

"What did he say?"

Merle 'ssshh'd her sharply and turned her attention back to the announcement. Hermione tried to listen in as well. Hogwarts was mentioned again, and after intense concentration and several minutes of reporting, she figured out the school suffered some sort of attack and that there had been casualties. After that, she couldn't make out what the man was saying. She didn't even try, her thoughts flying six hundred miles north to a castle and the brother and friends and godparents she had left there.

A hand touched her shoulder, drawing her back to herself.

"Heloise?" Enid whispered. "Are you okay? You've gone all white,"

Hermione blinked at her stupidly for a moment, then nodded.

"Yes... I..."

She tried to think of some excuse, but was spared by Mrs. Prewitt, who had bustled over to them from behind her desk.

"Eloise, Enid, 'ave you finished ze laundry yet? Well, never mind. 'ere, take zome money and go to Bayard's. Buy a bundle. Ze guests will not want to wait until morning!"

She shoved a few silvery coins into Enid's hand and hurried both girls out of the office.

"And don't let ze old crook swindle you like last time!"

Hermione didn't want to go, but she didn't have much choice. She followed her co-worker to a storage closet to retrieve their winter coats.

"Who is Bayard?" Hermione asked absentmindedly. She actually wanted to ask what Enid, whose French was considerably better than her own, had gleaned from the news broadcast but didn't dare risk showing any unusual interest in a school that shouldn't have had anything to do with 'Heloise'.

"He runs a newspaper stand a few blocks from here. Mrs. Prewitt buys newspapers and magazines from him when the guests ask for something special."

She felt her anxiety ease somewhat. She was much better at reading French than she was at listening to it, and a newspaper wouldn't be suspicious about the answers she sought from it. With considerably more interest, she hurried out of the hotel. Outside, the weather was cold and damp, and Enid slipped her arm into Hermione's and huddled close to keep warm as they made their way up the street and turned left towards the Parc Lutetia, a cozy little wizarding neighborhood with an ancient cemetery on one side and an open-air market on the other.

At first, the neighborhood seemed the same as usual. Couples and tipsy weekend revelers crowded the streets, interspersed with the occasional late shift worker. No one looked or behaved as if anything important had happened, but when they neared Bayard's newspaper stand they could see that the local citizenry wasn't as disinterested as it first appeared. There was a crowd gathered around the stand, not

exactly a mob, but the man behind the stand was clearly harried by the number of people demanding their papers all at once.

"We better hurry or he might run out," Hermione said, pulling her anxious friend forward. They moved in as close as they could while they waited for a space to open at the stall so they could make their purchase. Hermione found herself standing next to a tall, broad figure in a black hood and coat. She wouldn't have looked twice at him, anxious as she was for news about Hogwarts and her family, but in the moment she was forced to wait idly her ever curious gaze wandered the crowd until it happened to land on the man's hand.

The first thing she noticed was that he wasn't wearing any gloves, nor had he stuck his hands in his pockets despite the below freezing temperatures. The second thing she noticed was how terribly pale it was.

She stiffened instinctively, identifying him immediately for what he was.

Enid, still gripping her arm, felt her sudden tension and turned to follow her gaze to the man beside them. The girl let out a startled squeak as she too realized what exactly they were standing next to. The vampire heard her and tilted his head slightly towards them, dark eyes peeking out from the hood. He blinked once and stiffened too.

The girls both took an instinctive step backwards.

"Er, excuse us," Hermione apologized awkwardly. She had to remind herself not to run away. Vampires, after all, were technically legal citizens and hardly committing mass murder in the streets. Not in this century at least. She didn't want to come off as a rude and ignorant bumpkin by running away. Beside her Enid didn't seem nearly as concerned about appearances and was tugging persistently at her coat sleeve.

Dark eyes blinked at her, and she realized she had spoken in English. Perhaps he didn't speak it.

"Excusez-moi," she tried again.

He turned towards her fully, pulling down his hood as he did so to expose his face. It was Hermione's turn to gasp.

"Viktor..."

"Her-"

Her hand flew up of its own accord, covering his mouth before he spoke her name. Before he exposed her in the middle of this crowd, to Enid, to anyone who would think to look twice at her. He blinked at her in surprise.

"Um... Heloise... maybe you shouldn't... uh... you know... Vampire?" her roommate stammered. "Teeth."

She was suddenly aware of his lips. His very cold lips she could feel smiling even through her gloves. She jerked her hand back. He barked out a laugh as she pulled away, his dark eyes as warm as she remembered even against the unfamiliar, deathly whiteness of his face.

"What are you doing here?" she demanded. "I thought you were dead."

He cocked his head in amusement, and she blushed.

"I meant really dead."

"Ah, dat... is a complicated story."

"You know him?" Enid whispered anxiously, still trying to tug her friend away. Hermione wasn't quite sure how to answer that.

"In another life," Viktor offered with that same teasing smile, his fangs just peeking out behind his lips. He reached out, and she forced herself not to flinch as he touched a lock of her straight, black hair. "You were always lovely, but dis new look especially suits you."

She felt herself blushing even harder. Turning to Enid, she asked her to get what they came for, promising to leave as soon as she did. The other girl needed no further encouragement and put forth extra effort into squeezing into the crowd. Hermione turned back to the vampire and crossed her arms.

She had no idea what to say to him. He seemed quite content to just stare at her, studying her with childlike wonder. He had looked at her like that before, back at Hogwarts when she said something he found so utterly peculiar and yet charming. Before he had betrayed her.

Suddenly, without thinking, she slapped him.

He flinched even though she was certain her hand was smarting more than his face.

"I deserve dat," he said.

"Yes," she agreed.

"I am sorry."

"I don't care."

Except that she did. She cared that he was sorry, that he had regretted leaving her like he had and kidnapping her best friend on top of it. She wanted him to feel positively awful about it, because it had damn near killed her. And then he had gone off and supposedly died before she could ask him why. Only he apparently hadn't. Except he still sort of had. She didn't have a clue on how she was supposed to feel right then. Should she be happy? Angry? Indifferent?

She didn't know, but the slap had felt pretty damn good so that was probably a step in the right direction.

"Dere is much I would say to you," he continued. "Much I would apologize for, but I cannot do dat here. Can we speak in private?"

She glared at him.

"Viktor, I wouldn't have trusted you enough to go somewhere alone before you became a vampire. What makes you think I would trust you now? Anyway, I don't care anymore."

A lie, an obvious one at that, but she was done dancing to his tune. Let him be sorry or not sorry as he chose. It didn't change anything. They could never have what they had before. They were no longer those children anymore.

"Ah..." Viktor sighed. "I made it quite impossible for us, didn't I? Dese mortal affairs dat mean nothing to me now."

Hermione looked away. The way he looked as he spoke made it apparent he didn't consider her one of those 'mortal affairs' he was now indifferent to.

"Did you know about the attack at Hogwarts?" she asked. It might have been a little reckless to say so near the crowd, but she wasn't going off alone with him to ask it.

"No. I haven't followed de war since I died."

She wondered if she should believe him.

"Then why are you here at a newspaper stand?"

"The war isn't the only thing they print in the newspaper..."

He reached into his pocket, and Hermione instinctively reached for her own wand that wasn't there. She berated herself afterward. Viktor was a vampire, and vampires couldn't cast spells. Rather than a wand, he pulled out a folded piece of paper and handed it to her. She carefully unfolded it. It was a newspaper article. About her. There was a photograph of her in her dueling robes and a headline 'Sentinels Still Searching for Murdered General's Daughter'.

It suddenly became difficult to breathe, and she hastily folded the paper again and handed it to him. He brushed her gloved hand with

his fingers as he took it back, quite deliberately she thought, and placed the article back in his pocket.

"You can't... You can't be in love with me," she said sternly, not looking at him.

"I don't really have much choice in de matter. It would be much more convenient if I were not."

"I don't love you."

A truth. A wonderfully reassuring truth. She didn't love him anymore. She had hated him for a long time, and then simply forgotten about him.

He smiled at her sadly.

"I know. It doesn't help."

Hermione couldn't think of what to say. Was she supposed to comfort him? Commiserate? Spurn him still further? She was spared having to reply by Enid grabbing hold of her arm and her attention.

"I have the papers. Let's go," she said anxiously, her eyes flitting nervously to Viktor.

"Okay," Hermione agreed. To Viktor she said, "Don't follow us."

He didn't move from his spot as Enid hurriedly pulled Hermione away, and once they were out of sight of the vampire her roommate questioned her.

"Who was that, Heloise? How do you know a vampire?"

"I didn't know a vampire," she said. "But I knew him when he was human. A wizard. We dated for a while... sort of."

Enid seemed to relax a little. Obviously, she felt better about rooming with a girl who hadn't had a romantic affair with a vampire. Those sort of girls were known for coming to a sticky end.

"So what happened?"

Hermione hesitated.

"He ran off with my best friend."

"Oh! That's awful!"

"Yes, it was," she agreed. "And I would appreciate it if you didn't tell anyone else about it. Lorelei would be insufferable if she knew, and Mrs. Prewitt would try to lecture me and never let me out after sunset again."

"I promise. Just... be careful, okay? He still seemed interested in you," Enid warned and looked around nervously as if expecting to be followed. There was no one to be seen, and as they reached the Hotel Raoulin, the other girl finally seemed to relax. Hermione did not look around once. She didn't need to.

She could feel Viktor's eyes on the back of her neck all the way home.

Queen Ophelia read the letter in her late father's study by firelight, wrapped in warm shadows and secrets. She had her own study of course, one she had decorated herself to a more modern and less overtly masculine style, but she liked to read Lord Voldemort's letters here. When she had been just a girl and her father had been grooming her to take his throne, he cosseted her away here and talked to her of secrets by the firelight. She had ever since associated her father's space with secrets, and if given a choice she preferred to read all the Dark Lord's correspondence there, particularly the private letters.

This letter was both private and official, talking of personal matters and politics with equal intimacy. It was secrets layered upon secrets, a conspiracy by style rather than necessity. There was nothing there she could not or would not have shared with her advisers, but he worded it all in such a way that she was sure would have made them blush and huff indignantly at his presumption.

But she wouldn't read the letter to them. She would answer the letter, and he would send more letters back in a tone her advisers would find more acceptable, although they would always huff indignantly at the presumption of a governmental usurper addressing a queen. No, this letter was for her, and for Serafina, who was now old enough to begin learning secrets herself.

"Germany has surrendered, as you know," she said to her niece when she finished reading the letter to herself. Serafina was kneeling at her feet, staring up at her like a child being told a story. "The battle at Hogwarts destroyed two thirds of their fighting forces. They sent word they wished to surrender within hours of their defeat. A wise move under the circumstances. The Dark Lord's retaliation if they continued would have been... thorough, I imagine."

Serafina nodded, but Ophelia could tell the girl didn't really understand what she meant. All her niece really knew about the Dark Lord was that he was a handsome rogue and semi-king, exceptionally charming and highly respected by both his people and their own. Hers was a child's understanding, because Serafina herself was still a child. She was shiny curls, bright eyes, glowing smiles, and dresses of ruffles and lace. Gently, she reached out and ran her fingers through her niece's curls and decided it was time to straighten them. Serafina was almost a woman now and would one day be a queen. She could not continue to look like a child's doll.

"He intends to submit the terms of their surrender very shortly and has offered to take our own terms into consideration in recompense of the assistance France has given him. What do you think we should ask for, my dear?"

Serafina frowned thoughtfully, but she was distracted.

"I don't know. Did he say whether Prince Harry is alright? Do you suppose we'll see him soon for the negotiations?"

The queen sighed.

"Lord Potter is not a prince, my dear."

The incorrect title was a matter Serafina had been scolded on by both the queen and her tutors on several occasions, but which showed no signs of disappearing. It was an annoying, but relatively harmless quirk.

"I'm sorry, but is he alright?"

Ophelia considered not answering the question until they had completed their discussion on more official matters but decided it would be petty. A queen must be patient above all else.

"Lord Potter was seriously injured during the attack. It seems he was maimed by the enemy, and it is feared he will lose his left arm."

Serafina gasped softly, eyes widening.

"Lord Voldemort has requested our best healers to attend to him, and I will, of course, send them, but nothing can be guaranteed. It may already be too late."

"Oh, my poor prince."

Ophelia's expression hardened.

"I mean Lord Potter."

"Why do you say so?" the queen demanded. "Lord Potter was injured in service to others. He has known battle and been injured before. He knew the risks, and he made the sacrifice; for his country, his ruler, and his classmates. Do you suppose if he had known the consequences, he would have chosen differently? For all your supposed admiration of 'your prince', you do not seem to grasp his character. Do not pity him, child. Admire him and learn from his example. Now, what should we ask for?"

Chastised, Serafina looked down in embarrassment. She was a princess, a witch born from a mighty lineage. Her heart ached at the thought of her brave, darling prince being so savagely injured, but Queen Ophelia was right. Harry was to be admired, and loss of an arm would not sway her affections for him. He deserved a love that

would not waiver from mere injured vanity. He was a great prince. He deserved a great princess.

She tried to turn her thoughts to the Queen's question, to see to her duties just Harry had seen to his.

"Hhhmmm... we should have the Germans pay for all the damage caused by German terrorists," she said after some consideration. "And to compensate those who were injured or killed."

Ophelia nodded.

"Yes, very good. What else?"

"Umm..."

She tried to think of something else, but all she could think of was Harry, somewhere in England, writhing in agony on a hospital bed. The queen eventually answered for her.

"First and foremost, we will demand the release of French citizens detained in Germany. We have over fifty of our people who were imprisoned illegally after we officially declared ourselves allies of Britain. They too must be compensated for any injury to themselves or their property. Then we must have the names of those saboteurs released. Terrorism is still an executable offense, particularly since we were not in open war with Germany itself. We may also ask for compensation for the expense of both the creation of the new werewolf colonies, which were made necessary as a result of Germany's abhorrent abuse of werewolves, and for the military defenses we built along the Rhine."

Serafina nodded, feeling foolish for not having figured at least some of that herself.

"Do you suppose," she asked after another moment of thought, "that Harry will come back to France soon for the negotiations?"

Queen Ophelia sighed in exasperation.

Four days after the Great Battle of Hogwarts, as it was now being called, Harry found himself sitting across from Giles Loughy, a reporter from Wizing Weekly at a hotel in Bristol. The man was in his late forties and dressed in a brown suit and a dark green robe, his tiny glasses perpetually threatening to slide off his large round nose. Harry was dressed in white. His robes were white. His shirt was white. His pants, his shoes, his right glove all white. The bandages wrapped up the length of his left arm and hand were white, but that was usually a given. Even his skin seemed strangely white.

Except for his left arm.

That was the darkest shade of black, and most of it was carefully hidden from view but for the tips of his fingers peeking out through the bandages. His healers had said he shouldn't wear his glove over it, but their reasoning had been vague and unsatisfactory. Harry suspected it was Voldemort's doing. He wanted the world to know his protégé had been injured without appearing as if he were flaunting it or showing weakness. The thought made Harry curl his hand into a fist and hide the blackened digits in the palm of his hand. It hurt to bend his fingers, but he didn't mind. His healers said the pain was good. At least he could still feel his fingers.

"Lord Potter," Loughy began, "I would like to first thank you for taking the time to speak with me. I understand you are still recovering from a very harrowing experience and that you have many other matters you must attend to."

"You are welcome, but I ask you keep this interview short. I do have other matters to attend to. A funeral, as you may have guessed," he said, gesturing towards the white robes with his good hand.

"Of course, of course. Let me ask, how are you? There are rumors that you had been seriously injured during the attack."

"I took a curse to the arm, as well as some bumps and bruises... magical exhaustion."

"Anything permanent?"

Harry's left arm twitched involuntarily.

"It's too early to say. I suspect I'll have another scar or two to tell my children about. I got off lightly, considering..."

Loughy nodded sympathetically.

"You lost friends during the attack."

There was no question, so Harry didn't answer. Of course he had lost friends, but even if he hadn't been close to those who had died, he couldn't be expected not to grieve. They had all been growing up together in Hogwarts.

"There were fourteen deaths that occurred inside the castle itself that night," the reporter continued. "Nine of them were students, three teachers, and two Sentinels. Any you were particularly close to?"

"All of those who died at Hogwarts... all of those deaths hurt, but yes, one in particular I feel... more keenly than the rest."

He did not say the name. It felt disrespectful to the others to elevate one death among the many, and he doubted it would have comforted the boy's family any to have known it. Allbright... Timothy Allbright, who had lived up to his surname in all his luminosity of spirit, had died in western corridor while covering the retreat of his classmates. Harry had mentored him in Dueling Club, watched him grow from a timid first year barely able to cast a Shield Charm to a confident, competent duelist in the span of three years. Out of all the Duelists, Allbright had been the one he was most proud of. There was talk that the boy was going to be a Prefect next year.

But he was gone now. Gone like Larousse. Like Brennan. Like Lucius. Like thirteen other witches and wizards who Fate had not favored that night. Professor Slughorn, who had still spoken to him sometimes of his mother with genuine fondness, and Professor Vector, who would never get to finish that paper they had worked on together. Burrows and Underhill, honorable men both, gone before he could either hate them or forgive them. Amanda Tott, Hufflepuff prefect, who led Harry's study group in Herbology but couldn't grow weeds herself.

So many lost.

Loughy cleared his throat, drawing back his attention.

"I understand your foster father and the school headmaster, Severus Snape, was critically injured during the battle as well. How is he?"

Harry didn't bother to correct the man. Snape was his guardian, not his foster father, but it seemed a petty distinction under the circumstances.

"He is lucky to be alive. I am extremely grateful to Draco... Draco Malfoy, that is, for coming to his aid. The Headmaster was... tortured to be blunt, and he refused to betray the school. If it weren't for Draco and his friends, I don't think he would be here now."

"Draco Malfoy... he is the late General Malfoy's son, yes?"

"Yes, and Headmaster Snape's godson."

"A friend of yours?"

"Yes."

"You seem to have many very brave friends."

"Everyone who was there that day was very brave. Not all of those brave people walked away unscathed, I'm afraid."

"There are many who are saying it is you who was very brave. They're calling you a hero."

Harry shook his head.

"Nothing I did would have saved the school or the other students on its own. It's Lord Voldemort who deserves to be called a hero. I would have been killed if he had not arrived when he did, and it was his spell that defeated the Germans-"

"A spell you helped cast."

"A spell I didn't know or understand and couldn't have done myself."

He hated to say it. He hated to give Voldemort that particular accolade, but it was deserved. None of them would have made it without the Dark Lord having been there. The reporter leaned forward a bit, his expression changing from politely sympathetic to concerned.

"There are those who have accused the Dark Lord of using magic of the Darkest kind. What would you say to that, having been witness to it directly?"

Harry stared at him for a long moment. Up until now the interview had been almost entirely choreographed. Loughy's questions and Harry's answers had been written on little cards he had thumbed through that morning over a breakfast of truly abominable hospital food. He had agreed to do it. There hadn't been much point in fighting it, and the Dark Lord had explained these tedious rituals were all necessary for the nation to walk through its own stages of grief and mourning. Children had died. Many more had been seriously injured and psychologically scarred by the experience. Hogwarts was in ruins. Harry had gone along with it, because he didn't know how else to grieve himself.

But Loughy's question stirred something in him. He knew what his answer was supposed to be. He was supposed to say that a powerful spell was not necessarily a dark spell, and under the circumstances, it had been all that stood between Hogwarts and absolute destruction, and he dared anyone to criticize the Dark Lord's actions who hadn't been there themselves. That's what he should have said.

"I would say that they were absolutely right."

Loughy gave him a surprised look, which quickly turned nervous. Clearly, he had expected him to deny the truth.

"Um... hah-ha," the reporter laughed nervously, "I suppose, given the circumstances it wasn't unreasonable-"

"He used blood magic," Harry continued. "There were Germans who had gotten into the castle, so he went about slaughtering them and then exsanguinating them. A very messy process. You should have seen him afterward. He was covered in blood, head to toe."

"Ah, ha ha, Lord Potter-"

"But it was essential, you understand. The stones of Hogwarts are already soaked in blood. That's where all the magic comes from. That's why it keeps absorbing more from all the witches and wizards who live there. It's all Blood Magic. He just needed more. So... he took it. And then he used it. I helped him."

He uncurled his left hand, showing Loughy his black tipped fingers.

"I paid a price for it."

The reporter stared at him for a long moment.

"Do you regret it?"

Harry smiled at him sadly. It was perhaps the only question Loughy had asked him that wasn't scripted.

"Not yet."

"Lord Potter."

They both turned to the door where Reggy loomed, his expression sternly disapproving. Harry wasn't sure if it was directed at him or at Loughy.

"Yes, Captain?"

"Your ride is here," he said, his expression softening somewhat. Ah, so the reporter it was then.

"Thank you, I'll be right there. Mr. Loughy, I am afraid that's all I have time for today."

Loughy stood and bowed politely, rather than shake his hand. It was a gesture that Harry wasn't entirely comfortable with, but one that seemed to be becoming increasingly common the last couple of days. He wondered how much of it was respect and how much was a desire not to touch him. He stood, paused a moment when he felt slightly light-headed, then strode out of the room. His personal aid (why the hell did he need a personal aid?), Rebecca, had his cloak, also white, ready for him and slipped it over his shoulders as he entered the hallway. Reggy hovered. He was always hovering it seemed, but at least he didn't try to make him speak when he didn't want to.

"You look pale. Is your arm still bothering you?" the elder wizard asked. "I could make your excuses. No one would think less of you under the circumstances."

Yes, they would, Harry thought without resentment. He would have thought less of himself too.

"I'm fine. Despite what Lord Voldemort insists I tell the press and anyone who asks, my arm is not about ready to fall off, and I'm not going to keel over dead. You needn't coddle me."

Harry could tolerate the hovering, but not coddling. In some ways he was glad to have someone he could be bluntly honest with regarding what had happened. Reggy had been at the battle, he had lost men there, and he was clever enough to figure out most of what really happened on his own. Out of everyone that had been attending to him, an endless stream of healers and aids and guards and court officials, Reggy seemed to be the only one who truly understood what he had been through.

"If anyone has a right to be sore about this media circus, it's you. You have the right to heal and grieve in privacy. He shouldn't be making you play brave martyr on top of everything else," the Captain insisted.

'He' being Voldemort. Another point in Reggy's favor, he didn't seem the least concerned about pointing out the Dark Lord's amoral and oftentimes selfish behavior. At least not in private. But right now, Harry didn't want to talk about Voldemort. It was too confusing to sort

through how much resentment his mentor did or did not deserve. He was a selfish bastard, but he had his own sort of honor. He believed the dead deserved remembrance.

"Maybe not, but I still want to go. This funeral... They were my friends, Reggy. My classmates, my teachers. They deserve to be honored and remembered."

Reggy nodded reluctantly, clearly unsatisfied with the answer.

"Fine, but if you start to feel dizzy, tell me. You're not going to honor anybody by fainting from exhaustion into someone's funeral pyre."

Ira sat beside Snape's hospital bed, her left hand holding a book in her lap and her right entwined with his. He was quiet, like he was most of the time these days, and his thoughts wandered around meaningless things. He brushed his thumb over hers, feeling her smooth, thin skin beneath his calloused fingertips. She was reading quietly a book Snape himself had been in the process of reading before the battle on the history of the potion master's profession. It was a rather grisly book to be honest, filled with anecdotes of potion's experiments gone horribly wrong and poisonous rivalries and muggle persecutions (potion's master, which had been mostly women before the Renaissance, were unfortunately vulnerable to witch hunts).

Someone entered the room, and he tensed. Ira stopped reading and looked up. It was Healer Brently, a gaunt, gray man who always looked like he was glaring even when he wasn't.

"How are you feeling, Professor Snape?" the man asked blandly. "Is the dosage of your potions proving adequate?"

Snape blinked at the man slowly, then said, "Less."

Brently stared at him for a moment then nodded.

"I'll have the nurses reduce the pain potion to three-fourths the current dose. We'll see how you feel tomorrow before I approve anything less than that. There's no need to be proud about these sorts of things and suffer if you don't have to."

"I don't believe it is a matter of pride," Ira protested. "The potions affect his ability to think clearly. It makes him uneasy."

Snape had not told her this, but somehow she had figured it out. He felt a swell of affection for her, his attentive, conscientious wife, and with it a swell of guilt. He had put her in danger, failed his duty as her husband to protect her, and even now couldn't bring himself to confess it. To warn her that she still wasn't safe so long as she remained by his side while the Dark Lord waited to collect the debt his lies had cost him. He was glad she wasn't looking at him. He didn't know what she would have been able to read in his face if she had been watching him instead of the healer.

"Hhhmmm... If it's merely a matter of mental acuity then I'll see if we don't have some local anesthetic in stock that should help. Now then, let's see the progress on the leg," Brently said.

The healer moved to the foot of the bed, pulling away the sheet that had been draped over the injury. Snape's eyes, which had been following the healer closely until now, moved to stare up at the ceiling. He felt uncomfortable looking at the limb encased in a torturous-looking cage of pins. Ira tightened her grip on his hand in sympathy. He had seen the leg once already that morning. It was swollen, purplish, and didn't look entirely straight from the angle he was lying at. Every time he saw it he wondered if it would be that way forever.

Brently frowned at the leg as if it had insulted him.

"It's healing. Slower than I would like, but at least everything looks straight. No infection."

"Potter would have been up by now," Snape said in annoyance. This was a rather common complaint as of late. Harry had a similar injury in both legs and treatment after the Battle of the Berlin Underground. His injuries had been egregious, and it had taken weeks to recover fully, but his broken legs had been repaired within a week. He had been able to walk on his own only a few days later.

"Unfortunately, you're not a teenage boy any longer, Professor Snape," Brently scolded. "They're a lot more... springy at that age."

"How long then?"

"Until the pins come out? Tomorrow should prove sufficient. Until you can walk on it? Another... six days, perhaps? You'll need a cane for a couple of weeks."

Snape nodded. It wasn't what he wanted to hear, but he had accepted that nothing about his recovery would be pleasant. A part of him was glad that it wouldn't. Penitence had always seemed like a pretentious sentiment to him, but it was the sort of pretentious sentiment the Dark Lord approved of. Perhaps he would consider at least some of his punishment meted out already. It was difficult to gauge what would appease the Dark Lord, even now, when time and his soul had mellowed him... relatively speaking.

The healer left, Ira settled back, and Snape waited for her to start reading again, but she didn't immediately.

"I probably should wait until they reduce your pain potions," she said. "But I... there's something I wanted to talk to you about, and it just gets harder to do the longer I put it off."

He turned towards her, taking in her expression. He was struck by how pleasing she was to look upon. Not really beautiful, she was too plain to be little more than mildly pretty most days, and her eyes were too shadowed and her skin too pallid right then to be even that generous. But, nevertheless, she was pleasing. She had a very earnest expression, held in check by a very feminine sort of English dignity that he thought would only make her features more refined with age rather than withered.

His fingers traced along hers, twisting the wedding ring on her finger round and round absently. He thought about her fingers, and how delicate they were in his hands. He thought about the Dark Lord and his threat to cut them all off. All but the ring finger, so she would understand that it had been entirely his fault. He thought about fear. He thought about guilt. He thought how pleasant it would be when

they reduced his pain potions so he wouldn't be so stupidly sentimental.

"What is it?" he asked.

"It's just... after all of this. Well, not just this, but you know, the entire year..."

The baby. Their baby. Lost. A dream so large and buried in a jewelry box.

"I've been thinking... that we should try again."

He blinked at her. He wondered if he had drifted off to sleep without realizing and was dreaming this conversation.

"I've been a coward, Severus, and selfish. I've been so worried about losing what I already have, I stopped thinking about what I was already losing by giving up. We wanted a family so badly, and we were doing it. We were so close, and then... and then we... and then there was a disappointment, and I lost myself to it. I gave up. We had barely really gotten started, and I just... couldn't anymore. But I was wrong. Or maybe I just wasn't ready. I don't know, but after what's happened... I nearly lost you. I don't know what I would have done if you hadn't... Am I making any sense?"

Frankly, Snape wasn't entirely sure that she was, but he thought she had made herself pretty clear in the beginning. She wanted a baby. He was a half-dead cripple, and she still wanted to have his baby. He wasn't sure if he should want to kiss her or throttle her at the moment.

"I was thinking," she continued, "that Hogwarts is going to be closed for the rest of the term at the very least, and you'll need time off to heal too. We can try again in the fall, so if it works this time, then I'll have the baby next summer. The war is over now, so it will be safe to try and buy a place down in Hogsmeade again or even have one built while the market price is still low. Harry will be off to university next year, so we'll have the extra room at the cottage if that plan falls through..."

His mind started to wander. Not off subject, he was still quite attuned to the idea that another attempt at children was going to be made and preparations were in order. Her idea of preparation and his just happened to follow different tangents. Most notably, he needed make amends with Voldemort and very soon. The attack on Hogwarts and the subsequent surrender by Germany (and it was not a surrender he entirely trusted) had bought them both time, but there was no way the Dark Lord had forgotten about his punishment. After several days of worrying over the matter, albeit in a half-drugged stupor, he was of the opinion that cutting off Ira's fingers had probably been a ruse. She was, after all, not only Snape's wife but also Harry's friend and Morgan's stepdaughter, one the elder wizard was actually quite fond of.

Voldemort had intended to scare him, and it had worked. That his punishment would stop at scaring seemed unlikely, however. He needed to find a way to make peace with his Master once again. He needed to keep his family safe.

He could give up Ron Weasley, but somehow he didn't think it would be enough, and he had his own reasons for wanting the boy to remain in his debt. Weasley had potential, if he could be taught to curb his more petty and impulsive behaviors, and Snape felt a debt held over his head would one day prove quite useful. That he was not in fact responsible for Lucius' death meant he would not satisfy Voldemort by way of compensation, only prove to be a waste of time and effort for everyone involved in the investigation.

He would, of course, still give Weasley up if necessary, but only if necessary.

Something else would have to serve as compensation to Voldemort.

He closed his eyes, trying to think of what would work, but Ira was still talking. A soothing hum in the background of his mind, and before knew it, he drifted to sleep.

Harry slept on the train. He dreamed he was awake, riding through a moor, the water black and air gray with mist. Sometimes the train would stop at rickety wooden platforms that rose straight out of the

muck, and ghosts would separate themselves from the mist and board. Voldemort sat across from him in his dream, but said nothing until Harry thought to ask where the train was going.

To the Styx, he said.

And the train crashed into the ocean, and he drowned quietly in black water.

He opened his eyes to Reggy sitting across from him, staring out the window thoughtfully just as the Dark Lord had been. The symmetry disoriented Harry for a moment.

"Where are we going?"

Reggy gave him a curious look.

"To Hogsmeade, remember? The funerals?"

The Hogwarts Express had been utilized to carry the funeral procession and the dead to Hogsmeade, a symbolic gesture Harry didn't much appreciate. He had always felt this particular train was meant for the beginning of a journey, not the end. No one had bothered to ask his opinion on the matter.

"Oh yeah, I meant, how long till we get there?" he said, yawning into his hand.

"Not long. Ten, fifteen minutes?"

It took thirty minutes, but not because his escort had miscalculated the distance. About two miles outside of Hogsmeade, a crowd began to form on either side of the tracks. Just a few people at first, but the numbers quickly began to multiply the closer they got to the village until the train was forced to slow to a crawl as hundreds of witches and wizards squeezed in as close as they dared. They were all dressed in white of varying shades, and Harry thought of the ghosts from his dream and shivered.

In Hogsmeade itself the crowd had gathered by the thousands. It was an official day of mourning, and all the schools and government offices and many private businesses had all closed, and its citizens flocked to the little village to pay their respects. The wizarding world was small and close-knit. Families, friends, neighbors of the victims gathered. People who knew the victims' families, friends, and neighbors gathered to support them. Old and present students alike gathered to comfort their teachers and each other and remember their fallen housemates, friends, and rivals. Even complete strangers came, marking the tragedy as both personal and national, mourning what was lost even as it finally led to peace.

The world outside the train flowed in rivers of white. Witches and wizards in white robes meandering to white tents and white stalls, where charitable businesses handed out free hot tea and cocoa in white mugs or white candles or Clothes Whitening Charms (not everyone owned white robes after all), and then pooled towards the center of the village where an enormous bonfire had been lit. It seemed even some of the village shops, normally their own kaleidoscope of colors, had been painted white or were draped in white cloth. The only non-white thing to be seen were the Culties in their crisp black uniforms and dress cloaks, a deep rusty red patrolling the crowds for lost children and troublemakers. The crowd seemed quiet though. Grim, grieved, and quiet.

The gathered mourners began to stir with the arrival of the train into the station and slowly made their way towards the platform. Culties cleared a path while an officious-looking Court Official spoke over the crowd for a few minutes. Harry didn't know what he said, but the people in the crowd seemed to shuffle with a little more purpose after he had spoken.

Harry watched it all from the window of his compartment, then turned to Reggy. The elder wizard stared back.

"You can still back out, you know."

It was tempting. The crowd seemed so vast, and inside the train compartment seemed so safe and warm. What would he be greeted with when he exited the train? Would they stare at him with pity for

his blackened arm, his dead friends? Would there be acquisitions? Why didn't you cast the spell sooner? Why didn't you save them? Admiration? There goes the boy who helped win the war! He wasn't sure what he would find more nauseating. He wished, more than anything at the moment, that they had been instructed to put up the hoods to their white cloaks during the procession.

There was a knock on the compartment door, and someone said it was time to start lining up.

Harry opened the door and stepped out into the hall. Other students were already crowding into the aisle, and he felt instantly better surrounded by familiar faces dressed just like him. There was no particular order to the procession of students that would be escorting their departed teachers and classmates up to the cremation site, and Harry was grateful for this. He took a sort of comfort that he wouldn't be intentionally singled out, that he might pass a majority of the crowd without being recognized.

In the line itself, several other students regarded him with some surprise.

"Hey, Potter," a girl a few years behind him greeted him shyly. "Glad you could make it. I didn't think they'd let you out of the hospital yet."

Technically, Harry hadn't been in the hospital for the last three days. Once it became obvious the healers could do nothing about his arm and he wasn't in any danger of dying, he had been moved to a hotel in Bristol, right across the hall from the Dark Lord, although he had seen very little of him.

"Sshhh... I escaped. Don't tell anyone," he said, smiling weakly.

She smiled back just as feebly. "You would."

Conversation flowed up and down the aisles, subdued without the giggling and exuberant shouting they were all used to, but still familiar and vaguely comforting. Harry spotted Clyde and Ginny further up line, but it was too crowded to try and squeeze up to them. He didn't see Natalie or Draco, but the Slytherins had mostly gathered at the

back of the train. None of their classmates had died during the attack, and many of them were only there reluctantly. When he had seen Draco the day before, a brief, tense visit, his friend had counted himself among the reluctant. He wasn't inclined to play the grieving friend to people he frankly didn't give a damn about while his father was barely cold in the ground. Harry hadn't said anything. It was a selfish thing for Draco stay home, but it would have been equally selfish for someone to demand he come. His friend had taken his silence as censure and stormed out of the room. Harry hadn't been in any state to chase after him.

They waited for what seemed like an eternity in the cramped aisle before the mourning wail of bagpipes echoed through the train, signaling the beginning of the funeral procession. Slowly, the procession shuffled through the narrow aisles of the train and out onto the platform. The sky was sunny and blue, but a sharp wind bit at his nose and ears, making Harry wish they had been instructed to put up their hoods for an entirely different reason.

Ahead of them, Harry could see the bodies of the dead, laid out on gurneys and wrapped in gauzy white cloth, their faces left exposed to reveal their peacefully sleeping expressions. Harry quickly looked elsewhere and took several deep, calming breaths. He had come to honor the dead, but he couldn't stand the idea of looking at them. Couldn't stand the idea of never seeing them again except as they were in that moment, empty vessels soon to be nothing more than ash. He was certain he would cry or vomit or do something irrational and embarrassing, and it would be in all the newspapers in the morning.

"Snap out of it," someone hissed in his ear.

Harry startled and stiffened. Very carefully, he glanced behind him. Draco glowered back at him reproachfully. Harry thought for a moment he was hallucinating. The other boy gave him an exasperated look and shoved him forward, and he had to turn back around and hurry to catch up to person ahead of him. They filed down the platform steps in single file, but once they touched the ground they formed up into columns and were handed candles that lit

themselves when held. With some quick and careful maneuvering, Harry positioned himself beside Draco, who was now ignoring him.

He found that strangely comforting.

For the most part, everyone ignored him. Despite his earlier fears, most of the crowd did not seem to recognize him amidst the other students. Their focus was on the twelve students and teachers they were there to honor, and they were nearly a hundred feet ahead of them, laid out on levitating sleds covered almost entirely in white roses and pulled by white horses. People in the crowd were weeping, some quietly, some loudly, but the sound was drowned out by the wailing of the bagpipes.

The procession walked and walked, the crowd remaining thick around them, following slowly after them. The mournful wail of bagpipes gave way to drums and flutes and then to a violin. Hogsmeade gave way to an open pasture, and the road curved towards Hogwarts, but the procession turned to move off the road and up a hill. The wind blew harder and colder as they climbed. Harry's candle grew heavy in his hands and his legs began to ache. Halfway up the hill, Draco reached out to touch his candle and muttered a Levitating Charm on it so that it could hold up Harry's hand rather than the other way around, then pulled away. Neither said a word, but the kindness of the gesture gave Harry the encouragement he needed to make it the rest of the way.

The top of the hill leveled out into a wide, round plateau, and it was there the pyres had been erected. Three white granite monoliths, about ten or so feet high, stood at equal distance from each other. Around each stone were four pyre platforms spread out like the points of a compass. The pyres reminded Harry of brick molds more than anything, with solid granite walls and a hollow, rectangular space inside. At the center of it all stood Lord Voldemort, waiting patiently for their arrival. Harry tried to summon some sort of anger at the man for his presumption. Why had he not been a part of the funeral procession?

But the anger wouldn't come. Deep down, he knew the reason why. Someone had to prepare the way.

Once at the top of the hill, the students all dispersed into the surrounding crowd, leaving a wide space around the pyres. Harry followed Draco into the crowd, pulling up the hood of his cloak as he did so. Within moments, he felt completely anonymous, surrounded by hundreds of other witches and wizards, their hoods similarly pulled up to protect against the wind.

Pallbearers unloaded the twelve carriages (Underhill and Burrows, the two sentinels who had died in the castle were to be honored in the military fashion at a separate service) and carried the dead to their pyres. Voldemort, stately and almost priest-like himself in his white robes, circled each the great monoliths, stopping before the dead to lay a silver coin over each eye. Harry thought of his dream, of the River Styx, where the dead went to forget and where Charon, the ferryman, would only take those across who could pay their way. His eyes felt suddenly hot. His head ached. He wished Hermione was there, crying on his shoulder so he could cry into her hair.

When the Dark Lord had completed his offerings, he moved towards Harry without even having to search the crowd for him. Rather than stop to stand and watch the rest of the proceedings, he grabbed his protégé by his arm and pulled him away from Draco and into the crowd. The people scurried quickly to move out of their way, and Harry was mortified to make a spectacle during such an event.

"What are you doing?" he hissed angrily.

"This part isn't for the like of us," Voldemort replied, continuing to pull him along until they reached the edge of the plateau. The hill was crowded, but on the side where they stood it was steeper and there were less people. Those that were there quickly make space for them with a wary, sometimes confused, glance. Voldemort let go of him, and Harry turned back towards the funeral.

He paused when he realized what Voldemort meant.

Priests had moved in and were speaking now, making some sort of sermon or prayer to a God neither of them could call their own. He turned back around and sighed. Ahead of them, off in the distance,

Hogwarts stood in ruins. He had seen the pictures in the papers of course. The images were splashed across the front page of every paper since it had happened, but it hadn't prepared him for the reality of it. Her towers were broken, her roofs torn up or burned, windows empty of glass, and all around her lay ice. Ice thrown up from the ground like spears, ice blown up into glacial walls, ice hanging down from the roofs and trees and the archways in razor sharp daggers, ice in glassy sheets over every smooth surface, ice in opaque white mountains where fountains and statues once stood. The lake and moat reflected the clear sky like a mirror. All of it glittered in the sun, savage and clean, terrible and beautiful all at once.

I did this, he thought, feeling a mixture of awe, pride, and horror. As if hearing his thoughts, Voldemort's hand came to rest on his shoulder. No. We did this.

They didn't speak. Harry had nothing to say, and Voldemort, for all his blithe disregard for life, has a genuine respect for honoring it. This went on for nearly an hour as the priests performed their rites and people wept, prayed, sang a hymnal Harry didn't recognize, and shuffled to keep warm. Then it was over, and the people lined up to lay down their offerings of flowers, photographs, letters, and whatever flammable sentiment they could offer. Harry had nothing to offer, but it didn't really matter. With over five thousand mourners, there was plenty to pile over the dead and plenty more to fill the empty space in the pyre platforms too. He followed the Dark Lord in a snaking circuit around each pyre, willing himself to look, really look, at his fallen classmates and teachers for the last time.

Some of them he barely recognized. Vector looked twenty years younger with her glasses gone and her hair lain loose. Gerald St. James looked ten years older with his military haircut and sans his usual pouty glower. But some looked just the same. Allbright looked just as he always did. Small, pale, and yet somehow vibrant. Peaceful now, like he were having a pleasant dream. But Allbright wasn't sleeping. He was gone, and all that was left of him was so much flesh and bone, no more truly Allbright than a statue of clay or stone would have been.

Harry said his goodbyes in silence and moved on. At some point, he lost track of Voldemort and his mentor disappeared. He was not particularly concerned. He filed along with the crowd, Reggy eventually coming once again to stand beside him as if he had always been there. Harry intended to search the crowd for familiar faces, but his plans were ruined by a sudden wave of dizziness that caused him to drop his candle. He staggered and was caught by his escort.

"Sorry, I-"

"You pushed yourself too hard. Come on, I'll bring you somewhere to rest."

Harry insisted he only needed to sit down somewhere for a moment, maybe warm up by the bonfire, but Reggy wasn't listening. He took him to Madame Puddifoot's of all places, which had been requisitioned by Culties as a security station for the event. The gaudy little tea shop was known as a sort of romantic hangout by the students, and there were several private booths with comfortable couches. Reggy deposited him in the most secluded one he could find and cast a Muffling Charm to keep out the sharp military tones and pounding of heavy boots on wood floors as the Culties went about their business. He was left alone for a moment while his escort went to get him some tea, but suddenly immersed in a dark, warm, comfortable booth and already exhausted, he fell asleep before he got back.

Harry was woken hours later by someone sliding his glasses back onto his face. He hadn't remembered taking them off to begin with, so the sensation was sufficiently strange that he reached up to swat the helpful hand away and nearly fell off the couch in the process.

"It's time to wake up, Harry," someone said, sinister and familiar.

He opened his eyes, blinking blearily through his lopsided glasses at Voldemort seated across from him, drinking from a truly hideous yellow and pink tea cup. He righted his glasses. The tea cup still didn't look any better. Reggy, who must have been the one to replace

his glasses, handed him a cup of tea. The cup was even more hideous, if possible.

As he reached to take it, he felt a twinge in his left arm and knew the pain potions had started to wear off.

"I put some of your potions in your tea," Reggy said.

"Thank you," he said, although he would have preferred he hadn't. The pain wasn't unbearable, and he would have liked all his senses about him when speaking to the Dark Lord.

"Yes, thank you," Voldemort interrupted impatiently. "I can handle things from here."

The Captain saluted and left, but not without a cautious glance back as he went.

"What time is it?" Harry asked, noting the tea shop was looking especially dim.

"The sun has just set a little while ago, so about a quarter after four."

That meant he had slept for nearly four hours. He was thirsty, hungry, his back ached, and his left leg had gone numb. He yawned and drank his tea. Voldemort watched him intently.

"How is your hand?"

"It's still there."

"May I see it?"

"Now?" he asked, surprised.

"I suppose later would be better. You should finish your tea if you want see them light the pyres."

Harry swallowed down the rest of his drink, and carefully climbed off the sofa. He stretched his back and shook his tingling leg, and once

reasonably sure he could walk with relative dignity, gestured to Voldemort he was ready. They left the shop and entered the village. The wind had died down, but it was even colder now. There was a faint purple and pink glow in the west where the sun had set only a few minutes before, but stars were appearing rapidly in the deepening blackness of the sky. Charmed orbs of blue-white lights had been suspended above to light the streets, making the white robed people seem to glow ghost-like in the darkness. The crowd had thinned considerably, only a third of the previous number but still plenty to stop and stare at them as they made their way out of the village. They were still on the road when the pyres were lit, and they stopped for a few minutes to watch the fires burning at the top of the hill. Harry couldn't see the pyres themselves from their angle, but he could see shadows dancing against the rising smoke. Some of the shadows looked like people, some like birds and beasts, and some that looked like a combination of them.

Eventually, Voldemort placed his hand on his shoulder and led him forward. They didn't go off the road towards the burning hill, but kept on it, turning east back towards Hogwarts. As they made their way up the road, the hill fell out of sight and Voldemort murmured a spell. Harry stiffened, but it was only a Blackening Spell, their pristine white robes darkening into mere shadows. They continued on in silence.

Ahead of them, Hogwarts was dark, her torches left unlit, but the surrounding ice fields glowed very faintly in the weak light of the waning moon, creating a clear silhouette of the castle itself. Entering the ice field itself was not as harrowing an experience as Harry thought it would be either. At a distance the razor sheets of ice, some shards rising several feet above their heads, looked impenetrable by foot, but up close it was apparent that there had been paths made by melting and refreezing. Voldemort, his night vision superior to his protégé's, led them through a twisting curving path.

"What happened to the dead?" Harry asked. There must have been hundreds upon hundreds of dead after the battle, buried beneath the ice and snow, but in the dim light Harry couldn't see any of them. Surely they wouldn't have been left there?

"I believe most of them have already been found and... put away somewhere. Although, I wouldn't be surprised if some were missed. I don't suppose we'll find out until spring."

Harry shuddered.

"Do you suppose any of them will come back as ghosts?"

"If they do, they will be immediately exorcised. They don't belong in this place."

The drawbridge that led into the castle was still standing, though just barely, and once they had crossed over it, they were met by several Culties, who gave Harry a terrible start when they stepped out from behind the portcullis. Voldemort dismissed them, then took a moment to show him something. He lit his wand and held it high. Harry was startled once again, but this time the sense of alarm seemed to grow and sink deep into the core of him. He could feel himself starting to tremble.

Above them, where previously there had only been brick and mortar, there now hung a relief. It was of a woman, her hair in braids and wild curling tresses, her bare arms open in welcome, a look of gentle welcome on her face.

"It's Her," Harry whispered. "It's Madris."

Voldemort looked back up at her, and smiled himself.

"I thought as much. Now, this is your patron goddess, if I recall. What did you do to summon her?"

Harry's thoughts were suddenly bouncing around in his head like a nest of Cornish Pixies. He had made a point not to think back on the battle or his several brushes with death during it, but he couldn't ignore it now. He had made a promise. A promise he wouldn't be able to keep without the Dark Lord's approval.

"I promised to make Hogwarts her temple," he said with a grimace. Voldemort stiffened, the hand that hadn't left his protégé's shoulder

tightened painfully for a moment. Then the dark wizard sighed, and his grip loosened.

"Not precisely the god I would have chosen myself, but then I can't criticize under the circumstances. She's powerful in any event."

"She's a queen among gods, you know," Harry pointed out, feeling defensive of Her despite his earlier reluctance.

"I know," Voldemort sighed, and moved them forward. Inside the castle was like the inside of a cave, dark, hollow, and echoing. It was cold too, and ice layered the floor and formed icicles off the furniture. Harry pulled away from the Dark Lord to place his hand against a stone pillar. His magus hypersentia sensed life and magic still there, but dormant, resting, gathering strength. A sleeping dragon.

"I've never felt Hogwarts this quiet before," Harry said, feeling melancholy even as he said it.

"It could have been worse, Harry. It could have been so much worse."

"Why did they do it? The Germans, I mean. Why attack a school? Did they think slaughtering a bunch of children would have won them the war? That's stupid. It only would have made everyone angrier."

Voldemort made a gesture with his wand, dispelling his illumination charm and lighting the surrounding wall sconces. The entryway was still terribly cold, but the room felt different all at once. The firelight gave the room a warmer glow, illuminating the castle in a light that made the abandoned castle feel more familiar and welcoming.

Voldemort explained, "It wasn't their intention to kill the students, but rather to take them hostage. As hostages, you all would have been considerably more valuable. Our population is relatively small, our children are precious, and the children attending this school particularly so. Seventy percent of the students here come from Pureblood families or have talented witches and wizards in Court positions as their parents or grandparents, and many of those are the sole heirs within their respective families. Then of course, there was you, a national symbol unto yourself. If you have been captured or

killed, it would have been a severe blow to the country's morale. Had they succeeded in taking the students back to Germany, then they probably would have been able to get a cease-fire and our troops withdrawn. Even I would not have been able to justify such a sacrifice."

"But you wouldn't have surrendered, would you?"

The Dark Lord turned to him, light and shadow making his smile sinister.

"No."

Harry wondered what he would have done instead, but didn't ask. He knew he wouldn't like the answer, and he had enough inspiration for his nightmares already. Voldemort's smile widened as if he were reading his thoughts. He turned from his protégé and started up the nearby stairs. Harry followed after him.

Into the belly of the beast, he thought to himself.

"Why are we here?"

"A number of reasons. Queen Ophelia will be hosting the negotiations for Germany's surrender at her palace in Bourges, and I will be leaving soon to oversee the preparations. I wanted to speak with you before I left, and thought we might visit Hogwarts at the same time."

"I would like to come to France too. I want to see the war ended once and for all with my own eyes," he said. It was partly true. With the school closed indefinitely, his friends scattered to the winds, and only his own long, dull recovery to look forward to he would gladly have done some traveling in the meantime, even if much of it would be spent sitting in a corner and listening to grown men squabble. Mostly, however, he saw it as an opportunity to find Hermione. She was in France somewhere, and while he might not have been able to find her himself, it wasn't unreasonable for someone as clever as her to find him and secretly arrange a meeting.

"Perhaps for the official ceremonies," Voldemort conceded, "but for now you will remain in Britain while your magic recovers. It would be too much a risk to take you while you are this vulnerable. Besides, Blackbone has been demanding to see you."

Harry conceded with a nod. Hermione was important, but so was family. They would be anxious for him despite the letters he had sent, and he missed them something awful these days. They walked the western corridors with its partially collapsed roof and missing windows, a room of splinters and shattered glass that had once been the Transfiguration classroom, countless statues reduced to rubble and tapestries burnt or torn. Much of what had been salvageable had already been taken away for storage or repair. The portraits were all gone, as were the suits of armor, the display cases empty. Even the greenhouses, mostly untouched, had been cleared. Natalie had Inana, had smuggled her out during the evacuation and was keeping her for Harry (so she said, but he suspected his friend just really liked having a pet cobra). As they were exploring, Voldemort went over his plans for renovating the school.

"The destruction caused by the attack was a tragedy, but it presents a unique opportunity to improve the school," the Dark Lord said. "We had to postpone the construction of the Preparatory College wing of the school because of the war, but we'll have the extra income to finish that up soon. The school chapel will be reconstructed as a temple to Madris, but we'll just tell everyone it's the new Celtic Culture classroom. Eventually it'll be the Old Magics classroom, but I haven't been able to locate a practitioner sufficiently skilled or tempered to be a teacher yet. The Astronomy Tower... that was unfortunate, but perhaps something can now be constructed more in line with my conservatory near the Sianach Lodge. The entrance to the Chamber of Secrets will have to be moved."

"Or you could just rename it the Chamber of the Basilisk. I think that would be enough discouragement."

"Harry, you're assuming everyone has a shred of common sense. I assure you that isn't the case."

And Voldemort went on and on. The moat would be deepened and widened. The boathouse would be expanded so it could accommodate classes on water-based spells and transfigurations. The ruined artwork would be replaced with more modern pieces. There would be skylights on the southern corridors, and open walkways and mezzanines around the expanded courtyard. Ravenclaws' dormitory would need to be completely remodeled, and if so, Slytherin House would be demanding the same even if there hadn't been any damage to it, meaning the other dorms would be following shortly after. They would need more space. Britain's population was growing, slowly, and Hogwarts would need to grow to accommodate it. That would mean new classes and new classrooms, more teachers needing private chambers. More study places. A larger a library. Even the owlery, destroyed along with almost all its owls, would be moved and remodeled as a brattice off the castle's exterior wall over the lake rather than a small tower.

The more Voldemort talked the more excited he seemed to become about the prospects for the future. Harry tried to feel his enthusiasm, but he couldn't help thinking about what had been lost. A sort of innocence, he supposed. Had it been the castle's innocence or merely Harry's own perception of it? Since the day he had first seen it, Harry had loved Hogwarts. Its grandeur, its warmth, its mystery. But time and circumstance had made him slowly aware that the castle held as many grim secrets as it did curiosities, and there were places as dangerous and dark as the Forbidden Forest itself nestled within the stones. He felt it had balanced out, or even that the good parts outnumbered the bad. Now he wasn't so sure. There was blood in the walls, death and suffering. There had not been enough time to numb the horror of it, for new generations to forget about it, and for continued life to steadily wear away the sharp corners.

Hogwarts would never be what she was, either to his perception or those who came after. He mourned that, just as he mourned Allbright and Slughorn.

Eventually, Voldemort seemed to catch on to his distraction.

"Where are your thoughts?" Voldemort asked curiously.

"Here and there. You talk a lot about what will be or could be, but... I will miss Hogwarts the way she was."

"All things must change, Harry. Even if she were rebuilt exactly as she was before, she would not be the same. You saw to that when you summoned a Goddess, and when I soaked the stones in new blood. In saving Hogwarts, we have destroyed and rebuilt her. We are now as much her creators as the original founders were."

Harry thought on that for a long time, and the Dark Lord left him to his thoughts. Their wanderings had led them to Ravenclaw Tower, now a burnt-out shell, but the stones still stood firm. The stained glass windows had been blown out by the magical fire, and from their vantage point they could see the pyres burning in the distance. It occurred to him that those monoliths and stone pyres could stand as long as the castle itself, reminders of what was lost and won with the castle's rebirth. Perhaps others who died in sacrifice or service to the school would be similarly honored there.

Perhaps he would be too when his time came.

He ran his blackened hand along the cold stones, felt the magic resting there. Could he really be called a Founder? The magic was his magic, and not his magic. Shaped by him, but not of him. But then, the magic had not all been of the original founders either. They had taken much of the magic from the sacrifices made on the wall guarding the Forbidden Forest, and used it as they needed. Just as Voldemort and he had. If he could go back in time, would he have made the same choices?

His left hand caught a sliver of glass from the edge of the window, cutting open his palm. He grimaced and stared at the wound, two inches long and welling up blood as black as the surrounding flesh. He stared at the wound for a moment, before smearing the blood across the stones. It seemed he would have made the same choices. He wasn't opposed to making the same choice now.

The idea gave him a sense of satisfaction, and he understood now where Voldemort's enthusiasm stemmed from. Hogwarts was no longer just a refuge, but now also a canvass. The future had endless

potential, and he had played a part in its creation. Perhaps he would have other parts to play. He turned to the Dark Lord who regarded him smugly, taking Harry's bloody offering as the acceptance it was. Harry felt a swell of irritation. Why did it seem Voldemort always got his way in the end?

"I want you to pardon, Hermione, or I suppose I should say, I want you to stop trying to convince the public she's guilty of something she's not," he said. It hadn't been his intention to bring her up, but he couldn't think of anything else that would irk the Dark Lord as quickly as this reminder of Harry's defiant trickery. It worked. Voldemort's expression quickly darkened. "As a reward?" Harry suggested.

"You cheeky little..."

The Dark Lord let out a huff.

"You know there used to be a time when people were afraid of me? They wouldn't have dared play these games. Now I can't turn around without someone pulling a stunt. You, Blackbone, Greyback, the Germans, Lucius, now Severus. For Merlin's sake, Severus of all people," he lamented.

"I don't know why that surprises you as much as it does. He's actually quite good at making others pull stunts for him. Besides, what are you talking about?"

"Don't tell me you've forgotten? I haven't. Lucius' curse. He withheld the identity of the perpetrator."

"Oh that," Harry said, as if it had all the significance of a lost scarf.

Apparently fed up with his protégé's 'cheek', he hit him with a Shocking Jinx. It was hardly the worst he could do, but stung something awful and left Harry pitifully weak-legged. He fell over with a squawk in an undignified heap.

"Hey!"

"You're lucky you're injured or I would have made that a full Cruciatus," Voldemort said coldly. Harry glared back.

"You're lucky I'm injured or I would have given it right back to you," he snapped back.

The Dark Lord looked momentarily taken aback. Then his expression twitched and twisted, as if he was having trouble maintaining control over his face. It was Harry's turn to look alarmed. The Dark Lord burst out laughing. Harry scowled at him, but it only made the man laugh harder. He realized suddenly how ridiculous he truly was, already sat on his ass by the most childish of jinxes and still starting fights with the most powerful and probably evil wizard in the world.

Before he could stop himself, he burst out laughing too, and they continued to laugh for several minutes. They laughed until it hurt and they couldn't anymore. Then spent another minute or two trying to catch their breath. Voldemort leaned against the wall and slid down to sit next Harry, his right arm just brushing Harry's left. They fell into an easy silence, smiling to themselves.

"You're a ridiculous man, Harry," Voldemort said.

Harry chuckled.

"It takes a ridiculous man to like you, my Lord, even if he only likes you half the time."

"I can't argue that."

"You still owe me something," Harry said, holding up his arm damaged arm.

"I saved your life," Voldemort pointed out. Harry shook his head.

"If we tried to keep score based on how often we saved each other's lives, it's going to get endlessly confusing. Especially since every so often, we try to kill each other. I helped save the castle... again."

"Using magic I summoned."

"Yeah, and nearly killing me in the process. Don't tell me you knew this was going to happen," he said, lifting his wounded arm.

"A minor miscalculation on my part. I overestimated your body's ability to adapt to my blood. It was probably because your magic was already so low, your natural healing-"

"Don't care. Still bloody hurts, and who knows if it will ever go back to normal."

"Well... we could always cut it off and grow you a new one," Voldemort suggested. Harry wasn't sure if he was joking or not.

"Let's not. Anyway, I still think you owe me a favor, and with everyone caught up with the end of the war business, I doubt they'll notice if you turn the investigation elsewhere and she just slips in. With Hogwarts closed, there's no reason for anyone to know she came back for some time."

Now was probably the best opportunity he was going to get for negotiating Hermione's return. Voldemort seemed to be in a relatively congenial mood at the moment, he did owe Harry a favor or two, and like he said, there was still an opportunity to withdraw the warrant without much public embarrassment. Everyone could get their happily ever after. Maybe.

"She's still a suspect."

"Then investigate her. Give her Veritaserum if you must. I know she's innocent."

"Because you know who really killed Lucius?" Voldemort asked, eying Harry expectantly.

"No, but it wasn't her."

"Has anyone told you how grating your absolute faith in others is?"

Funny enough, Hermione had made a similar complaint. Although, it had been directed towards Sirius. And Sirius had complained of his trust in Voldemort. Apparently, everyone thought Harry was an awful judge of character.

"You're pushing your luck, regardless," the Dark Lord continued. "There's still the matter of the curse, the origin of which you knew and did not tell me. You told Severus and not me."

Harry gave him a level stare.

"I don't know if you've noticed, but you have a tendency to overreact."

Voldemort glared back but couldn't refute it.

"You still should have told me. You should tell me now."

Harry sighed. "And then what would you do?"

Voldemort didn't answer.

"And that's why I won't tell you."

"I could make you."

"Yes," Harry acknowledged.

"But you don't think I will."

"I think I could find a way to make you regret it afterward."

Voldemort chuckled.

"I imagine you could. You are the closest thing I have to an equal in this world," he said with a touch of melancholy. Harry looked at him curiously. Voldemort was a being unto himself, neither human nor demon nor god, just... Voldemort. There was no one and nothing like him, and Harry wondered for the first time if he wasn't a bit lonely. "We've shared almost all that can be shared. Dreams, magic,

purpose, and now blood. Loathe me or love me, hurt me or heal me, you'll never be free of me. Would you even want to be now?"

Would he? Harry wondered. Sometimes he did, when the fear and pressure of living in the Dark Lord's shadow seemed to drive him to the brink of sanity. Yet challenge after challenge that had been presented, he had risen to, and for every moment of terror and pain there had been twice as many moments of wonder. The world was a place of infinite possibility, and he knew he would not have realized it without Voldemort leading him, sometimes kicking and screaming, through it.

"I suppose not."

Voldemort smiled another of his self-satisfied smiles that Harry found so obnoxious.

"I suppose I shall have to be the bigger man then and make the compromise. I'll give you two options. One, I will pardon your Hermione and allow her to return without fear of the law or myself, but you will give me the name of the one who cursed Lucius. Or, I will pardon the one who cursed Lucius, and continue to let the girl take the blame. One or the other."

Harry thought about it for a moment. It seemed almost fair at first glance, but then Hermione shouldn't have been persecuted in the first place and Ron, jerk though he was, probably didn't deserve what Voldemort had in mind for him.

"What about Snape?" he asked.

"What about him?"

"If I pardon Hermione, are you just going to threaten Snape to get the name of the curser?"

Voldemort chuckled. "Very good. You're getting better at this."

"So if I pardon the curser, will you leave Snape alone?"

He received no reply. Harry sighed.

"I'll pardon Snape then."

"That wasn't an option."

"I'm still picking Snape. Leave him alone. You owe him anyway for the whole... torture thing."

Voldemort stayed silent for a long time, thinking. Around them, Ravenclaw Tower, a darkened ruin, closed in around them in a strangely comforting intimacy. Torches flickered as the wind blew through the empty windows, making their shadows dance across the room. Harry closed his eyes and waited, listening and feeling his companion's breathing against his aching arm. Cosetted in darkness and ruin, it felt like they were the last two people left at the end of the world.

"Very well," Voldemort said at last. "Consider Snape forgiven, but not forgotten and Granger forgotten, but not forgiven."

"I have no idea what that means," Harry said.

"And I have no inclination to explain, but we're essentially right where we started before... this."

He made a vague gesture at the ruined tower. He climbed to his feet, and helped Harry to his. By now the worst of the Shocking Jinx had worn off and he could walk normally again. So that was it. Another battle of wits and wills, and they were right back where they started. Maybe. Probably not. Somehow or another Harry suspected Voldemort had tipped the scales in his favor, or at least thought he had. On the other hand, Harry was feeling more optimistic than he had since the battle. Hogwarts was closed, but she had a future, and in the meantime Harry now had the time and space he needed to pursue his private interests as well as public ones.

And there was still so much that needed to be done.

Author's Notes:

There seems to be some confusion about the 'Epilogue'. This is NOT the end of the series, only the end of the Book VI. There's still the entirety of Book VII to get through, and that should tie up all the loose ends floating around.

Book VII

Chapter 1: Matters Unsettled and Unsettling

Harry wandered his way through the woods in the dim predawn light, looking for reasonably dry kindling amidst damp undergrowth. The last few days had been unusually warm for February, hovering just above freezing during the day and even sunny at times, which would have been nice if it weren't for the mud and the constant dripping of melting snow. After an hour or so of turning logs and checking tree hollows, he found what he thought would be enough and headed back towards the colony. As he drew nearer, other wood-gathers appeared from amidst the trees, tossing him greetings.

"Morning, Harry," one of the females called. "How's the arm this morning?"

He lifted his arm, still black even over a month later, and wiggled his fingers at her.

"It's still there so I can't complain."

In fact, he could complain if he wanted to, because frankly it hurt like hell. It often did in the morning, as growing stiff during sleep and then being forced into heavy manual labor shortly after waking was something it didn't approve of. If he said anything though, Sirius, still feigning indifference towards him, pretended he didn't care but inevitably assigned his godson to light-duty chores for the morning. He knew his godfather meant well, but being treated like an invalid didn't help matters, not with his arm and not with his status in the pack. So he ignored the pain and did his part, and life went on.

Harry's days now consisted of colony routine, mixed with private study and introspection. The winters were quiet here, most of the work suspended until spring, and most of what they did do revolved around keeping fires going and meal times. Hunting parties came and went every few days, rotating three or four werewolves at a time, to hunt the deer and boar that made the bulk of their winter stews and sausages. It was a break in the tedium of winter Harry was not yet privileged to experience. His quiet time had been devoted to

researching those subjects he had not had the opportunity to study during the school year. The pagan arts and mythos were his primary focus these days, unraveling those mysterious practices he had glimpsed under Voldemort's mentorship and finally making sense of them. Even his own abilities, such as his increased healing ability, his magic-imbued scars, and the affinity his magic took to water (especially cold water), which seemed simultaneously influenced and yet independent of Voldemort, were slowly starting to make more sense to him.

At Remus' encouragement, he had begun writing his own Book of Shadows, detailing those many spells he had created unknowingly in moments of desperation or experienced under the Dark Lord's tutelage. He was not pleased with it so far. He had never written down his own spells before, and they seemed rambling and disorganized when he tried to describe them or put the processes used into words.

He wished desperately for Hermione's guidance. There had to be some sort of style or guidelines for this sort of thing, and if anyone knew what it was it would be his best friend. She was a walking encyclopedia of spells, but more importantly she was a scholar in the truest sense. She didn't learn spells to fulfill some sort of educational quota like most of the people he knew at Hogwarts, but because she genuinely wished to understand magic and how it worked. Even though it took longer and was usually tedious, she had always followed the proper format for research that made it sound like she was writing her college dissertation rather than a third year essay. It drove everyone else crazy, her teachers included, but no one could accuse her of not knowing her stuff.

These thoughts of Hermione's scholastic obsession inevitably led to other, more sentimental thoughts of his missing friend. Whenever his thoughts started to wander from his studies, they inevitably wandered towards her, where she was, and what she was doing. This in turn led him to considering what he needed to do to find her and bring her home. Voldemort was the major problem here, and he wasn't quite sure how he could work his way around him. He figured he had two options. One was to find Lucius' murderer and the other was to gain a favor from Voldemort proportional to Hermione's pardon. The first

option he was tentatively looking into through the use of magic. There might have been some sort of divination technique or spell that could reveal the true culprit, but he doubted it would be as simple as all that. If it were, then Inquisitors like Amelon would have used such spells already. There either wasn't a technique or the methods were considered unreliable or legally inadmissible.

He had written a letter to Robert and Kyle about this possibility but hadn't had the opportunity to send it yet. Elsbeth had returned just last night from delivering a letter to Natalie, and he wanted to give her at least another day to rest before he sent her off again.

As for the second option, he didn't have much control over it. The misadventures of his life often earned him a favor from the Dark Lord but were equally as likely to earn him a debt, and there was no telling when an opportunity would arise next. It could be months or years. He wasn't that patient. There might be other ways to earn such a favor, but he found himself reluctant to ask his mentor directly. It meant the Dark Lord would get to set the terms, and given what was at stake, those terms were likely something he would never be able to demand of Harry otherwise.

Harry deposited his kindling at the bath house where they were just starting to light the furnaces. He chatted with some of the werewolves for a few minutes, then made his way back towards the cabin to get in a little reading before breakfast. Bobby was there waiting for him, perched on an overturned wheelbarrow near the door. Harry smiled at him in greeting and opened the door wide for him.

The lantern was still lit, although the cabin was now empty. The oversized bed had been stripped of its covers, some taken to be laundered and the rest folded and piled at its foot, and the fire was almost out once again. Harry stoked the embers and threw in the last log from the woodpile, then pulled his trunk from under a table and started rummaging for some parchment and his book. Bobby perched himself atop one of the two chairs positioned in front of the fire, warming himself.

"How did it go?" Harry asked. Bobby's feathers fluffed and fell in a bird's equivalent of a shrug.

"Well enough, I suppose. This one wasn't the sharpest knife in the drawer, if you get my meaning, but at least he had the sense to listen when I told him to do something," the raven said, then sighed. "I don't know why it's been so busy lately. I used to go months without a summons and now it seems like I get one every other week."

"Hhhmmm... well, Natalie said paganism has apparently become in vogue lately. I mean, there's always been this fringe group interested in it and then the few practicing druids, but she thinks with everything that happened at Hogwarts people are really starting to get curious about it. Do you suppose you might be getting a few of those sorts? You know, a couple witches and wizards dabbling on the safer side of things?"

"Merlin, I hope not. That happened in the sixties, you know. The muggles were getting into druidic magic and wizarding folks weren't about ready to be outdone. It was a silly affair. Nobody knew what the hell they were doing."

Harry tried to imagine that and started giggling. Yes, he could see how that all might get ridiculous very quickly.

They chatted amiably for a while, discussing Bobby's recent ventures escorting witches and wizards on journeys and Harry about his studies and his arm. They broke off again when they heard the breakfast bell ringing.

"Stay here and keep warm," Harry said. "I'll bring you back some sausage."

"Well, since you're so adamant," Bobby replied, without having stirred from the comfort of his roost.

Harry went to the mess hall and squeezed himself in beside Remus along the bench tables. He helped himself to a slice of rye bread as the sausages made their way up and down the tables and took a quick survey of the room. Every time he sat down in the dining hall, he noticed something new. His first day back, he had noted that there were three new werewolves, and for once they were all women. This

was curious since typically the men outnumbered the women three to one. He had tried to approach them separately and together on several occasions, but they had always hurried off as if scared of him. It wasn't until several days and a very uncomfortable discussion with Sirius later that he learned that all three were German.

He still didn't know how he should feel about that, but since they seemed even less eager to talk to him than he did to them it hadn't become an issue yet. He had the unpleasant notion that it was going to become an issue eventually. Sirius refused to talk about it, but Remus had warned him there would likely be more people brought to them from among the German prisoners taken, and while Sirius might not take any of the wizards offered, he was unlikely to turn away any able-bodied witch. Harry was going to need to find a way to get over his stigma, but he didn't see it happening any time soon. These women... any one of these women might have been the ones to kill Allbright or Slughorn or Vector. Any one of them might have been among the party that orphaned Luna and murdered dozens of innocent men, women, and children. No one else seemed bothered by this, but Harry supposed necessity trumped vengeance in the werewolf mind, and the colonies had been desperate for females from the beginning.

Today's observation was fortunately more mundane. He noticed the latest hunting party had returned and Morton Longtooth, a boy around Harry's own age, was looking around rather smug. It was Longtooth's first winter hunt, a rite of passage for any werewolf but boys in particular, and it seemed he had succeeded in felling a boar or deer. From now on things would be different for Longtooth. He had proven he could be a provider, and that gave him certain rights that he had not had before. He could move to different cabins or even a different colony without his parent's approval. He could court a fertile female, sit in with adults during pack meetings and voice his opinions, and even issue challenges for position as beta or alpha within a pack. It also meant he would be held solely responsible for his mistakes as well as his accomplishments.

Harry had never been on a winter hunt, but he had been considered a grown man by pack standards since before the passing of Greyback. His rites of passage had been stranger by far, yet no less poignant in

the eyes of the werewolves. As a mere child he had challenged the head alpha Greyback more than once and survived, he had tamed the wolf spirit and made it a part of him when he had saved Sirius, and he had killed wizards. No deer or boar could compare with that.

"Blackbone and I are going to take you hunting next," Remus told him, his voice carrying throughout the room.

A least, he hadn't thought it compared.

Harry nearly protested, but quickly caught himself. If he had a choice in this hunt, then it would have been offered in private. But they weren't in private and there hadn't been a question. Sirius had a tendency to be heavy handed, even with Remus and Harry, but this seemed unusually presumptuous. There had to be a reason. Perhaps the pack was starting to suspect their alpha's favoritism again?

"As my alpha commands," Harry said obediently, loud enough for all to hear without sounding forced. This brought a murmur of approval from around the room. Something was definitely going on. Normally, he would spend the meal chatting with Remus, always loud enough for Sirius to hear too, and who ever happened to be sitting around him, but today his conversation was taken up by well-wishers and advice-givers to the point where he barely managed to get a bite of breakfast.

"Don't let them all make you nervous," Longtooth advised good-naturedly. "It's not the hunting part that's the hard part. Rabbits and ducks are honestly a lot harder to hit, and you've bagged a few of them already. It's the camping out part that gets you. Pace yourself and keep your strength up. Don't worry if you don't get anything the first day or even the third. Your shot is out there, you just have to be patient."

"Thanks," Harry said, pleased Longtooth hadn't been put out by the sudden shift in attention. He decided one good turn deserved another. "I'd like to see your kill before I go."

This pleased Longtooth, and Remus murmured a 'well done' in his ear. The meal wound its way down, and Harry finally managed to

finish his breakfast as people filed their way out of the mess hall. Sirius left. Remus gave him a verbal list on what he could and what he should take, then joined his alpha to finish their own errands before they left. Harry wrapped a piece of sausage in a napkin and went to see Longtooth's kill, a boar thinned out by the harsh winter but still impressive and not a kill he was likely to beat, then headed back to the cabin. He offered Bobby the sausage and told him what Remus had said.

"Ah, so he wants to speak with you privately?" the raven asked.

"That might be part of it, but there's probably more to it. There are a lot easier ways of getting me alone than hauling me off into the woods in the dead of winter for a week."

"Any ideas?"

"Not going to bother guessing. I'll be able to ask him myself soon enough. Have you seen my keystone?"

He hadn't been able to sleep with the keystone recently, what with sharing a bed with so many others, so it had remained low in magic since he used it last. Perhaps he could begin recharging it now that he would be relatively alone again. He eventually found it, along with his Baluvian cloak, an extra set of gloves and socks, Draco's knife, and minor odds and ends to take with him. Otherwise, he had very little that would prove useful on his journey. The camping equipment used was shared by everyone in the colony, and the hunting equipment would be provided by Sirius and Remus.

Said equipment was ready and waiting when he went to the clearing just outside the village. Sirius' roundhouse was still standing, archers perched on its roof and smoke puffing from the chimney. A crowd of curious onlookers had also gathered to see them off, their alpha, beta, and... whatever Harry was, exactly, heading off on a hunt. There would be high expectation upon their return, and Harry felt a sense of unease. Harry found his backpack, the smallest among them but still at least twenty pounds, and put away his few contributions. Then he put it on, and Sirius, who seemed to be waiting for just that, tossed his own bag over his shoulder (easily twice the size of Harry's) and

started off towards the trees, heading west. The crowd shouted their well wishes and waved them off until they were out of sight.

For nearly an hour, they continued to walk without speaking. The trees grew thicker and the underbrush heavier. At some point, Sirius led them off trail to follow a small stream as it slowly wound its way northwest. Harry looked about curiously, expecting to catch someone spying on them, but there was no one. The uneasiness he had felt before was becoming stronger the longer no one spoke.

When he couldn't take the waiting any longer, he said, "So... what's this really about?"

Sirius grunted, refusing to slow his steady stride, even as he spoke.

"What do you think it's about?"

Harry sighed. So Sirius wanted him to figure it out for himself. Voldemort played this game as well, stating thinking took practice, particularly in politics, and there was definitely something political about all this.

"You're not mad at me so this isn't a punishment, but you hadn't mentioned a hunt before today so it's a last minute sort of thing. Which means there's either an opportunity or a problem-

"Or both," Remus chimed in, confirming Harry's reasoning even as he evaded answering.

"Is it both?"

"I wonder. Is it, Padfoot?" the beta asked innocently, and Sirius finally turned back to glare at him.

"A personal problem?" Harry guessed, earning him a glare of his own. Definitely personal then.

"Jane has been seen lingering outside the village," Sirius said finally.

"Oh, you just wanted to keep us separate."

But after he said it, he knew that wasn't entirely right. His godfathers had gone quiet and weren't looking directly at him any longer. "Why isn't one of you back at the colony watching her?" he asked.

While Jane, and by extension, Luna hadn't been officially exiled, Sirius had made it clear he viewed them as traitors, and they weren't welcome or trusted anywhere near him. How much the rest of the pack agreed with this sentiment, Harry didn't know. No one spoke to him about it directly or even in passing. And yet, there had been that night when he had been retrieved by Luna and no one had attempted to stand in her way or reported them to Sirius. Did that mean there were werewolves who secretly supported Jane and Luna? How much power did Jane still hold? Was it a threat to Sirius?

He felt distinctly uncomfortable thinking about this. It made his own decision not to speak of Luna's last visit seem... disloyal, perhaps even dangerous if Jane's supporters turned out to be somehow subversive. But if he told Sirius, what would the alpha do? Luna had expressly broken the Head Alpha's command by coming to see Harry, secretly at that, and if the truth were known she would be punished. Pain would be the least of it. She could be banished, and a banished werewolf had no safe place to go.

"She won't reveal anything if we're hovering over her shoulder ourselves, but if she says something or does something she shouldn't we will know about it," Sirius said.

"You have spies?"

"Don't be dramatic. We don't have spies. We have those who are more loyal to myself than they are to her. Just as there are those who are more loyal to her than they are to me. We're not wizards, Harry. We fight our battles out in the open."

It was something of a shock for Harry to hear him say this, and then another shock to realize that he had been so conditioned to expect evasion and half-truths by his circumstances in the wizarding world he hadn't considered the possibility of a political system, even one as

strange as the werewolves', being so open. He should have known better. He was disappointed in himself for not understanding it sooner.

"But then why is she at the colony in the first place? Didn't you send her to another colony?"

"I didn't send her anywhere, I simply kept her away from you or myself. She may be the daughter of Rhiannon and that guarantees her certain privileges, but without my support she can't really do anything. And if she can't speak with me, everyone knows her limitations. She goes to the other colonies, teaches her arts and practices her medicines and makes sure no one forgets her, then after a while she'll come back here to test the waters and see if I'm still angry with her."

"And are you still angry with her?"

"Yes."

Harry felt his stomach drop. Sirius wasn't an eloquent speaker, but he never had to be. That single proclamation, devoid of any variation of meaning or subtext, held a conviction that could not be reasoned with or undermined. While there was no love lost between Harry and the goddess that inhabited Jane, Harry had come to the point where he preferred reconciliation. For Luna's sake, if nothing else, and for the good of the packs, as well.

"So, we're out here to snub her."

Remus snorted loudly through his nose and then burst out laughing.

"He makes it sound like you're a teenage girl when he says it that way, doesn't he, Paddy?" the beta laughed. Sirius growled at him, but Remus only laughed harder.

"Don't you start again," the alpha snarled.

"I didn't say anything."

"You're implying-"

"That you're being petty and immature? I don't need to imply that. I'll say that right to your face," the beta said, the humor in his voice suddenly taking on a biting edge.

Harry knew instantly when Remus had taken his joke, if it could be called that, too far. The distance between the two werewolves had increased somewhat while Harry had moved in closer to Remus, but now everyone had stopped. Ahead of them, he saw Sirius suddenly stiffen and then throw off his gear. Remus matched his actions, though not as smoothly or quickly, and they would have been at each other in moments if Harry, still wearing his own gear, hadn't thrown himself between them.

"Stop! What are you two doing?! Stop!"

Remus pulled back immediately, but Sirius had already been at a run. Harry managed to brace himself and catch the alpha with both outstretched arms, staying upright for a full half second before he was bowled over. He grabbed tight to Sirius' shirt, and rather than allow himself to be shoved to the side, pulled the larger man down with him. His foot came out, catching Sirius in the stomach and sending him flying over Harry's head. The alpha landed on his back, the air knocked out of him in a stunned 'wumf'. Harry would have been quite proud of himself for completing a move that smoothly, if he hadn't still been wearing his backpack and his spine wasn't currently screaming in agony.

"Prongslet!" Remus shouted, suddenly beside him and quickly undoing the straps of his pack. Within seconds Harry was free, and he rolled over onto his side, grunting in pain and relief. By now Sirius had regained some of his senses and rolled over as well, climbing up onto his hands and knees. They were both dazed and breathing heavily as their eyes met.

Sirius looked stunned.

"That was..."

"Stupid and reckless!" Remus shouted, looking like he wanted to shake Harry to pieces.

"... quite brilliant," Sirius finished, and half laughed and half coughed as sat back up. "Where did you learn that? I didn't teach you that one."

Crisis averted, Harry sighed and rolled over onto his back to finish catching his breath. "Redskin taught me last summer."

Wrestling was a common pastime with the werewolf boys, and Harry had played at it a fair amount. He wasn't nearly as good as the other boys, having less opportunity to practice and built more for speed and agility than strength, but he had picked up a few pointers here and there.

"Now what was that all about?" Harry asked. "Since when do you two start knocking heads over... I still don't know. You having some sort of spat I should know about?"

Remus shrugged as if it weren't important, but Harry knew he was only that casual when he was being evasive. He turned to Sirius, who was now looking amused at Remus' expense.

"He's just sexually frustrated."

"I am not!"

"Merlin! Never mind!" Harry shouted, covering his ears. Sirius laughed.

It wasn't until several minutes later, when they were all back on their feet and making their way along the stream again that their moment of madness was explained. As it turned out, Remus was frustrated, although he insisted it was because of Sirius, not because of... that. Sirius had apparently sent Remus' girlfriend, and really that term had limited meaning amongst werewolves, to another colony, despite Remus' objections. There were legitimate reasons behind the transfer, and Remus probably would have been fine with it eventually, except that Sirius had taken an interest in one of the new German women

around the same time. Even someone as laid back as Remus could be subject to envy apparently. Then there was the matter of Jane. Remus seemed to follow Harry's attitude in this, preferring reconciliation, although his reasons weren't the same.

"You can't keep treating her like a leper. It's bad for pack morale, and it's bad for your reputation!" the beta argued.

"My reputation?" Sirius snarled. "Do you think me kowtowing to that little bitch is going to improve my reputation?"

There had been several more minutes of fighting, luckily all of it verbal, falling along the lines that Remus thought Sirius was being stubborn, arrogant, and selfish and Sirius thought Remus was being a short-sighted ninny. Harry grew bored with the bickering quickly and decided action needed to be taken.

"If you'd just talk to her-"

"Let that viper back-"

"- not fair to make the others choose-"

"-give her power over me-"

"- make an enemy where there's isn't one-"

"-won't forget what she's done-"

"Alright, enough," Harry said sharply, drawing their attention. "Enough, enough, enough! Let's just not talk about it. Let's not think about it. Let's just have a bloody week where we're just Padfoot, Moony, and Prongslet and no one is going to die horribly, including ourselves, if we don't make any important decisions. You're not Head Alpha!"

He pointed at Sirius, who stared at his finger with some bemusement.

"You're not his baby-sitter!"

He pointed to Remus.

"Oi!" Sirius objected.

"And I'm not... er..."

What the hell was he precisely?

"The Dark Lord's puppet?" the alpha offered. Remus slapped him upside the head.

"And I don't know Lord Voldemort."

And it was sad to realize how uncomplicated not knowing the man really would have made his life. Sirius looked positively delighted by this.

"Deal!" Sirius said. "I won't mention who's it, and you won't mention that bastard who shall not be named, and Remus-"

"Will forget that you only have the mental capacity of an eight-year old," said beta offered.

"Hey!"

Overhead a raven flew, cawing loudly. The werewolves paid him no mind, but to Harry it sounded as if it were laughing.

"Well that's two less suits to worry about," Robert said, pacing the study and depositing two large folders onto the large desk as he passed and picking up another pile. Draco, who was religiously avoiding sitting at the desk, was sprawled in a chaise, skimming through sympathy letters and checking them for curses. He had found three so far, considerably less than he had anticipated. He yawned and turned his attention to his lawyer.

"Only twenty more to go," Draco said blandly.

"Six, Draco, just six. Three of which I can stall indefinitely if necessary. One that will probably be dropped within the month. It's the Oldershaw and Crutchley suits we're going to have problems with.

They have easily traceable lineages to your father, and they have well-documented claims."

"Except in my father's Will."

"Which doesn't void promises made while alive."

"I'll pay them the damn money, but they're not touching my property."

"It's not that simple and you know it. Anyone can get money, but real estate is where the real wealth lies these days. Since the Dark Lord ordered our complete isolation from muggles, we've had a severe restriction on where we can live. Over half the land available is owned by the Court, and the rest is already owned by other pureblood families or businesses. This land you live on is worth ten times what it did twenty years ago."

"Spare me the lecture on my own property's worth, please. I assure you've I've heard about it plenty of times already. I still don't understand how they can attempt to seize the Malfoy Estate. Father never would have promised them that."

"No, but he did promise them the castle in Ogdensea. He promised both of them."

"Ugh, Ogdensea. I saw it once. Only Azkaban is more depressing."

"Their thoughts exactly it would seem. Which is why they're trying to seize some of the land around here or one of your better town properties, since they can't both have Ogdensea. In fact, neither of them can have it, since your father didn't actually own it."

"Great Aunt Gwenda is in for it any day now."

"Wishful thinking," Robert said dryly. "And in any case, his contracts with them were made in bad faith. It's not a matter of if they are owed anything now, it's just a matter of what they're owed."

"Damn it!" Draco snarled, jumping to his feet and stalking the room like an agitated tiger. "If my father were alive they wouldn't have

dared! They'd take what he had given them and been grateful for it! Damn him! Damn them! Damn it all to hell!"

Robert flinched back helplessly. Draco was not a large man, nor legally even a man yet, terribly pale, with shadowed eyes, and a touch on the side of too skinny, but when he was in one of these moods he was a demon. His elegant hands curled into iron-stiff fists and the energy coiled in his slender frame held an animal danger. It was times like these that Robert suspected Veela or something other than just pureblooded wizard flowing through the boy's veins. He could only stand still and listen, hoping that he didn't turn that thinly-veiled savagery on him.

"We have to make them suffer, Robert. We have to make them and everyone else think twice about trying to force my- the Malfoys' hand again. They all have to be shown that even with my father gone, we're not a bunch of pushovers!"

Robert stiffened. What precisely did Draco mean by 'suffering'? It had better not be of the kind that Death Eaters like his father had been notorious for. He had served as Lucius' lawyer only for a few months, but those few months had convinced him that he never wanted to work for such a man again. Draco had the potential to be more than his father, at least in character, but the strain of these constant battles was taking their toll. He was starting to slide into the tried and true methods taught to him by his predecessor. Methods that had led to many of the problems they were facing now.

Draco needed alternatives. Draco needed the support of family and friends. Draco needed to eat regularly and sleep more. Draco wasn't getting any of those things, and Robert hated that he cared so much. He had never grown this attached to a client before.

"Okay," Robert said, moving back to the desk and pulling out one of the files he had discarded. "I have an idea. You own an apartment complex in London called Chesterhill Terrace. It's valuable. More valuable than Ogdensea in any event, and the property is set up in a way you could split it between the Crutchleys and Overshaws to cover both suits."

Draco had slowed his pacing as the elder wizard talked, until he eventually stopped to stand in front of him. His arms were crossed, and he was glaring.

"I don't see how giving in to their demands makes them suffer, Robert."

"And if we're very lucky neither of them will see it either until it's too late. Here, let me show you something else."

He handed Draco a file.

"This is the Camish Uwen Brewing Company. They're the second largest brewing company in Britain, and well on their way to be the largest. The war made them quite a bit of money selling medical potions to the Culties, and they bought some additional property to open another factory. That property is right next to Chesterhill Terrace."

Draco skimmed through the file more closely, his irritated expression gradually fading into one of wicked delight.

"Oh, my," he chuckled. "It seems the only thing keeping Camish Uwen from gutting that property and turning it into a factory was an injunction by my father. He claimed the noise and smell would ruin Chesterhill Terrace's property value."

"They dropped their suit when I made it clear we weren't going to lift the injunction, but perhaps we were a little hasty. There's no reason you can't make a friend or two in the business world by compromising here and there."

Draco laughed. It wasn't a pleasant laugh, but it was better than his cursing the world, Robert thought.

"Do it!" Draco said.

"It's not a guarantee. One or both of them might catch on-

"That we fought the injunction, won, and then changed our minds again? They won't think that. It's barely been a month since my father died. They'll think I- they'll think my mother is caving in to the pressure and trying to get everything over and done with. They won't see this coming. Not from her. Not from me."

And he was right about that, of course. To the world Narcissa was a grieving widow who had shut herself off from the world, and Draco was merely a child, an untried schoolboy with no real world accomplishment to his name. But Draco had grown in the company of great men and women. His father, terrible but intelligent and accomplished, his mother, a great patron of wizarding culture and societal figurehead, his godfather a renowned potions master and headmaster of the finest wizarding school in the world, and Harry Potter, a boy whose life defied categorization or explanation. Draco had to have learned from all these people things Robert would probably never fully understand and didn't truly want to. One day the world would learn to fear and respect Draco, but for now they would take advantage of it underestimating him.

"I'll make arrangements," he said taking back the folder and gathering some additional papers from around the room. "In the meantime, you should take a break. Eat something. Sleep all day. You've earned it."

Draco turned away and shrugged it off.

"I've letters to write."

"Draco, you need to rest," he insisted.

"I'll rest when I'm dead."

Which would be sooner rather than later at this rate Robert was about to say but was interrupted by the door opening. They both turned to see Narcissa standing in the doorway. She was dressed elegantly in a green silk and her hair made up in an elegant weave, but the veneer of her beauty had grown thin. She was looking very much like her son. Thin, shadowed, and too pale.

"I thought I heard your father in here," she said, glancing around the room expectantly. Robert shared a look with Draco, whose expression was suddenly unreadable.

"He had to get back to the office," Draco said evenly. "He wanted me to go over some of the projects he was working on with Mr. Reicher. He thinks it's time for me to learn a little more of the family business."

Narcissa smiled at this, walking over to him and taking his face into her hands.

"It's well past time for that. You're such a clever boy, Draco. You're every inch your father's son," she said and kissed his forehead, oblivious to the look of anguish before her very eyes. She drew back. "And where is Hermione? I haven't seen her all day."

"Bookstore," Draco said, his voice growing thin. Narcissa sighed in exasperation.

"That girl, honestly. She should be spending all this free time getting to know her fiancé better."

"Mm. He's been just as busy as father I'm sure. Besides, she's likes him already. He said he'd give her her own study."

Narcissa smiled.

"Well, he certainly knows the way to our dear Hermione's heart. When she gets back, send her to my room, won't you? There are few things I want to talk to her about."

"What sort of things?"

"Girl things," she teased.

Draco laughed, a brittle sound that was worse even than the maniacal one. She left after that, slipping past Robert as if she didn't even know he was there. Perhaps she didn't. These days there was no telling who she realized was and wasn't there. Draco watched her

leave, grief and frustration following her until she disappeared, and he turned away in disgust.

"She's gotten worse," Robert remarked. "She needs a mind healer."

Draco sneered at him.

"Obviously, but you know damn well why I can't get one for her."

Of course he knew. He had been the one to warn Draco about the dangers in the first place. If Narcissa was declared legally incompetent, Draco and the Malfoy estate could very easily fall into the hands of the very relatives they were currently in dispute with. Draco wouldn't be a legal adult for several months, and his relatives could obliterate his inheritance in the meantime. Draco might have risked it even then if he had the full support of his godfather, Snape, and some positive regard from the Dark Lord. But Snape had been seriously injured recently and between rebuilding Hogwarts and tending to his new wife his hands were full, and Lord Voldemort seemed to have forgotten the Malfoy's existence since Lucius' funeral. To make matters worse, if it became known that Narcissa had gone mad, she would be disgraced. Even if she recovered fully, which could itself take years, she would always live under that stigma, and Draco couldn't bring himself to do that to her.

"We just need to hold off until my birthday. Then I'll take legal control over the Estate, and I can hire someone to treat her privately. Maybe have her sent to France. They have the best mind healers, and they're discreet."

"That's a long time to keep a secret like this. She could get worse. Someone might grow suspicious."

"I know," Draco said and nothing more.

After all, what else could he say that hadn't been said before? The secret would be kept because it had to be kept. The alternative was unthinkable.

Harry's proclamation that they were to be completely normal and unburdened people, while entirely ridiculous, proved to be just the thing they all needed. Sirius hadn't had vacation from his responsibilities since he became Head Alpha, which in turn meant neither had Remus. So this was the first real break they'd had in years, and while it took a few days for Sirius relax completely, one he did the change was remarkable. He laughed more, he teased and joked, and ran around in his animagus form to chase squirrels. It was like stepping back in time to the old Sirius, the one Harry had met that fateful summer five years before. With Sirius unwinding, something in Remus relaxed as well. He had always been Padfoot's friend and had therefore always worried after him, but these last few years had been exhausting. Harry could see it was good for Moony to become reacquainted with his old friend again and remind him that who they had been was still there, and they still trusted each other enough to show that part of themselves.

Harry just basked in the glow of it, enjoying the familial intimacy he had been so starved of since his parents' death. Even Bobby was there, not interfering with Harry's time with his godfathers but hovering about as any familiar would.

Sirius and Remus led him to a small rock outcropping in the woods, where they set up camp on a wide stone platform nestled up against a small cliff that sheltered them from wind. Their tent, because there was only one, was small and dark, and made only for sleeping and taking shelter from the elements, and they spent very little time there. Early mornings and dusk were reserved for hunting deer and afternoons for boar. Here they cheated somewhat, as Padfoot enjoyed hunting in dog form best of all and with his superior sense of smell he sniffed out their prey, and then flushed them from hiding. For the first three days Harry hit nothing but small game, rabbits and a grouse, and missed hitting a deer twice, much to his disappointment. On the fourth day, a cold and drizzly morning, he finally got one. Sirius had chased the young buck right to him, and Harry had it squarely in chest. It had stumbled, but then got up and kept going in another direction, and Harry had to chase after it in the half dark of the woods, Sirius barking and rushing ahead to cut it off. His second shot caught the deer in the flank, and it fell. Once on the ground, Padfoot seized its vulnerable neck in his jaws and held it down until

Harry reached it, killing it quickly with his hunting knife. It was a bloody, clumsy hunt, but he felt strangely happy when it was done.

Not so happy when Sirius made him carry the carcass back to their camp by himself.

Or when he had shown him how to clean it.

Their hunt was completed, but none of them felt particularly eager to cut their trip short. Instead, Remus cast a preservation spell on the carcass, and they spent another three days on Animagus lessons for Harry. It was harder than Harry had realized.

"Does it hurt?" Remus asked Harry, who was flexing out his good arm now bent strangely and covered with gray and black-speckled feathers. They had found an open clearing near a small, shallow lake ideal for practicing. It was early morning, and the lake was still misty in the cold winter air. It smelled of snow but the wind was still, and they wanted to get some practice in that morning while the weather held.

"It aches a little," Harry admitted, flexing the wing this way and that.

"Then something isn't right. It should feel tight, but not painful. Change it back."

Harry let out a sigh and the arm returned to its normal human shape.

"I don't get it. I have done this before, and it wasn't nearly this difficult."

"From what you told me, you didn't do it so much as had it done to you. I imagine that was very unpleasant."

Harry grimaced, remembering the experience. It had been painful and exhausting, but once he was rested it had felt surprisingly natural and easy. Now, however, he was struggling to recapture the experience, to follow that particular flow of magic that was now forever etched into the core of his being.

Behind them, Sirius was squatting on an overturned log, shirtless despite it being well below freezing and seemingly oblivious to this fact. He chuckled at them.

"The answer's obvious."

They both turned to him with cautious stares.

"You're wearing too many clothes," he said laughingly.

"What?" Harry blurted and turned to Remus who was now looking at him speculatively.

"He's right. I forgot about that. Novice animagi typically aren't able to handle fully transforming both their bodies and their clothes comfortably."

Sirius burst out laughing at the look on Harry's face.

"Th-that's the look! Oh Merlin, that's the look your father had when I suggested it the first time."

"I'm not embarrassed!" Harry objected, because he wasn't. Mostly. He had become relatively comfortable being nude amongst werewolves given how little modesty they held as a whole. "It's just... cold!"

This only made Sirius laugh harder. Harry did end up stripping down eventually after Sirius built a fire for him, and this time he was able to transfigure his arm without pain. After several more attempts he was able to transform fully and found himself suddenly very short but considerably warmer.

"Well, look at you," Sirius said, grinning down at him proudly. He slipped on his leather arm guard and came to Harry, offering it as a perch which the falcon accepted. Sirius stroked the soft, speckled feathers of his breast with his free hand. "You're quite a handsome specimen. Your father would have been very proud."

Harry, without even thinking about it, puffed out his chest and inadvertently fluffed his chest feathers as well, looking considerably less dignified.

"Don't give him a big head," Remus scolded, although he too looked rather impressed. "Try to hold that form for ten minutes and then turn back. It is easy for novices to get stuck in their animal forms."

He gave Sirius a pointed look.

"That was one time, Moony."

"It was four times, Padfoot. Four."

"The other three don't count. I was drunk."

"I still don't know how you managed that. I mean, who the hell serves alcohol to a dog?"

"People who really like dogs but don't like drinking alone."

The falcon suddenly fell off his arm and landed as a heap of naked Harry in the dirt, laughing uncontrollably.

"Oi! Don't make me- don't make me laugh when I'm concentrating!"

There was no more practicing that day. The wind quickly picked up, and it was both too cold and too dangerous to continue. They returned to camp just as the first snowflakes began to fall. They managed to cook up some of the grouse Harry had caught earlier and then spent most the day cooped up in the tent as a snow storm blew its way through the forest.

By morning, the storm was over and the forest was blanketed in half a foot of glittering snow. It was all very pretty, until Remus and Sirius insisted Harry needed more practice back at the lake. Then it was just wet and cold. But it did give Harry plenty of incentive to transform into his falcon form as quickly as possible. Which he did. Repeatedly.

"Alright, I think he's got it now, Moony," Sirius said, sounding as bored of the back and forth transformations as Harry felt. "We should let him enjoy it for a while."

Remus sighed.

"Alright, I suppose you've earned it. Why don't you practice flying for a bit? No more than ten minutes and not too high or far, alright?"

Harry was in the air in an instant, his large powerful wings beating furiously to give him lift and speed. Like flying on a broom, Harry found he had a natural talent for flying as a bird. He had flown as a falcon before with Bobby during their escape from Haustenheim, and he remembered his lessons from that day well. The air was calm again that morning, which meant he had to fly harder to gain lift but maneuvering in the air was made simpler, and he managed several spins and turns and loops around his admiring godfathers. At some point, Bobby joined in on the fun and together they played an impromptu game of aerial tag. Harry was faster by benefit of species, but at their limited height and distance his advantage was a small one, and the game proved challenging and exciting as he raced after the raven around the now half-frozen lake.

He was enjoying himself so much he hadn't thought twice when he had followed Bobby out over the lake. In fact, he didn't concern himself with much of anything until his left arm suddenly spasmed, agony shooting up through the limb and into his chest. The wing buckled, and he started to fall.

"Harry!" someone screamed, but it was too late. He couldn't unfold his wing. His magic was unweaving itself, and he felt himself panic. He struck something, but it wasn't ice or water, and he was too stunned to move for a moment as he felt himself suddenly lifted and carried, clumsily and with great effort. His first instinct was to seize the thing beneath him, to dig his talons into it and hold on for dear life, but he realized just in time the thing beneath him was white and feathered and alive.

Elsbeth!

She carried him over the icy water, her wings beating furiously to keep them both up and upright. She barely managed to reach land before Harry finally lost his place on her back and rolled off into the snow. His tenuous hold on his magic snapped, and his body returned to its natural form. With it a fresh new wave of agony ran up his arm. It was excruciating, but he knew it for what it was. He had felt it before, at the Battle of Hogwarts when the Dark Lord's venomous blood had mixed with his own. Worse than the pain was the fear, the blinding terror of feeling the poison spread, slowly making its way towards his heart.

"Harry, Harry! What's wrong?!" Remus was shouting, pulling off his cloak and wrapping him in it.

"My arm! It's the blood. Goddess, it's the blood. It's killing me," he cried.

"How? The healers said it was harmless now, didn't they?"

Yes, the healers had said that. Sort of. No, not really. The healers hadn't had a clue on what to do about it, and said it would merely need to be watched. The pain, still there but fading every day, had been manageable. Why was this happening now?

"Damn fucking bunch of quacks," Sirius snarled, and then lifted the bundled Harry into his arms as if he were merely a small child. "It's alright, Harry, I know what to do."

"Where are you going?" Remus asked, sounding as terrified as Harry felt.

"Jane. I'm taking him to Jane."

Through the haze of agony and panic, there was suddenly a feeling of distorted gravity and the telltale sensation of apparation.

McGonagall sat in the Snape cottage living room that doubled as the library, sipping tea and quietly marveling at the place. She had visited the cottage before, once or twice, but every time she came she felt slightly disoriented when attempting to attach ownership of the pretty

little house with its abundant windows, cheery white painted furniture, and hand-woven rugs with the dark and hawkish man currently seated near the fire. Snape's quarters in the dungeons at Hogwarts seemed much more in character with the man, but perhaps that was the prejudice of first impressions. He didn't look the least bit uncomfortable in the cottage, and the masculine touch of his book collection and old Herbology prints hanging on the wall lent something of his personality to the place.

"Would you like some more tea, dear?" Ira asked as she wandered into the living room from the kitchen. She touched his shoulder lightly, affectionately, and McGonagall couldn't help but be transfixed.

"We're both quite well stocked," he said, patting her hand lightly in return. "Why don't you stay? I'm sure this conversation will interest you."

McGonagall took a sip of her tea to hide her smile. The two really were quite smitten with each other. Snape seemed to sense her amusement, however, and leveled an annoyed look at her.

"Down to business then," she said. "As I am sure you've probably already guessed, the school board is completely out of its depth with this current situation."

"I am not surprised. It's a catastrophe. Normally Lord Voldemort would give this his personal attention and seize control over the situation, but he's busy in France at the moment. Then Narcissa Malfoy, the only real leadership on the board, resigned."

"You're right, of course. The board seems more interested in who is in charge than actually addressing any of our problems. I've been to three board meetings already and nothing's been done, but then I can't really criticize. I'm at a loss myself."

Snape nodded thoughtfully, tapping the edge of his cane. The cane was a new addition, along with the metal brace on his left leg. McGonagall had politely refrained from acknowledging it, but secretly it worried her. Hogwarts was not a place for those not quick on their

feet. Even the oldest of teachers still had to be light of foot to manage the castle's many stairways.

Ira spoke with her usual genteel optimism.

"There's still some time. Surely, it's still too soon to bring the students back into the school routine just yet. This was a terrible shock and many of them lost friends as well as teachers."

McGonagall shook her head.

"Children need routine to heal. It reassures them that life as they knew it isn't over. While a few more days for mourning aren't unreasonable, they should still resume classes as soon as possible. Particularly the seventh year students who will have to take their N.E.W.T.s in order to move on to university next year. No, I'm afraid we can't be laid back about this."

"Surely someone has offered up some ideas? Even bad ones," Snape asked.

"Yes, but nothing practical in the long run. I've received several offers from parents to tutor their children, as have the other professors, but tutoring on an individual basis isn't fair to the other students and is against our teaching contract. Prunella Ticklebank thought we should set up a temporary school, but I can't imagine where we would find some place to both house so many students and staff and still have room to teach classes, or how we would afford it even if such a place existed."

Snape considered, but it was Ira who came up with an idea first.

"Is it really necessary that we provide room and board under the circumstances?" Ira said. "The important part here is that education continues. The children could come to school during the weekdays, then go home to their families in the evenings and weekends."

"I don't think daily commuting would be fair or practical for most of the students," McGonagall said. Snape, however, saw possibilities.

"Not if we expected everyone to go to the same place, but perhaps if we set up several small schools around the country and rotated our staff to the classroom on a set schedule... yes, that might work. We can probably convince local businesses and some of the larger estates to spare some warehouses or guest houses for lessons. Particularly if we can get Lord Voldemort to throw in a tax break of some kind."

"Do you think he'll do that?"

Taxes were one of the banes of every British witch and wizard. Voldemort taxed like a tyrant, rich and poor alike, with few offers of leniency except for the truly destitute and those who served the government in some capacity. Would providing real estate for educational purposes fall under assisting the country? McGonagall thought so, but the Dark Lord might have higher standards.

"Perhaps. He may demand certain standards for these 'classrooms', but that's probably for the best. It wouldn't be proper for students to be educated in an old tool shed for instance."

"That's certainly the best idea I've heard all week," she said, relaxing a little. There would still be the problem of finding appropriate classrooms quickly, then contacting parents, students, and teachers about the new routine. Lessons would have to be adjusted for lack of certain supplies and no school library, and then there was the matter of finding replacement professors for Arithmancy and Potions. Still, it was a start. "I'll present it to the board in tomorrow's meeting... unless you feel up to going yourself? You're still the Headmaster and something of a war hero. They'll be more apt to listen to you than some underling going behind your back."

Snape gave her sardonic smile.

"Flattery will get you nowhere, Minerva, and unfortunately it won't get me anywhere either."

He taped the brace on his leg lightly with his cane. It was the first overt acknowledgment of his injury he had made since she arrived.

"Is it very serious?" she finally had the nerve to ask.

"It's very painful, but I wouldn't say very serious. I should recover full mobility... eventually. I'll write some letters to the board directly endorsing the idea. No one is going to accuse you of subversion."

"My goodness, who is on this school board? Grindelwald?" Ira asked, sounding utterly exasperated. The conversation turned to other subjects after that. McGonagall asked after Harry and Draco, and if there had been any more word on Hermione. Snape asked about the other teachers and how they were faring personally and financially after their impromptu departure from the castle, while Ira prompted conversations about the country in general, the negotiations with Germany, and the rebuilding in London. This in turn circled the conversation back to Snape and Ira, and whether they intended to go to France to attend the negotiations themselves. Snape seemed to think it unlikely he would be able to attend due to his leg, but since Harry would receive an invitation it was difficult to say if he'd be expected to go as well, and how he could politely decline the offer. When the conversation, surprisingly pleasant, began to wind down, McGonagall excused herself in order for Snape to complete his letters to the school board. Snape didn't get up from his chair, but Ira escorted her to the door and sent her off with an affectionate hug and thank you for the extra company.

When Ira returned to the study, however, she fixed Snape with a rather perplexed expression. He smiled up at her innocently, which he only ever did when he was being facetious.

"Why did you make her think your leg was still bothering you?" she asked.

"Clearly you've never been to a school board meeting, or you wouldn't be asking me that."

"Why you little scoundrel."

He just smiled at her until she laughed. She gathered up McGonagall's teacup and headed back to the kitchen, and Snape shoved himself out of his chair. His injured leg was stiff, but his limp

relatively minor, and he carried his cane to the kitchen rather than use it to support his weight. He wasn't fully recovered yet, but the magical brace allowed him to move freely, and the cane only proved necessary when climbing stairs or steep inclines. Besides, he found the cane quite fashionable. He thought Lucius would have approved.

In the kitchen, he sat down to write the letters he'd promised McGonagall, while Ira went about making dinner.

"So why did you really lie about your leg?" she asked in between charming eggs to break into a bowl and divide themselves into yolk and white.

"Hm? Just some things I wish to sort out first. Draco hasn't returned any of my letters."

"That poor boy, losing his father like he did, and then being there for the attack on the school-"

"I am quite fortunate for him having been there, but obviously it hasn't left him wishing to be more sociable. He had quite a shouting match with Potter at the hospital when I saw him last."

At this, she could only sigh sadly. She felt terribly sorry for both boys and hoped they would be able to make up.

"Then there's the matter of the baby," he said, causing her to stop mid-way through a boiling charm to look at him. "We'll want to schedule another consultation with Healer Jacobi, and then perhaps another specialist in pre-natal care. Then we'll talk to that real estate agent from last year and see if any of those properties in Hogsmeade are still available."

"Isn't it a bit early for house hunting? The cottage should be just fine for a few years."

Snape shrugged.

"Hogsmeade property values are still low right now with all the mess still left from last year's attack. Who knows how high they'll be again by the time the school reopens?"

"I knew I married you for a reason," she chuckled.

"And here I thought it was for my good looks," he muttered offhandedly as he continued to write. Even as he sat there joking with his wife and writing his letter, he felt his thoughts wandering to darker places. He had only partly spoken the truth about why he had lied to McGonagall. He did need time to sort out some things, and some of those things would be the ones he mentioned. But more important than all of them was the matter with the Dark Lord. Now that he had been discharged from the hospital and had some free time on his hands to 'recover', it was time to address the matter that had been left unresolved since the confrontation in his office by Amelon and Voldemort. Harry had told him of the reprieve he gained for him, and Snape was genuinely, if reluctantly, grateful for it. While he had not seen either the Inquisitor or the Dark Lord since, he wasn't fooled into believing that things were settled despite what Harry had done for him. Voldemort was still holding a grudge towards him, and he would never rest easy while that loomed over his head.

Ira finished dinner, and he took a break from his letter writing to enjoy a meal together, discussing the reopening of the Wizarding College of London and the Scholastic Summer Conference that would be held for the first time since the start of the war. They talked about adding a solarium to the house they would buy so she could raise specimens for her own research, and he could grow his potion's ingredients year-round. When their domestic conversation was done, she tidied up with a couple of spells and retired to their rooms.

Snape watched her go, his mind whirling with thoughts of the future, aspirations and dangers both. Then he pulled out one last sheaf of paper for one last letter.

My Lord Voldemort...

It was snowing heavily as Sirius and Harry apparated into the Goddess Colony, the world muted and hushed. Sirius could hear his

godson's every pained breath and raving heartbeat booming in his ears and nothing else. But they were not alone. Even in the infancy of a blizzard there were still pack members wandering outside, completing chores or stretching their legs. A woman dropped a bundle as they appeared out of thin air, and the alpha turned to snap at her.

"Bring Jane to my cabin. Now!" he snarled, and she dashed away towards the dining hall as if he were chasing after her.

He took Harry to their cabin and placed him on the bed, covering his naked, shivering form in blankets. Harry's blackened arm had stiffened, and his fingers had curled into twitching claws. The boy himself said nothing. What else needed to be said after his last terrified cry? He merely stared up at the ceiling and tried to control his breathing, refusing to look his godfather in the eye, to see the fear there or show him his own.

There were no medical supplies in the cabin, but Sirius found a strip of leather and used it as a tourniquet to tie off Harry's arm. If the poison was indeed spreading, then it would hopefully slow it down. There was nothing else he could do for Harry himself. Frustrated and scared, he stalked the room, rekindling the fire and lighting the remaining two lamps and waited.

He didn't have to wait long, although it was not Jane who burst through the door first.

"Harry!" Luna gasped and leaped for the bed, landing at Harry's feet and crawling forward to hover over him. Terrified green eyes met wild silver.

Sirius snarled at her, and she snarled back with equal savagery. He nearly backhanded her off the bed for her impertinence, but his godson was suddenly clutching at her with his blackened hand.

"Luna," he whispered, "It hurts. Why does it hurt?"

She turned to him, lifting his arm and kissing it gently, hushing him like a frightened child.

"It will be okay. Shhh... hush now. Be calm. Hush..."

Jane appeared in the doorway, a crowd of curious werewolves at her back, but she shut the door on them as she entered. Her gaze found Sirius, and for a moment they were locked in a silent battle of wills, anger and resentment flickering between them, followed by despair and fear, and finally hope. She turned her attention towards Harry and climbed onto the bed, her child's body moving Luna aside with incongruous physical authority. The boy's hand still clutched at her, and Jane did not make him let go as she examined the arm. She sniffed at the darkened appendage and followed the scent all the way down to Harry's chest and head, finding the traces of poison in his breath. She pulled the blankets down to his stomach and hovered her hands over his trembling form, then pressed gently at his neck to feel his pulse, then at the discolored skin to test its tenderness.

The entire examination only lasted a few minutes but to everyone else in the room it seemed to last for an eternity. Finally, Jane straightened and turned to Luna.

"Get the black knives, a large bowl, and the bezoars. And bring Celestia. Hurry, he hasn't much time."

"I'll be back soon," Luna said, more to Harry than anyone else as she pried his hand from her arm. She disappeared through the door a moment later.

"What is happening?" Harry asked weakly. "Why is it hurting now? It was getting better."

"No, it was never getting better. You were merely getting better at ignoring it," Jane said evenly.

"But why is-"

"You've been practicing magic," she said. It wasn't a question. Harry said nothing.

"The poison, the blood, was content to remain dormant in your arm. Its inherent magic stabilized it there. In time, it would have incorporated itself into the muscles and bones and gradually spread to the rest of your body. It may have taken years, but eventually you would have been much like the God Eater. Strange, immortal, poisonous."

A low growl emanated from deep within Sirius.

"But the metamorphosis was dependent on your own magic remaining dormant. When you activated it you set off a chain reaction, forcing the two disparate magics to fight for your one body. It will kill you in the end."

"It will not," Sirius said darkly and in those three words was a promise of what would happen if it did.

"Are you going to cut off my arm?" Harry said with deceptive calmness, staring up at the ceiling once again.

"It may come to that. It is not my first or only option," she replied, nothing deceptive in her calmness at all. And nothing comforting in it either.

Voldemort surveyed the French Office of Parliament thoughtfully while aides and advisers hovered at his shoulder, awaiting his approval or instruction. The French Wizarding Parliament met there in the Bourges Palace every fall to discuss the affairs of state, but the Queen had graciously lent it out to the Dark Lord for the negotiations with Germany. The conference room was laid out much like a very large amphitheater style lecture hall; rows upon rows of adjoined desks elevated towards the back and sloping gradually downwards towards a small stage at the bottom with a lectern at the center, and tables and chairs set at the periphery. However, only the layout was in any way academic. The rest of the chamber was entirely artful and rife with symbolism.

The chamber was a curious combination of cathedral-like solemnity and palatial opulence. The southern-facing windows were tall and narrow, bordered in a mosaics of stained glass that changed color

depending on the light streaming through it and overlooking the palace gardens. The ceiling was high and domed, a fresco of angels flying amidst fluffy white clouds with spears in their hands and no god to be seen. The desks were all a beautiful mahogany, and all different in design and intricacy, the heraldic symbols of those serving office painted across the front, all of them attempting to boast some sort of superiority in design as if it represented some sort of superiority in the witch or wizard who sat there. Voldemort rather liked the effect and considered incorporating it into the Wizengamot. The walkways and staircases were marked with deep crimson carpeting, but the rest of the room was a complicated pattern of the fleur-de-lis in varying shades of gold. A statue of Juno* in white marble and gold stood at the front of the chamber, her seven-arched crown brushing the ceiling as she stared down at the assembly, and her robes flowing down onto the stage, giving it the illusion of protection to whomever stood upon it.

In only a few days, hundreds of German and British witches and wizards would be gathered there, ironing out the details of Germany's surrender to the Dark Lord. The Treaty of Hasselt which had been signed in Belgium the week before had ended the fighting, but it was an incomplete document meant only to prevent further bloodshed as the German community mourned their dead while Britain prepared its list of demands. Voldemort considered the number of representatives to call in from either side of the conflict. Should he allow more British than Germans to emphasize their superior power or more Germans than British to demonstrate how truly impotent they were despite their greater number? There would be representatives of France and Poland present, ensuring their own conditions were met during the negotiations. The press, British and foreign, were all demanding representatives be present for the historic occasion, but Voldemort was reluctant allow them admittance, as they tended to turn everything into a circus. Then there would be the honorary guests, General Lestrage, Intelligence Commander Morgan, and various other military officials. He had sent an invitation to Blackbone to sit in on the proceedings as well, but hadn't heard back from him. That was too bad, as it would have livened things up considerably if the werewolf lost his temper and bashed in one of the German's heads with his fist in a fit of pique.

He had a special place in mind just for Harry.

"We will need to replace all the desks, unfortunately," Voldemort said finally. "They take up too much room and the heraldic symbols may create confusion. Replace them with narrower tables and chairs. We will need to fit in nearly four hundred people and this room won't accommodate half that number right now. Replace the lectern with the judge's bench. Negotiations could take days, and I have no intention of standing through all of it."

"Yes, my Lord," one of his aides said, scribbling down his orders.

"And get some curtains for the windows. It's too damn cheery in here."

"My Lord."

Voldemort turned to see Morgan had entered the room and was already scanning it for potential security risks. He waved off the aides and advisers and summoned his minion closer. He could already tell by Morgan's expression that it wasn't going to be all good news.

"Tell me, my friend," Voldemort said without preamble.

"They are outraged."

The Dark Lord snorted. The losers were always outraged.

"Let me guess. It's the money?"

"Yes. You're going to financially cripple most of them with your demands. Not even the war with Grindelwald threatened to take away their ancestral holdings. They're panicking."

"And do they have the resources and fortitude to start the war anew?" he asked.

"There may be an assassination attempt or two, but none have the necessary support to start the war again by themselves. It is the muggleborns and half-bloods who are the most threat."

"They usually are. Are they sore about the massacre of their inept army? They have only themselves to blame for that."

"There are a number of angry relatives, yes, but that's not the dangerous issue."

Voldemort sighed. Why did peace have to be so tedious? Had it been this tedious after he won Britain and Ireland?

"Tell me then."

"The MCSA* and WYRA Initiative."

"Merlin, that won't go into effect for at least a year. What are they whining about?"

"The same thing the British muggle-borns and half-bloods were whining about when you did it to them."

Voldemort felt a wave of annoyance.

"I will never understand this loyalty to the biologically inferior. Britain has made a very successful transition into a segregated society and has grown stronger because of it."

"It is not a matter of superiority. It is a matter of family."

"Family isn't an inherent right, Morgan. It is not something everyone is entitled to at the expense of society as a whole."

Voldemort would know. His mother was a blood traitor, stupid and weak, whose unnatural affections for a base muggle had resulted in her miserable death and his miserable childhood. He had come into his understanding of magic late because of magical society's disinterest in their unclaimed magical children and struggled terribly through his younger years to make up for the disadvantages this had created in him. Had it not been for his own natural brilliance in magic and the mentoring of Carrigan, an extraordinary wizard himself, he may never have bridged the gap.

He saw the same story playing out for Harry, a child completely ignorant of his magical birthright until even later in life than Tom Riddle and left in the oftentimes cruel and negligent care of muggles. Harry had also struggled at first with little to distinguish him amongst his more experienced peers and no prospects to look forward to, but once he had found himself a place at Voldemort's side and under the watch of a worthy guardian, he had flourished in the most remarkable ways.

How often had this story played itself out to less happy ends? How many muggle-borns and half-bloods never found their place in magical society and abandoned it for the banal security of the muggle world? How many magical gifts remained stunted or lost because of the condemnation of ignorant muggle guardians? How many Purebloods had shirked their responsibility to safeguard the traditions of their race and instead held themselves proud and aloof in their own ignorant decadence?

Too often and too much.

With the complete segregation from the muggle world, Voldemort had seen the magical world flourish. Their world was a relatively small one, and now that wizarding kind in Britain was solely focused on it, many of the problems that had plagued it were finally being resolved to satisfaction.

"Regardless, they haven't any choice in the matter. They lost the war, and I won't have them slipping off into the muggle world to get out of the consequences of it."

"It will be difficult to keep them obedient to the edicts. We haven't the manpower to keep watch over every witch and wizard, and they'll figure that out quickly enough."

"Then we will have the Purebloods do it for us."

Morgan blinked at him.

"Sir?"

"All those panicky Purebloods, my friend, so desperate to cling to their wealth and their power. Why not have that work for us rather than against us? They can be my German Deatheaters, my eyes and my wand. The more they can keep their people in line the more they can keep of their own. Perhaps we will need to reorganize Germany under a fief system with one Lord or Lady overseeing the governing of a region or city. Hhhmmm... yes, I think that might work. It'll keep the country from uniting against us again when their young generation is old enough to fight."

The more he thought of it, the more he liked the idea. It would be far simpler to govern twenty or thirty lords rather than several thousand individual witches and wizards and with his personal attention he was certain he could win over a majority of those Purebloods to his way of thinking. After all, many of those Purebloods were from families who had supported Grindelwald and his way of thinking. It wouldn't take much to show them he was the Dark Lord that would fulfill those promises that Grindelwald had failed to. And if anyone objected? Well, there were always others ambitious for a title, happy to sell their talents and their souls to get it.

"The Germans won't be the only ones objecting to the MCSA and WYRA," Morgan said, interrupting his train of thought. Voldemort just looked at him expectantly. "The French will object."

The Dark Lord frowned. Of course the French would object. The French wizarding society was so integrated with muggles you wouldn't be able to tell the difference between them if the witch or wizard wasn't holding a wand in their hand. There were almost no wizarding towns or even neighborhoods in urban France, only islands of shops and houses and government offices floating in a sea of muggleness. It was highly aggravating, and if Voldemort had been expected to appear anywhere outside the large royal estates for any length of time he didn't think he would be able to stand it. And yet, the French themselves were strangely proud of themselves for it. No other wizarding society in Europe was as at ease with its muggle population as they were, and they seemed to think the rest of the continent would benefit from their example.

It was a matter that had been glossed over when Voldemort had made allies with the Queen of France. The Dark Lord's civil war had been more about governmental reform than Pureblood ideology, and despite the suggestion that it had been a genocide against those of muggle descent, the subsequent years of peace had given more weight to his statement of wanting what was best for all wizarding kind rather than the opinion he had been on a simple hate campaign. His public friendship with Harry Potter, a WYRA rescue and half-blood himself, had lent further credence to his character, as had the peaceful establishment of the werewolf colonies both in Britain and France.

But now it seemed peace would be the true test of France's faith in Lord Voldemort.

"We'll simply make it a matter of security. We can't afford to have a German resistance hiding amongst the muggles, nor evading the financial restitution each witch and wizard is expected pay for their part in this war."

"It won't hold up for long, and the French won't ignore it."

"But they won't go to war over it either," Voldemort said. "They won't risk the same fate as the Germans they helped to conquer. Not yet in any case."

Luna returned minutes later with Celestia, the supplies, and still more curious werewolves gathered outside the cabin. Harry had broken out into a sweat, despite the coolness inside, and a bitter taste had formed in his mouth. Jane placed a bezoar, a shriveled, kidney-like stone, in his mouth and told him to suck on it. The bad taste went away and with it some of his fear, but the fever remained. Sirius continued to pace, out of the way but still an overwhelming presence in the small room. Harry was glad he was there. He welcomed the distraction because impossibly the pain had somehow gotten worse.

Jane, Luna, and Celestia conversed for a minute near the door. Celestia left, presumably to get more supplies, and Jane and Luna climbed onto the bed. Luna pulled the bezoar he had been sucking on out of his mouth and placed it in her own. His heart skipped a beat

as he watched her, and it was not from the poison. She knelt beside him, placing her knee on his shoulder even as she lifted his arm, holding it firm at the elbow and wrist.

"Don't be scared," she said. She was smiling at him, and it wasn't fake or forced. He felt himself relax a little, even though his heart refused to stop pounding and he couldn't catch his breath. Another hand slipped into his right, and he squeezed it tightly, feeling the raw strength of it in the calluses and scars. But he didn't look at Sirius, and soon he wasn't looking at Luna either. He was looking at Jane and the obsidian knives she held in either hand. She whispered something (a prayer or a spell?) and brought the blades to her lips, then slipped a bezoar into her mouth and brought the blades down slowly. One blade traced the width of his wrist, so sharp there was not even a sting at first until the flesh parted and black blood boiled up and out. The second slid across the inner bend of his elbow, and soon it was bleeding profusely as well.

Jane latched onto his bleeding wrist and began to suck. At his elbow, Luna did the same. Harry felt very little pain, but there was a shock. It was not an electric shock. It wasn't even a shock of surprise; the clues had been there after all. It was a shock of magic. His, the poisoned blood's, Luna's, Jane's. Too many sources of magic of such differing types pushing and pulling at his body, creating chaos for his magus hypersentia. He gasped and tightened his hand in Sirius'. There was magic here too, but familiar and safely thrumming beneath a layer of skin. It was just there, not trying to pull him apart or put him together.

"It's alright, Harry," Sirius said, squeezing back gently. "You're doing great."

Luna suddenly drew back, her mouth black, and spit into the bowl. She rolled the bezoar in her mouth for a moment, then went back to suckling at his open wound. A moment later, Jane did the same. Harry closed his eyes and turned away.

After that, things became confusing. He kept his eyes closed, trying to sort through the many strange sensations and the twist and pull of magic in and around him, while Sirius' hand in his kept him grounded.

The room was swimming, even with his eyes closed, and at times he felt like he was in the ocean, rising and falling, tumbling and spinning as if caught in a wave without any sense of up or down. Time seemed to skip from one moment to the next without flow or context. Dreaming and waking were all the same.

The pain gave way to nausea. The nausea gave way to weakness. The weakness didn't gave way to anything, but was soon joined by cold.

He must have slept because he woke as he was pulled upright. He blinked blearily, unable to focus, only to realize a moment later he wasn't wearing his glasses. Where were his glasses? Had they left them by the lake? He felt something pressed to his lips and swallowed instinctively. He grimaced at the bitter, coppery-sweet taste of Blood Replenishing potion. He groaned.

"Ssshhh, sleep. You must sleep now," Luna's voice, always a touch on the dreamy side, pulled him back into the quiet darkness.

When next he woke, if it could be called waking, his forehead was pressed to hers, the arch of their noses fitted together, and they shared the same breathe, slightly sour with poisoned blood and herbs. Her eyes were shut, but he could see them flickering back and forth behind her eyelids. He wanted to kiss them and feel them moving beneath his lips.

"Let her rest," another voice said, young, feminine, dangerous, and he felt a shift of weight against his right side. The sudden awareness of Jane curled up against him made him suddenly aware of others within the room. He could hear the light and heavy snores of other werewolves and Sirius' callused hand still gently gripping his own.

They were all there together. Sirius, Luna, Jane, himself, and probably Remus too.

A highly dangerous combination.

He smiled at the thought and closed his eyes again.

"It's entirely unfair," Enid sighed, looking up from her book of poetry to her roommate, who was immersed in a very dull sounding history of Paris in its original French, a dictionary readily available (and frequently used) on the nightstand beside her. "It's not like Lorelei knows anybody in England. She said so herself. How's she going to find work? Where's she going to stay?"

Hermione sighed. Enid was normally a very easy-going girl, but ever since Lorelei had announced her intentions to go to England, she had been sulky and depressed. Hermione sympathized with her, but she had even more reasons to want to head home, and her inability to share them left her slightly bitter.

"She probably thinks she has some rich, Pureblood relatives she doesn't know about just waiting for their long lost niece or cousin to come back and stay with them. Don't stress yourself out about it. Even if she could afford a take the ferry, she'll never get her papers without a proper wand."

While Britain had begun the process of re-opening its borders to British refugees wanting to come home, it was neither simple nor cheap. Many of the witches and wizards that had left Britain to escape the Dark Lord had done so without much in the way of funds and had quickly sunk to the bottom of the social ladder within the wizarding world. Too many English wizards without funds or with job skills already met by the local natives meant many poorer wizarding families had either accepted low-paying jobs amongst wizarding kind or else tried their luck with muggle employment. The result was a young generation of witches and wizards without wands or basic spell knowledge. Britain had no muggle world to support these unskilled magic-users, and there was a not-so-subtle contempt for any witch or wizard who could use magic and yet decided it was not worthwhile to learn. It meant Lorelei, who had her late mother's wand but neither the connection with it nor the skill necessary to cast a spell, wasn't going anywhere despite what she said even if she could afford the registration and application fees. Unfortunately, it also meant Enid wasn't going anywhere either.

"I don't have a wand."

"But you're saving up for one. That's put you way ahead of Lorelei in getting home."

"I don't know how to use it though. What if I'm not any good?"

"Then you'll just have to keep practicing until you're good enough. They're not expecting you to be the next Merlin."

"Will you teach me some spells when I get my wand?"

"Of course, I'll- What? How would I teach you? I don't have a wand either."

Enid looked at her guilelessly.

"But you used to, didn't you?"

Hermione felt her heart suddenly pounding in her chest. How did she know? She had always kept her wand and spellbooks hidden and her trunk locked. What had given her away?

"Why do you say that?"

"I dunno. It's just something about the way you move about. It's different than people who don't know how to use magic. And you're always reading those smart people books and have those nice clothes. I figured you used to come from a family that could afford to get you a wand."

Oh... oh, Merlin, she had been an idiot. An unforgivably stupid idiot. Had she really thought she was being clever? Subtle? Enid had noticed something wasn't right about her, and why shouldn't she? The girl was poorly educated, but she wasn't stupid and they shared practically every moment of the day together. And if Enid had noticed, surely Mrs. Prewitt had noticed? And who else?

"Don't look like that, Heloise. I won't say anything to anyone. You've got your reasons, I'm sure, and you'll tell me when you're good and ready. Just don't think I'm entirely thick."

"Enid, I-"

"Haaaloooo!" a call interrupted from down the stairs, followed by the sound of footsteps pounding their way up. The door burst open, allowing in Lorelei with her usual dramatic flair. She was dressed in her receptionist uniform and holding a bouquet of flowers. "Heloise, look what someone left you at the front desk! Aren't they beautiful?!"

She scampered across the room and laid them right in Hermione's arms, like a new baby for a new mother. Hermione had to abandon her book to take them and sat there feeling rather silly buried in blankets, books, and flowers all at once.

"Why didn't you tell me you had a boyfriend?" Lorelei scolded. "Is he new? Where did you meet him? Did you know about this, Enid?"

"No, nothing," the girl said, climbing out of her own bed to come and see the flowers for herself. She approached cautiously, as if expecting them to suddenly explode. Hermione was feeling rather the same way.

"There's no card," Enid pointed out.

No, Hermione mentally noted, there wasn't, but then there really didn't need to be. Narcissa had taught her the symbolism of flowers, and while less interesting than their uses as potions ingredients, she had endeavored to remember her lessons. Anemone and baby's breath for unfading love, blue hyacinth for constancy, purple hyacinth for forgiveness, lavender heather for admiration, and white heather for protection. A beautiful, melancholy bouquet for a beautiful, melancholy sort of love.

"I'm in so much trouble," Hermione said to Enid once Lorelei had gone.

Her roommate's reply to this was to lock the window, close the curtains, and hang her cross on the door handle.

Authors Note:

Juno is the goddess of State, and is a national symbol in France. She is also the model for the Statue of Liberty in New York, an American-French collaboration.

The MCSA is short for the Muggle Cultural Segregation Agency, which can be considered the adult side of WYRA. It's in charge of separating adult witches and wizards from muggles and muggle society and culture. Remember, there was originally a number of adult wizards married to muggles or with muggle relatives and friends. They couldn't afford to have their memories erased like small children could, so the MCSA went about separating the magical folk from the muggles through other means, and of course erasing or altering the muggles' memories of the magical folk. They're also in charge of keeping out muggle contraband and preventing wizarding folk from traveling within muggle territory. Ron talked a little bit about this with Hermione and Natalie when he escorted them through muggle London, and Fred and George have quite a business in illegal muggle contraband.

Book VII

Chapter 2: Off Guard Moments

Harry sat on the wall and stared into the forest, heedless of the wind and the cold. The blood magic imbued in the mortar of the wall felt hot against his legs, but he was so full of magic, most of it not his own, he hardly felt it. So full of magic, he felt empty of anything else. For once his heart was quiet. No fears, no longings, no hopes, no anything. Just a great hollowness that would be terrible if he had any horror left to spare it.

"It will pass," Luna said. She was sitting beside him, facing the opposite direction, and occupying herself with braiding a rope of some kind. She hadn't left his side since he woke up, and yet whatever it was she was doing it didn't feel like hovering. He wasn't entirely sure he hadn't been following her all morning.

"I feel..."

"I know."

"Is this what it was like for you when the goddess left you?"

"It is what it was like when the goddess was a part of me."

"How can one feel so full of something and yet so empty at the same time?"

"You are not empty, just overwhelmed."

Harry thought on that for a moment, but the thought led nowhere. Before him the forest was a study in gray. The sky was gray, the barren trees were gray, and even the snow was now a dirty gray slush. The world had been bleached of color, and his mind felt starved from the lack of variety. He turned to Luna, seeking out the corn-silk yellow of her hair and the rosy stain of her wind-bitten cheeks.

"I will have to trust you on that."

She looked up from her rope and stared back at him.

"And do you trust me, Harry?"

He blinked at the intensity of her gaze and finally felt the first stirrings of... something. Something that wasn't magic. Or at least a different kind.

"I... no. I'm sorry."

She leaned towards him until her arm pressed against his and her head rested on his shoulder. He brushed her hair lightly with his left hand, the formerly blackened limb now molted with purple and blue bruises. It looked even worse than before it had been bled, but the pain had faded to a dull ache he could push to the back of his mind. Now he could run his fingers through her hair and feel the beads and feathers and the odd twig or bur buried in it.

"It's alright. I'm sorry that I am not trustworthy."

He sighed.

"Do you think there could ever be peace and trust between us? Could we find some sort of compromise between your love for me and your loyalty to your father and for my love for you and my loyalty to my godfather?"

"I do not understand why there has not been peace already," she said, a hint of accusation in her voice. "The war is over, our pack was avenged in Berlin. The only problem now is that Blackbone refuses to make the appropriate offerings to the dead."

The emotional numbness of moments before suddenly sharpened into irritation.

"Oh, is that the only problem?" he said bitingly.

He couldn't see her face, but the hesitation before she spoke made him think she was at least a little contrite.

"Greyback is a god to our pack. He looks after our dead and avenged their deaths. He deserves our love and respect."

"Alright, I'll go along with that. But in looking after the dead he messed with the lives of the living. I nearly died, Luna. Some of our brothers did die, and all of us would have died if Voldemort hadn't come to rescue us. Looking after the dead doesn't give him the right to treat the living like they're expendable."

Luna remained silent for a long time after that. He wasn't so foolish as to believe he had convinced her with his argument. He had been brushed by the divine time and again and that had left its mark on his magic and his thinking, but he had never been influenced to the extent that Luna had. He couldn't even begin to guess where her thoughts were leading her.

"We all eventually die, Harry. We will all be a part of my father's court. Even your godfathers must bow down to him eventually."

"But Luna, the dead and the living are different. They have different needs. Greyback can't rule both, and Blackbone won't willingly play the puppet king for him. There has to be boundaries."

"Boundaries?" She lifted her head to look him in the eye, her expression disbelieving. "Where do you draw the line between what was and what is? Between the magical and the mundane and the divine? How could you... can any of us, make that distinction? And if we did, would the world be any better for it?"

He closed his eyes and ran his bruised hand through his hair, frustration mounting. It wasn't the first emotion he would have chosen to have, but it was something. As difficult as this conversation was, he was relieved he was beginning to feel human once again.

"You're a shaman. You know there are boundaries. You spend much of your time crossing them or tearing them down, but you can't ignore them. They're not absolute or infallible, but they are there for a reason. If there is to be that peace and trust between our families we

want, we have to decide where those boundaries lay and respect them."

She looked away.

"Then we will never know peace. My father won't compromise. Blackbone won't compromise."

Harry smiled, despite the grimness of her words. Luna was one of the wisest people he knew, but she had something of blind spot when it came to Sirius. Perhaps it was fear or resentment, but whatever the case she seemed to have it in her head that Sirius was some sort of unmovable object she could only ever work around and never with. Likewise, Greyback was difficult, but even he wasn't entirely unreasonable.

"It doesn't hurt to try," he said.

She smiled at that, as if he had told some sort of joke.

"Okay, that was a little trite. Perhaps it's better say 'it's worth the effort'."

"Ah, yes. That is better," she agreed. "You are most remarkable when you are trying. Or most trying when you are being remarkable. I forget which."

He barked out a laugh and felt magic inside of him stir, like silt disturbed from the bottom of a lake. There was a strangely weightless feeling as he felt his own magic and thoughts rising to the surface, shaking off the shock even as his limbs began to tremble. His laugh took on a hysterical edge as realization settled in. He had nearly died again. Again. Always so close. At the other side of things he had nearly been made immortal, made in the image of his mentor, the Dark Lord, through blood. Like some sort of vampire. Only not a vampire. Just as he was not a werewolf and could never truly become a werewolf, and yet was still a part of their story. A story that was becoming difficult to follow even as he felt it tighten its hold on him. Different stories told by different gods, ending in different places he couldn't yet see.

Here he was discussing the future of the werewolves in Britain in terms of both the living and the dead, self-appointed champion to stand between the Head Alpha and a spurned devil of a god, while at any moment the Dark Lord might summon him across the ocean to play some undefined role as either peacemaker or warrior or both. The last visages of his childhood had crumbled with the walls of Hogwarts before he was ready or particularly willing, his companions scattered and dealing with their own crises. The sanctuaries he had found among his godfathers and friends had become new battlefields, and he could see no place of respite.

At some point his laughter had turned to gasps for air, a panic attack squeezing his lungs while his heart tried to kick free of his chest. Dying all over again, and he thought he would be used to it by now but it was as terrifying as ever. He lost his balance and fell.

Luna seized him, her bird thin arms deceptively strong as she held him, pulling her to him. He continued to panic and flail, breathing made that much more impossible as she forced his head into her fur cloaked shoulder. He nearly unseated them both from the wall, but her legs came up and wrapped around him, pinning his arms to his side. Smaller though she was, she managed to hold him and draw him tighter into her. There was magic in there, distinctly Luna's with a touch of power from something other. There was no escaping from her, if escape was what he wanted. It seemed for a time she had the power to crush him into some tiny thing and bury him beneath her ribs and her heart.

"There," she said. "It has passed."

Darkness seeped into his vision, and his limbs became leaden and immovable. The panic of suffocation had finally given way to resignation, and in the following stillness he could hear not only his heart but another slower, discordant beat distantly. His mind surrendered to the inevitability of it, followed shortly by his heart, and as it did he felt an overwhelming sense of calm wrapped in Luna's arms.

Beat by beat, his heart began to ease until the distant thumping he heard became a perfect, synchronized echo.

At a quarter to one, Hermione slipped out of bed. She pulled her wand from its hiding place between her mattresses, slipped Enid's cross from the window latch, and made her way downstairs. Her slippered feet made hardly a sound as she passed through the corridors. She could hear footsteps and muted voices from some of the rooms, but most were dark and quiet. Nervously, she continued on to the ground floor and peeked into the reception area. It was empty. Doreen was supposed to be manning the desk that night, but no one took the job very seriously and wandering away from the post was more common than not.

She took her cloak from the employee closet and slipped on someone else's winter boots, then quietly stepped outside. She nearly jumped out of her skin when she saw she was not alone.

"Merlin, Viktor!" she hissed.

He stood at the bottom of the steps as if he had been expecting her, a pleased smile on his face.

"I am sorry. I did not mean to frighten you."

He didn't sound or look the least bit sorry.

"What are you doing here?"

"I thought you might come to find me tonight. We used to meet after curfew quite regularly before--"

"I'm not that girl anymore," she said sharply. His smile faded slightly.

"And yet here you are."

"To warn you."

"To warn me?"

She steeled herself. She had rehearsed this moment over and over again since she had first received the flowers. She would be unyielding, cold, even cruel if she had to be. It was absolutely imperative that he understand that she had no affection left for him, and whatever he hoped to achieve by courting her would be futile. Her mental rehearsal had all seemed very practical and reasonable in her head, but now that he was there...

It hadn't occurred to her how lonely she had been until now. She had Enid, of course, and that helped, but the other girl didn't really know her or where she came from. Viktor had betrayed her, knew her, and probably loved her. She could stand on these steps and reminisce for hours on end about what had happened since they parted, and he would understand and care and enjoy her company.

The temptation to do just that was overwhelming. The only thing stopping her was fear. If she let herself, she would fall in love with him again. It would be the easiest thing in the world. It would inevitably kill her one way or another.

"Stay away from me, Viktor."

"I'm sorry, but I don't think I can."

Her hand tightened around her wand, and she stomped down the steps towards him. His eyes widened, and he took several steps back until she had nearly driven him across the street. Even then she did not stop and suddenly grabbed him by his coat and pulled him all the way to the end of the street. He could have stopped her if he wanted. Even if he hadn't been a vampire, she was barely two-thirds his size and no athlete, but he was so stunned by her assertiveness he couldn't help but follow. When she was satisfied she was far enough away from the hotel that no one would hear her and come to investigate, she whirled on him.

"That wasn't a suggestion, Viktor. You will stay away from me."

"You are threatening me?" He seemed amused by this, and Hermione felt a surge of genuine anger towards him. He startled her as he suddenly stepped closer, crowding her so that their noses were

practically touching, and she could see the amber hue of his eyes in the streetlight. "How can you threaten me ven it is you who is so obviously afraid?"

His hand reached for her, and for a moment she thought he meant to caress her face, but his fingers found the cross dangling from her neck instead. The skin of his fingertips blistered and blackened where they brushed the tiny piece of silver, only to turn pink and then white again seconds after he pulled them away. She raised her wand, but he caught her wrist before she could point it.

Her heart was suddenly pounding wildly in her chest, and she knew he must hear it too. Hear it. Smell it. Taste it. He was right. She was terrified of him. Only she hadn't known it until then. Her thoughts scattered in panic, and she tried to grasp hold of them, to at least one of them. The only one she seemed to have any success in keeping was a question.

What would Harry do in this situation?

Viktor was staring down at her patiently, his ice-cold thumb now making gentle circles along the veins of her wrist. Waiting. Waiting for what? Her surrender? Her acceptance of her helplessness? Anger mixed with fear.

What would Harry do?

He would attack. Recklessly, fiercely, unflinching, he would attack and damn the consequences.

"And are you not afraid of me, Viktor?" she said, her voice sharp and strained against breaking. He blinked at her, confused and suddenly wary. "You would be exceptionally stupid if you weren't."

He had her wand hand in his grip, but she hadn't intended to use her wand in the first place. She couldn't afford to alert the French authorities of her location with use of an unregistered wand. It had been a 'just in case', and she was not totally without magic to defend herself even without it.

She closed her eyes tightly, focusing on her own innate magic, on Viktor, on Rue de Lancry, and the little canal it traversed.

And then she apparated.

They reappeared on a walkway at the very edge of the canal. Caughting him off guard, Hermione managed to pull her hand free and push him with all her might. He fell backwards, over a chain-link guardrail, and into the canal. He splashed and struggled until he finally managed to grab hold of the loose brick lining edge of the waterway. Plenty of time for Hermione to regain her bearings and aim her wand directly at him.

Viktor glared up at her. In spite of what muggles thought, vampires were not incapable of crossing moving water. However, that didn't mean they like it. They couldn't technically drown, having no need to breathe, but their preternatural bodies lacked buoyancy, and they couldn't swim. Viktor was no exception. Something Hermione obviously knew. He was familiar with the place, it wasn't far from Hermione's hotel and technically still in a 'wizarding' neighborhood and thus well concealed against muggles under 'notice-me-not' charms. Despite her previous fear, she had chosen well. If he weren't so peeved at the moment, he would have been impressed by her resourcefulness.

"I could have apparated you straight into a tree, Viktor," she said coldly, her wand still pointed at him. "Or a church or a bonfire. So don't push me. You won't like the results."

Then she was gone again, apparating away and leaving him to pull himself out of the canal by himself. It was an entirely undignified affair, and it didn't help that by the time he'd pulled himself sopping wet onto the walkway, Goethe was there waiting for him.

"Don't worry, my friend, I'm sure she was just playing hard to get. You know how these English witches are."

"Shut up," he growled, the menacing effect was somewhat dimmed by him looking like a half-drowned cat.

"The threats of murdering you violently aside, I don't think she was entirely unreceptive. You might try other courtship techniques. Maybe you could get a tattoo?"

"I vill throw you in de canal, Goethe. Tie you to a post box and just throw you in."

"It was only a suggestion."

Cold and disgruntled, Viktor made his way home. He had high hopes for the evening, but he had botched it up something awful. He had used intimidation when he should have used sincerity, pushed where he should have reassured, and mocked where he should have listened. In the end, he had gotten just what he deserved, but he wasn't giving up just yet. After all, she could have apparated him into a very painful or dangerous place, just as she had said, and yet had not. She was giving him a chance to walk away unscathed, and that bit of generosity spoke of possibilities. Possibilities of what, he wasn't sure. He had no idea of what he was doing, but it felt... it felt deliciously human.

"You should know..." Goethe said after they had walked for some time in silence. "Master Clarión's people are in the area. They have been asking around about you."

Viktor paused.

"Do dey know about her?"

"I believe it would be dangerous to assume they didn't know anything. There were witnesses to your little spat at the newspaper stand. There were the flowers you had delivered. Either would reveal a name or a place to find her."

Mentally, Viktor cursed himself. How could he have been so careless? Clarión was looking for an opportunity to either bring him to heel or kill him, and Hermione was the only weakness he had ever revealed.

"I must distract dem," he said absently.

Goethe nodded.

"And you must watch after Hermione."

Goethe sighed, but nodded once again. Goethe had the makings of a master vampire, the strength of mind and body, but never the temperament or the inclination. He was the most logical choice to protect the witch when Viktor was unable to do so himself.

Although, given that evening's happenings, perhaps protection was unnecessary.

The first of the German representatives had arrived at the Bourges Palace that afternoon, and Voldemort was making it a point to ignore them completely. He had sent back several requests for a private audience without reply and left instructions to his security that he should not be disturbed. To that end, he had created the illusion of being occupied by closeting himself away with Queen Ophelia under the pretext of making additional preparations.

In truth, they had been discussing very little about the treaty and a great deal about the upcoming social events of the seasons. Balls and operas and private soirees and national holiday events. Neither of them particularly cared for such social events personally, but politically they were excellent opportunities to introduce well-to-do families into favorable alliances. The French were not as stringent about blood purity as the British, but old money was still the best money as far as the upper crust were concerned, and Voldemort knew the advantages of introducing new blood to the weakening family lines. Congenial relations between the gentry of their respective countries could only be to their advantage.

"Will you invite some of the German Lords and Ladies then?" she asked idly, reclined in a chaise while the Dark Lord leaned against the frame of a window. They were in the China Room, surrounded by pristine white plates and vases and figurines painted with blue ink. Like most wizarding art, it moved, but the Chinese style had the pictures and text moving about like water flowing. Ophelia liked this room. It was very relaxing. But it didn't suit the Dark Lord. His

element was fire, and he stood out as incongruous with the rest of his surroundings.

"It would be a generous gesture," he said. "I'm not sure that I am so generous or that they are worthy of it."

"It is not generosity if it must be earned first. Besides, you cannot keep making war on a people you've already conquered. It's bad form."

He smiled, amused despite himself. In fact, he had every intention of inviting Germans to various events. Just as he had told Morgan, he would woo a select number of them into an inner circle, and through them control the country now in his grasp. For now, however, he had to make them afraid. It was through fear that he would control them. Not through fear of death, but through fear of losing their positions and their possessions. He would shake things up and see who and what came loose. Then when things seemed at their most desperate, he would offer them a way to save themselves.

It wasn't something he intended to explain to the queen. He had no intention of demonstrating just how devious and manipulative he could be, although she more than likely had her suspicions. She was an intelligent woman after all, and for all her supposed affection for him she was not as free with her secrets and vulnerabilities as a true lover should be.

"I will take it under consideration. For now, the injuries made against my people... I find I cannot easily forgive them."

She sighed and eased back on the chaise, looking for all the world like a bored goddess in repose. Which was why her next words caught him completely off guard.

"Is that why you are imposing WYRA and the MCSA on them? To punish them?"

"I... It is not as simple as all that," he hedged, mentally scrambling on how to handle this. He had not expected to have to explain his intentions so soon, and not to Queen Ophelia directly. It was her

practice to send others to broach those topics that might prove potentially dangerous, feeling him out before deciding whether to bring up the matter herself or ignore it altogether. That she was doing so now, before it had even reached the wording of the treaty was disconcerting.

Would she try to make him omit that demand?

He couldn't do that. It would have made the war almost entirely pointless. Yet to defy her could prove disastrous. He was still dependent on her to secure his position on the continent, and they both knew it.

"Then tell me," she said, still feigning boredom. "I like to think I'm relatively clever."

He took a deep breath. She was fishing. He would have to pretend he didn't even see the bait.

"WYRA," he started, "is precautionary only. While I am quite proud of what has been accomplished with the program back home, I understand it is not very popular on this side of the channel."

She regarded him politely, offering no opinion of her own.

"I have no intention of implementing it in Germany to the extent it is in Britain. It'll be more of a dragnet to catch those wishing to avoid paying their restitution. Adult witches and wizards have the ability to hide their magical abilities relatively well, but children? They can't control it. Accidental magic happens all the time, and we can track it easily enough. Witches and wizards will be less inclined to try to flee if they know that their own children could give them away at any moment, and the penalties will be severe. And of course, there is the general child welfare aspect, which is WYRA's primary function to begin with."

Partially true, and it would be difficult for even Ophelia to discern where the truth ended and the lie began.

"I see. And the MSCA?"

"That should be obvious," he said impatiently and gave the same reasons he had given Morgan.

"Very shrewd," she said when he was finished. "But it will be tricky to maneuver around politically. You are proving the Germans-"

There was a knock on the door.

"Enter," he said, feigning irritation at the interruption but secretly relieved. One of his aides entered the room, carrying a letter.

"My Lord, you received a letter from Headmaster Snape."

"Give it here then."

The aide handed him the letter, bowed respectfully to them both, and left.

"Headmaster Snape... isn't that Lord Potter's guardian?"

"Yes, your Highness, although he has been in the hospital since the attack on the school. Very nasty business."

He opened the envelope and perused its contents quickly, then came to sit at the other end of the chaise beside Ophelia. He frowned.

"What is it?" she asked. "Has something happened?"

"Nothing like that. It seems the headmaster feels sufficiently recovered to escort Harry to France in person. They should arrive sometime Monday afternoon. I do hope the man isn't overexerting himself."

He didn't honestly give a damn whether Snape was overexerting himself or not. He still hadn't forgiven the man his deceit and wasn't inclined to do so anytime soon. Yet the letter had discussed the possibility of making amends. It was presumptuous of the man to approach him so soon, and yet Voldemort couldn't help but admire the nerve it must have taken. Snape feared him. He had seen to that.

And still he sought him out. Had his minion ever been that brave before? He didn't think so, but perhaps he had never been properly motivated. Curiosity, if nothing else, demanded he discover what he wanted.

It would also save him the nuisance of finding someone else willing to go into werewolf territory to retrieve his protégé.

"Harry will be reaching his majority this year, won't he?" the queen asked conversationally, their previous discussion seemingly forgotten.

"Yes, this August, although he still has another year of schooling left. Why? Are you still entertaining the possibility of an alliance between him and your niece?"

She graced him with a teasing smile

"Why dear sir, perish the thought. I was rather thinking of stealing the young man for myself."

"Do you suppose he knew? About the blood, I mean."

Harry looked up from his notes to Bobby, who was perched on the back of a chair. After his panic attack, Luna had taken him back to the cabin to rest. Tired and depressed as he usually was after such an event, he had napped for the rest of the morning with Luna curled up behind him, absently playing with his hair. He woke up later alone, with only tiny little braids woven into his hair the only evidence she had been there at all.

Feeling anxious and yet too tired to venture outside, he attempted to distract himself with his studies. Bobby had appeared soon after, flying through a window that opened without being touched. They had not spoken much. Harry suspected his brother felt guilty about what had happened during the Animagus lesson, and while he didn't blame the raven, he wasn't sure how to broach the subject without upsetting him. So he had said nothing, merely welcomed him with a wane smile and a place to perch on the back of a nearby chair. No one bothered them for hours.

His studies were a distraction, but his focus was anything but idle curiosity. Chakra and magical first aid were currently the only books that could provide even a hint of what precisely had gone wrong with the tainted blood. There wasn't much useful information, and whatever he found that was relevant indicated that the sharing of magic, without some sort of ritual or potion, should have killed him immediately and not waited over a week to turn maleficent. Admittedly, his books were not comprehensive and given that even his professional Healers hadn't warned him of the possibility, he doubted he would find any explanations on the matter himself. He considered asking Luna, and by extension Jane, but he couldn't be sure when he would see them next.

"Who? Voldemort? I don't think anyone understood about the blood being poisonous."

"No, not that. Even I don't believe he thought to hurt you intentionally. I meant about the blood changing you. Making you... more like him."

The question caught Harry off guard. He hadn't considered that possibility, but now that it had been pointed out he couldn't help but wonder. His relationship with the Dark Lord was complicated. He couldn't describe it as entirely friendly and certainly not safe, but there were a definite sense of attachment. Voldemort mentored him in a variety of educational and magical endeavors, raising Harry up gradually to become something like an equal. Would it be unreasonable to assume he wouldn't try to 'improve' him physically as well as magically and intellectually? The Dark Lord was nearly immortal after all, and that must be a very lonely prospect even for one such as him.

"...Maybe. I don't think he would see anything wrong with trying."

Bobby puffed his feathers in indignation. Harry had a more philosophical view on the matter.

"I messed with his soul, brother."

"What soul?" the raven huffed. Harry continued as if he hadn't heard him.

"It'd be a little tit-for-tat, on his part."

The feathers settled, but there was nothing relaxed about Bobby as he studied the young wizard intently.

"It doesn't bother you? What he did?"

"I don't know that he did anything intentionally. I'd be bothered more if he had done it knowingly and specifically to change me, but I don't think that's what happened. We were in the middle of a battle. I had nearly died several times already before he found me. We both took a risk and lived to tell the tale. Might it have occurred to him that there would be... side effects? I don't know. I think he would have taken more precautions, but who's to say?"

Bobby said nothing to this. Harry waited, but the raven remained mute and motionless, and eventually Harry turned his attention back to his studies. They didn't speak for nearly hour, but he could feel his companion's unwavering stare on him the entire time even without looking. Finally, Bobby spoke again, and this time Harry wasn't surprised by the question at all.

"Do you want to be immortal?"

Harry smiled, but didn't look up.

"I don't want to be immortal. I don't want to not be immortal. I don't want to waste time striving for something I'll never have or resent it if it's forced upon me. Let's be honest, whether I become immortal or not probably won't be decided entirely by me. I figure, whatever happens, I'll just roll with it."

Bobby blinked at him, tilted his head curiously and said, "That's all very zen, Harry, but let's see how well that philosophy holds up when you're reincarnated as a tortoise."

Harry just laughed.

Some time later, after Harry had switched from studying sharing magic to water-based elemental magics, he was interrupted by a messenger summoning him to the Head Alpha's meeting place. A little uneasy, he put his books and notes away hurriedly, put on his heavy Baluvian cloak, and made his way to the clearing. It was still cold and still gray, but the village lacked the quiet stillness of the wall. There were too many people milling about outside, anxious and clustered together, neglecting their chores in favor of gossiping. Harry could feel their attention shift to him as he stepped out into the open. They did not feel hostile, precisely, but his presence made them alert. Expectant.

He was used to it enough that he could ignore it.

There were more people than usual in the clearing when he arrived as well. More anxious onlookers, more archers on the roof of the round house, and several women clustered around a girl a ways off. Harry recognized Jane, solemn and distant, as several of the women brushed and braided her hair and sang softly to her. She must have sensed his gaze, because she turned towards him. He turned away before their eyes could meet.

The round house's windows had been left open to allow in the sunlight, and a large fire burned hotly in the fire pit to drive out the cold winter wind. Sirius circled the room like a caged beast, trapped and brooding. Remus had planted himself out of the way at a low table, where he was setting out a rather formal-looking collection of parchment, quills, ink pots, pen knife, red wax, pencils, ruler, brushes, and various other supplies that suggested he was about to draft something very official.

His godfathers stopped what they were doing to provide him their full attention.

"Prongslet," Sirius said first.

"How are you feeling?" Remus followed.

"I am well. Tired, but well."

"Are you warm enough? Blood loss is said to make people sensitive to the cold."

"Warm enough, Remus. You don't have to worry about me."

The beta gave him a rueful look, and Harry gave a helpless shrug.

"Alright, you've mothered him enough, Moony. We don't have time to dance around it," Sirius said, agitated but not harsh. He was studying Harry anxiously himself, looking for any sign of weakness or discomfort. For all that he complained of Remus' worrisome ways, the alpha could be even worse. "I'm sending you back."

"Back? Back where?" he asked confusedly. Back to the campsite? Back to Hogwarts? Snape Cottage? A hospital?

"Back to wherever you like, but you can't stay here. Not until the matter is settled."

"Siri, stop being intentionally vague," Remus chided, then explained. "We're trying to make a negotiation with Jane. After what happened... there are debts that must be paid."

Harry closed his eyes and nodded. He had expected this. Jane and Luna had been living precariously at the edge of the pack, but when Sirius had summoned them to save Harry he had unwillingly brought them back into the fold, imbuing them once again with certain rights and responsibilities. Harry had known this instinctively when he had woken to find them all sharing a bed together and became increasingly conscious of it when no one objected to Luna and him spending the morning alone atop the wall. Still, that didn't explain why he was being sent away, and he said as much.

"They cannot know how much I care for you," Sirius explained. "It will make Jane's rescue that much more significant, and tip the scale even more in her favor."

Harry felt suddenly comfortable.

"Ah... Padfoot? I don't think... well, that matter of you caring about me... You weren't exactly subtle."

Even half out of his mind with pain, he had to have been aware of Sirius' concern for him. Certainly, everyone else would have had to been aware of it too.

The alpha merely shrugged at this.

"It has never been officially acknowledged. There is a form to such things. If it isn't acknowledged it cannot be used against me. Not as easily anyway."

"I don't see how me staying would change anything if that's the case. You can just continue to pretend not to care."

"But you can't."

"What?"

Sirius stopped pacing and straightened, staring across the fire at him. His expression wasn't precisely hostile, but there was an intensity in it Harry wasn't entirely comfortable with either. It told him the Head Alpha was looking at him and not his godfather.

"You want me to make peace with Jane."

Harry tensed, unsure if he was being accused of something or not.

"I want what is best for the werewolves. All of..." He was about to say 'us', but floundered. He couldn't claim that sort of kinship casually and certainly not under these circumstances. "All of the werewolves. Things can't continue as they have."

"You are unbelievably impertinent," Sirius said, without bite. "If you remain you will insist on putting in your two knuts, even if you have to undermine me to do it."

"I would not!"

"You might," Remus said gently. "Not intentionally, but you still might. Especially if you think he's being unreasonable. Or it might work the other way. You might try to assist Sirius, and in doing so prevent him from being able to compromise without losing face."

Harry felt stung by the suggestion. He wouldn't undermine Sirius. Did they really think he had so little self-control? The hurt must have shown in his expression, because both his godfathers' expressions changed slightly.

Sirius shook his head. "Don't be like that. You're strong-willed and opinionated and more clever than I am by half, and I wouldn't have you any other way. But this has to be between Jane and me. If you stay, you risk turning a negotiation into a three-way power struggle."

"I don't have that kind of power," he objected. "I'm not here often enough to hold that kind of influence, and I am not a werewolf or even a shaman anymore. I can't force anyone's hand, and I wouldn't want to."

Sirius and Remus turned to each other and shared an uneasy look. Harry felt suddenly queasy.

"I don't, do I?"

"It's complicated," Remus said.

Sirius met his eyes levelly and answered him bluntly.

"You're bloody Merlin."

Harry stared at him blankly.

"Which is just another way of saying you're a living legend," Sirius clarified and started to pace the room yet again. "I know you don't see it. The rest of the pack are careful not to treat you differently while you are with us, but when you're gone... You're the subject of fireside legends and children's bedtime stories. They see your life as one great adventure after another, and who can blame them? They admire you for your bravery and your resilience, but they love you for

the fact that despite having the entire world open to you, you choose to call this place your home and they your brothers where the rest of wizarding kind sees only a prison and outcasts."

He gaped at him and sat down heavily, his knees suddenly too weak to support him. He hadn't known. How hadn't he known? If anything, he had thought most of the pack rather indifferent to him. Well, no, that wasn't true. He was aware of at least some of the admiration, at least of the respect no wizard of his age would normally have been granted. It hadn't seemed as significant as Sirius was implying, but how was he to know really? Lately, he was increasingly aware of how little he really saw or understood of them.

"You are source of great pride for all of us, Harry," Remus said. "That you tied your fate with ours is a great gift."

"Even after...?"

No one had ever blamed him for the Goddess Colony Massacre. Nor the Battle of the Berlin Underground. That had always struck him as both strange and tragic. In fact, the most disapproval he ever faced had been his renunciation of his responsibilities as a shaman, and even that had dissipated relatively quickly.

"You have suffered for us, Harry, and with us. Whatever trespasses you feel you've committed were forgiven. Don't misinterpret this. They're not actually sticking you up on a pedestal to be some sort of god figure. It's more like... you're a cousin who went on to be a famous Quidditch star or the Minister of Magic and still comes around for the holidays."

Harry didn't think anyone thought much of cousins who became Minister of Magic (when Britain still had one), but he got the gist of what Remus meant. He wasn't sure it made him feel any better. If anything, it made him self-conscious. The Goddess Colony had always been considered a refuge from societal expectations. While he had never deluded himself into thinking he was treated like any other young werewolf, he hadn't realized the depth of their regard.

"If I'm so popular, then why pretend you don't like me?"

"You know why," Sirius said. "It was more for the Dark Lord's benefit than the other werewolves. I'm sure most of them know or suspect the ruse. But your loyalty to me is a better endorsement than your affection. That you would support me, who supposedly treats you coldly, over Jane despite your obvious feelings for her disciple, Luna, speaks of your belief in the righteousness of my decisions."

That's very Voldemort of you, Harry was tempted to say, but caught himself. The manipulation of the other werewolves rankled him, especially his using him to do it. He wouldn't have thought Sirius capable of something so Machiavellian if he hadn't just confessed it himself. Yet who was he to criticize. Hadn't he done worse and for less? But the bitterness slipped out just the same.

"And you think I've changed my mind? That I'll support Jane instead and undermine you?"

Sirius snarled something that may or may not have been words and stalked towards him, and Harry flinched back despite himself and broke eye contact to stare at the ground. The alpha was often angry, but very rarely aimed that anger at him directly and even he feared it to an extent. He flinched again as Sirius stopped in front of him, half expecting to be grabbed or slapped. But the touch when it came was gentle, a callused hand run through his hair, mussing the already wild locks. He closed his eyes and leaned into the touch, into the reassurance that despite what was being said it wasn't all as broken as it seemed.

"I've been an awful godfather, Harry. I've said it before, haven't I? I've dragged you into these situations and burdened you with these responsibilities, and now you think it's supposed to be this way, but it's not. We've been talking about power struggles and public opinion like a bunch of bloody politicians, but that's not... I'm not a politician, and I'm not the Dark Lord. I don't want to use you. I don't want anyone else to use you. But I keep doing it anyway, without even thinking about it until you suffer for it. Remus is right; if you stay you'll get drawn in one way or other. It doesn't matter how or who or in what way, you'll still get mixed up in this mess. So I'm sending you back until it's been sorted. Don't try to change my mind."

The hand withdrew from his hair, and Harry felt simultaneously relieved and bereft. Sirius had delivered his benediction and absolved him. It was no longer his cross to bear. And yet... hadn't he told Luna they had to try? That it was worth the effort? Would he truly go back to the wizarding world without at least attempting to make some sort of contribution towards a resolution?

"Okay," he said, slowly rising to his feet. Sirius was behind him, but he could see Remus who visibly let out a sigh of relief. "But can I at least give you my opinion before I go? And will you please think about it before you talk to Jane?"

Remus looked uncertain, but Harry's acquiescence had earned him a little for himself. The beta brought out parchment and a quill, which stood upright the moment it touched the paper and moved without assistance when Harry began to speak. In truth, there was very little Harry had to say. He related parts of his conversation with Luna, most importantly the needs of respecting of living and dead and the necessity for established boundaries that needed to be respected by all.

It was no more than he had said to Luna, and no less than what Luna had probably related back to Jane.

Harry's departure was without fanfare. Despite his godfather's assertion of the other werewolves' regard, he saw little evidence of it himself as he prepared to go. But then, perhaps they didn't realize he was leaving. Packing the remainder of his belongings into his trunk was the work of minutes, and after charming his trunk into weightless little box that fit in his pocket, he left. He had said his goodbyes to his godfathers, stilted and awkward and unsure if he was supposed to wish them luck or not. He could not find Luna, and the few people he met along walk to the boundary did not know where she was. His goodbyes would have to be related through a brief note he left back at the cabin. It was yet one more thing that made his leaving feel unsatisfactory.

There was nothing for it.

The sooner he left, the sooner the negotiations could begin. He left Elsbeth behind so that she could deliver the news of their completion and when he could return. It could take hours or weeks. There was no way to tell yet.

The sun was setting as he passed through the boundary wall. He was alone as he did so, but there was someone waiting for him on the other side he had not been expecting.

"Professor? What are you doing here?"

Snape stood a short ways from him along the narrow dirt path, a familiar if ominous figure in his elegant black robes and cane he had acquired at some point. The man regarded him with consternation, seemingly as surprised as Harry to have met him there. His black eyes flickered suspiciously to the wall and the sentries perched atop it, then back to Harry.

"I have come to fetch you."

"Sirius told you?"

That didn't seem right to Harry. Sirius rarely sent correspondence to his godson's wizarding guardians unless it was requested first, and sometimes not even then. Snape in particular was to be avoided above all others save the Dark Lord himself.

"You are already packed then?" his guardian asked, ignoring his question. Harry hesitated.

"Password?"

Snape smirked. "Incorrigible."

"Cantankerous," Harry replied, mirroring his expression.

"Good of you to remember at least some of the safety protocols."

Harry rolled his eyes and made his way to join the man.

"I'm sixteen, Professor. I think I can make my own way home."

Especially given he had made his own way home from Germany years before.

Snape wasn't in the mood to argue with him. Most of his concentration seemed to be on the path, little more than a game trail, and keeping his own footing as he made his way stiffly through the forest. Or perhaps he simply didn't want any of Sirius' werewolves to overhear them talking. Harry didn't force the matter and merely followed after him. Somewhere along the way, Bobby flew out from amidst the trees to alight on his shoulder. When the three of them reached the road, they apparated to the little road that led up to Snape Cottage.

It was already full night there and the road was dark. In the distance, Harry could see the lights of the little village behind them, but not the cottage. He cast a Lighting Charm to light their way so Snape could still lean on his cane.

"What happened to your hand?" the professor asked.

"So Sirius didn't tell you then."

Harry couldn't see the older wizard's expression, but he could still feel him glaring into the back of his head.

"An answer, if you would."

"It's a long story, but I guess you could say that I'm cured. Even if my magic is shot all to hell again, and I'll probably need another blood replenishing potion tomorrow."

There was a snort behind him, but no further questions until they reach the cottage. Ira was there waiting for them with a hug for Harry, a gentle scolding for her husband for straining his leg, and a rather dubious look at Bobby. It struck the Gryffindor as slightly funny, slightly awkward, and more than a little endearing. He deposited his trunk in his room, changed clothes (apparently fur and leather didn't

qualify as 'appropriate' dinner dress), and returned to the kitchen to help Ira with dinner. He let Bobby loose to explore the house on his own, trusting the raven to make himself welcome even if the Snapes didn't.

In the kitchen, it didn't take long before Ira noticed his hand, mottled purple, and she was not satisfied with the vague answer he had provided her husband. She pulled the story out of him bit by bit, and though he tried to keep particular details from her (his animagus lessons and his complicated relationship with Luna to name a few), he could tell Snape was aware of his attempts at evasion even if he couldn't possibly guess at the specifics.

"We are going to go over all of this again after dinner," Ira said sternly. "It is all going to be written down in detail, particularly what method of treatment was used. Tomorrow, Severus, you'll need to take him to the hospital to be checked out before you head out."

Snape grunted but didn't argue. It was a perfectly reasonable request considering. Who knew what the werewolves had actually done to the boy? Sucking out the blood? The thought made him shudder. Even if Harry demonstrated a certain resistance to Lycanthrosis there was no way to be absolutely certain he was immune. He would make it a point to pay close attention to his behavior over the next few days. The full moon was in less than a week.

"Head out? Are we going somewhere?"

"France," was Snape's succinct reply.

The answer was not surprising, he had been told he might have to attend the negotiations before, but it was still unwelcome news. With matters so tenuous at the Goddess Colony, he had wanted to stay close in case of any news. Elsbeth could, theoretically, find him in France, but it would take over a week and would have to pass through Voldemort's security first. He would have to send a letter just to warn Sirius not to write anything too revealing.

"When?"

"Tomorrow."

Harry choked on a mouthful of Sheppard's pie.

"Pack for a month's stay, at least. Make a list of anything you think you will need tonight," his guardian added as if he hadn't noticed.

"W-why so suddenly?"

"The Dark Lord summons, and we go. I suspect he intends to include you in the negotiations."

How very un-Sirius-like of him, Harry couldn't help but think with some irony.

"I don't see what I have to contribute."

"No doubt you will agitate the Germans immensely."

No doubt. Of course, he didn't fancy meeting up with them himself either. Years before he had sympathized with the Germans to a certain extent, but the actions that had been taken since his escape by both their government and individuals that involved the murder and assault of innocent werewolves and children had pushed them firmly into the category of 'unforgivable'. Intellectually, he knew it was not all the Germans who had behaved so reprehensibly, but it had been far too many and there had been no visible opposition. He wasn't entirely sure he would be able to control himself if he was forced into their company and if they provoked him, even if it was only verbally, he knew he was more than capable of violence against them.

"So he wants to pick a fight? Seems a bit redundant at this point."

"Negotiations of this sort are a war unto themselves. Yes, he wants to pick a fight. He wants to be able to say 'Hogwarts' and point to you, to a child, and have them squirm and deny their wrong-doings so that he might verbally beat them with their own shame for all the world to see."

"Severus, really," Ira said, disapprovingly. "He shouldn't be dragging Harry into this if he's just going to treat him as some sort of moral foil."

Moral foil? Now there was a blade that would bend and snap at the first hint of pressure. He honestly hoped that wasn't Voldemort's intention either. It would be too simple to turn the matter around on him.

"I am sure it is only one of a dozen reasons he wants him there. It likely isn't even the most significant reason."

"He's right of course," Harry agreed. "There might also be dragons at some point. They'll want someone on hand with experience in that sort of thing."

They talked a little more about the journey and what he might possibly do while in France, what Snape would be doing (an explanation that seemed as evasive as Harry's must have about the werewolves), Ira's plans for while they were away, and other bits of news Harry had missed out on while he was away. When dinner was over, Ira sent him to pack while she cleaned up. Snape's marriage hadn't made him any less evasive of housework, and he made some half-thought out excuse to escape and followed Harry to his room.

"I have invited Draco to accompany us to France," Snape said when they were alone, sitting himself in the chair at the study table. Harry felt a moment of surprise and quickly tried to unravel his guardian's reasoning. His own purpose for going was obvious, Snape's less so but not unreasonable. Draco though? He would not have been invited to attend the negotiations, he thought. His father had been a general but he was dead and not as the result of a conflict with the Germans. Factoring his civilian status and since Snape said he had invited him specifically, his invitation was likely unofficial. There was only one unofficial piece of business that would involve Draco in France.

"You want to send him to look for Hermione."

"You said yourself that she was likely in the country, but you cannot possibly complete a discreet search for her. I will perform a search

myself, but I have other duties I must perform first. Draco is a logical choice to search in my place. He speaks some French, no one will be watching him too closely, and his presence can be explained away as my wanting my grieving godson close or moral support to yourself."

"And what does he think about all this?"

"I don't know. He hasn't replied."

Snape looked uneasy about this, and it made Harry uneasy himself. His relationship with Draco was complicated at the moment. His friend was grieving, anger and confusion and despair pulling him in different directions. Harry had been shouted at in his hospital bed by him one day and shown a moment of unspoken kindness at the funeral parade only a day later. Were they still friends? They must be, because he was more worried about the other than he was anyone else at the moment, Hermione included.

"We will see him tomorrow morning. If he has decided to go, he will be ready and waiting, if not..."

He left the rest unsaid. There was no telling how Draco would greet either of them tomorrow until they stood at his door.

"Request denied," Lestrangle said flatly, tossing the piece of parchment aside. It hovered for a moment before gliding over to a file cabinet in the corner of her office, and a drawer opened to swallow it down into the bureaucratic abyss.

Tom forced himself not to grimace, not to glare, not do anything to outwardly express how much he truly despised Bellatrix Lestrangle. His boss. Instead, he held himself rigidly straight, expression blank, and gaze focused somewhere slightly about his commanding officer's head. She seemed to sense his resentment anyway. She grinned like a cat, her blatant sadism bordering on the obscene.

"Ma'am, this was an order made by Lord Voldemort himself," he reminded her.

"Lord Voldemort did not request you, Captain Stratus. He requested a representative of the platoon. I will be that representative as its commanding officer."

"With all due respect, you were not present at the battle we are being recognized for."

Her smugness faded somewhat, falling instead into an angry grimace. Her absence from the battle was sore spot for her. She was supposed to have led the charge, but the presumptuous little bastard standing before her had superseded her authority and taken her soldiers on mission she had not authorized. They should have waited for her, their general, before seeking out their glory in the field. To add insult to injury, she couldn't punish them for it. Not officially in any event. The Dark Lord had already given them commendations for their valor and Stratus had become a war hero and household name once the newspapers had gotten word of them. A mere forty or so witches and wizards flying into battle against hundreds? They were being called the Spartan Platoon and Stratus was their Leonidas, despite not having the decency to have died in battle.

"A fact I have you to thank for, Captain. You should be pleased, sir. My absence will give that much more opportunity to sew resentment amongst my men."

He visibly stiffened, even if his expression didn't change.

"I don't know what-"

"Stow it. Lucius might have trusted you, but I won't make the same mistake. Did you think I was oblivious to what my soldiers are saying about me? What they say about you?"

"I don't know what you are accusing me of. I have never spoken a disrespectful word against you."

"Of course you haven't. You're too good at being a manipulative little bastard to be that obvious about it. If you had wanted, you could have had them eating out of my palm by now, but I can't get so much as salute without a look of contempt from them."

He looked at her directly for the first time, indignant at her accusation.

"I'm sorry you feel that way, General Lestrangle," he said tightly, the same contempt buried under his military civility she had seen in every soldier she met. As if they thought her unworthy of her position, that all her successful campaigns both during the civil war and her battles in Britain had been a fluke or credit stolen from others.

She hated him. She absolutely despised him. If it was the last thing she did, she would make him suffer the humiliation he had inflicted upon her a thousand fold.

"You are boring me now, Captain. Go away. Shoo," she dismissed imperiously, already turning her attention to some report or another. She saw him grimace out of the corner of her eye and felt a moment of satisfaction, which she didn't show until he had turned away and stormed out of her office. She nearly laughed when he slammed the door behind him.

Outside Lestrangle's office, Stratus seethed. He wanted nothing more than to rage and curse, at Lestrangle, at the Universe, at anyone at all. Lestrangle's refusal to allow him to attend the negotiations in France was more than just a blow to his pride. France would have been the perfect time and place to begin fostering a relationship with Voldemort. The Dark Lord would be in a foreign territory, surrounded by relative strangers, and focused on his political games with the Germans and the French. He would be relatively vulnerable and foiling an attack from some unexpected corner would prove just the circumstances Tom needed to gain the Dark Lord's trust. He was already moving in closer with his public promotion, and his current publicity meant socializing with the Dark Lord at particular events quite likely, but it was not enough for his plans. He needed the Dark Lord to trust him. At least enough that he could influence his actions to a certain extent.

The opportunity to keep Harry's company was an added bonus, and something that was likely to prove essential for his plans to be successful. It was imperative that his friend be a willing participant, for both their sakes.

But Lestrangle had ruined his chance. Now it would likely be months before he had the opportunity to see either of them, and when they returned he would be farther from his goal than before.

"Bad day?"

Tom jumped and spun, mentally cursing himself for being so distracted he hadn't noticed the other man in the office. His displeasure only mounted when the man turned out to be Inquisitor Amelon, watching him with that unnervingly curious expression he always wore. He hadn't seen the man since before the Final Battle of Hogwarts, but he knew he had been around. It had been months since Lucius' death, and still Amelon was asking questions. His own sources seemed to think Snape was the prime suspect, but after the battle the Dark Lord had forced Amelon to turn his attention elsewhere with little results to show for it.

That was unfortunate. It would have pleased him greatly if his impromptu assassination of Malfoy and Crouch hadn't only resulted in Granger's exile but also Snape's ruination. So many birds with only one cursed stone.

Now Amelon was floating about, making inquiries of not only Lestrangle and Harry, but of Stratus. Tom wasn't particularly worried about being caught. If something hadn't been found yet, it was unlikely to turn up. That didn't mean, however, that the inquiries weren't potentially troublesome. He didn't like the idea of anyone looking over his shoulder.

"A minor inconvenience," he said shortly, and continued on his way. To his annoyance, Amelon followed him.

"Might I have a moment of your time?" he asked politely.

"Aren't you here for General Lestrangle?"

"Of course, but I meant to find you later. This is actually quite convenient."

"I am sorry, sir, but I have duties of my own to attend..."

"It will only take a few minutes. We can walk while we talk."

Tom bit down on his annoyance and affected an air of polite helpfulness. He couldn't afford to break his facade. Not to this man.

"Very well, sir."

"How would you describe your relationship with General Lestrangle?"

Tom frowned in confusion.

"I'm sorry, I don't see how that would have anything to do with your investigation."

The Inquisitor smiled back at him affably, but his eyes were sharp and seeking. Tom made it a point to avoid direct eye contact with him.

"It just seems like you are having a difficult time with your current commander, when you were able to reach such intimate terms with General Malfoy. A man I am told was increasingly losing his grip on his own sanity."

"I am sorry, sir, but you are mistaken. General Malfoy and I were never very close. My position at the time meant I spent a great deal of time with him, but I never knew him well. I told you before I was aware of his increased agitation during my time with him, but it was my ignorance of his person that allowed me to mistake his behavior as related stress rather than... illness."

"You say you were not close, and yet he offered you a place in his own family. You were betrothed to his daughter."

Tom affected an air of discomfort.

"If you are aware of the betrothal then you must similarly be aware that relations between General Malfoy and his foster daughter were not good. Affection had less to do with our betrothal than convenience. I am single, I am appropriately positioned in society to

appease his wife and not embarrass the Malfoy name, and I didn't say no."

"You certainly didn't say no."

"Was there a reason to? She's a pretty girl, smart, with good connections, and I didn't exactly have a line of women at my door. I thought we would have been quite content together given the opportunity. If... if our betrothal had something to do with... what happened, then I am truly sorry, but I don't see how anyone could have foreseen it."

"So you believe she is responsible for General Malfoy and Lord Crouch's deaths?"

"Don't you?" Tom asked, feigning surprise. As far as the public was concerned Granger was still the prime suspect, but the scandal of those deaths had been overshadowed by the end of the war. The battle of Hogwarts had touched the lives of almost everyone in the nation in some manner, and the end of the upcoming negotiations had plenty of attention all its own. With no new developments in the story, most of the public had lost interest and papers hadn't offered any new insights or theories. No other suspects had been offered up, and no one was looking for any others while Granger still remained in hiding.

"Those closest to her are adamant of her innocence," Amelon said. "I haven't found any evidence linking her directly to the crime."

"But she ran."

"Yes, and there could be any number of reasons for that. Guilt is just one possibility. Or perhaps she is dead. I am beginning to think the later."

Tom blinked, not bothering to hide his surprise. Granger dead? That was... perhaps not an impossibility. She had not been found after all, and though clever she was hardly educated in the subterfuge necessary to evade a national manhunt. She lacked the knowledge to blend into the muggle world, and without her wand she would be

quite defenseless. Would it really be unlikely for her to have a run in with some magical beast or ignorantly walk into the path of a muggle vehicle? It would certainly be convenient if that were the case. It would spare him the necessity of killing her himself.

Amelon, however, seemed to think her continued absence a sign of yet more foul play. That was decidedly inconvenient.

"I hope that is not the case."

"Indeed, it would be a rather tragic turn of events. Lord Potter would likely be inconsolable."

There was something about the way Amelon said 'Lord Potter' that Tom didn't like. Did he suspect Harry of the deed then? He was rather tired of walking through this maze of a conversation.

"Her foster brother even more so I should think."

"No doubt," he said dismissively, confirming Tom's suspicion he had been fishing with his Potter comment. "But I think this conversation is wandering a bit farther from the topic than I intended. Let's see, where was I? We've already talked about General Malfoy, so that leaves Lord Crouch. What was your relationship with him?"

Tom let out a mental sigh of relief. It seemed he was home free.

"There was no relationship strictly speaking. I only ever met the man a handful of times in the general's company, and we never spoke outside of the usual pleasantries."

"Really? Even after General Malfoy called off Miss Granger's engagement with him so he could transfer it to you?"

Perhaps not quite free.

"You are mistaken. The engagement was called off before the general even asked me to marry his daughter. I believe there were financial or legal reasons involved, but I don't know the specifics. You

could ask his lawyer. Reiger or Reicher I believe the name was. He is still working for the Malfoy family last I heard."

"I shall check on that, thank you. So you never spoke to Lord Crouch after your betrothal? Not once?"

"I saw him occasionally, but again never outside of Malfoy's company. He may have made a snide remark at the winter ball, but I honestly can't remember it."

"Ah-huh, well thank you for your time. It's been quite informative."

"Has it?"

Tom certainly hoped not. Was Amelon merely being polite or was he fishing? Had Tom unknowingly given answers contrary to what the inquisitor knew and revealed a lie? How much did the wizard suspect already, and was he trying to trick him into giving some self-incriminating detail? It was best to play it safe and offer nothing else, assume he knew nothing until he proved otherwise. At least until Tom could do a little investigating of his own.

"I'm glad. I hope it proves helpful. Now if you'll excuse me, I'm afraid I must leave you here."

"Of course. Good day, Captain. We'll see each other again soon, no doubt."

Amelon turned away and made his way back down the hall towards Lestranger's office, his step light and jaunty so that Tom half expected him to start whistling. Tom stood there for a long moment watching him go, wondering if that last remark had been a threat or not.

Book VII

Chapter 3:

Malfoy Manor loomed on a hill against a gray morning sky in grim repose, its grandeur muted in the February gloom. Harry had not seen the estate since December. It was not so great a time, and yet the manor had undergone some essential change Harry would be hard pressed to identify but could not be missed. The windows seemed somehow darker, the grounds wilder, the stones grayer.

It's as if it's in mourning, Harry thought and did not dismiss the idea. Wizarding places were known for their personalities, their sentience, although they were not strictly alive. The real question was whether the manor itself was mourning Lucius or if it was merely the reflection of its new master's grief?

There was a sentry at the gate, which typically was unusual outside of special events. He was a burly, disagreeable wizard that must have had a troll or ogre somewhere in his family tree and had threatened to smash their heads in if they were reporters. Snape hadn't been impressed, but he did wait patiently as the guard summoned a house elf to verify their identities and escort them to the house. Even the elf seemed gloomy, its ears drooping and its eyes sad. Harry pitied it, and he pitied Draco, being trapped in such a depressing place.

Inside the elf bid them wait while she informed the 'Young Master' of their arrival. Harry studied the entryway, mentally cataloging what he was seeing to what he remembered. He held no memories of his fall from the top of the staircase, but the events had been reiterated to him enough for him to have an idea of what happened. The chandelier in the foyer was missing. It must have been the one that fell on Crouch, he reasoned. It still hadn't been replaced, leaving the space dark and cavernous with only the weak winter light coming through the narrow manor windows. He looked towards the stairs, half expecting to find blood there or a crack in the stone. But the stairs were pristine.

"Perhaps I shouldn't have come," Harry said as the minutes stretched.

"Why?" Snape asked in a put-upon tone, drumming his fingers against his cane in boredom. He didn't even bother to look at Harry, although there was nothing else particularly interesting in the foyer to look at.

"Draco might... not be entirely happy to see me."

He still maintained some hope that wasn't the case since the unexpected gesture of kindness at the funeral, but there had been no reply to the letters he had sent since then, and he wondered now if he hadn't been snubbed after all.

"That is something better known than guessed at," Snape said unsympathetically.

Harry didn't agree. At least, he didn't agree with finding out in Malfoy Manor. The house had already tried to kill him once before. It seemed impolite to mention this aloud, however, particularly in the foyer where his voice might echo up and out into the entire manor.

Several more awkward minutes passed, and finally the house elf returned, looking shaken, and led them to the study. Snape hissed in disgust as they entered the room, and Harry hesitated at the doorway. The study, once the picture of sophistication and order, was now a hive of chaos. Stacks of papers had piled up and fallen over across every available surface, including much of the floor, along with what looked like a month's worth of dirty dishes. A fire burned in the hearth, making the room unpleasantly hot and the air vaguely rancid. Amidst it all sat Draco, half reclined behind his desk, one leg draped over the arm of his chair while his right hand held a glass of something that definitely wasn't pumpkin juice. If the office was in an alarming state, Draco was doubly so. He was thinner and paler still than he had been at the funeral procession. He was greasy and unkempt, and the shadows around his eyes were so dark they appeared painted on.

He stared at them through slitted eyes, his expression closed. Snape glowered at the state of the room, then glowered some more at the state of his godson.

"I take it you will not be joining us then?"

Draco laughed or spasmed or something, and the brittle porcelain of his skin broke into a smile that threatened to shatter into bloody shards.

"I am afraid I must decline," he said with mocking politeness. "As you can see I am quite busy."

"Perhaps it would help if you let the house elves into the study. They clearly haven't touched the place in a while."

"I can't stand them in here. They constantly nag and simper and whine. 'Young Master needs to drink his tea', 'Young Master must sleep now', 'Would Young Master like a teddy bear and a bedtime story?' Merlin, it grates."

"At least let them tidy the office. It's disgusting in here. And when was the last time you slept? Or bathed for that matter?"

Draco sneered at him nastily. Harry felt a jolt of surprise. For an instant, the other boy had looked just like his father, with all the vitriol and contempt Draco himself had yet to acquire. Until now.

"I can just as easily ban you if you continue to play the worried house elf as well."

Snape stared at him, his eyes narrowing thoughtfully. Draco stared right back and took a long draw from his glass.

"Where is your mother, Draco?"

The boy suddenly looked away, and then tried to hide the retreat with a dismissive shrug.

"Visiting some distant cousin or uncle or something. I couldn't be bothered to remember. I'm not her keeper."

You said too much, Harry thought. You're evading and sloppily at that. What are you hiding?

Snape appeared to notice it as well but did not pursue it. This was not Hogwarts. This was Draco's domain, and whatever regard his godson afforded him might have been enough to get him through the door, but if he used that up he could easily and irrevocably be expelled through it.

"Let the house elves tidy up. I will have Ira bring you a sleeping draught. Undoubtedly she'll become maternal. Indulge her," Snape said.

The 'or else' went unsaid but heard nevertheless.

"When we find your sister I want to be able to say that you're alright and not be made a liar."

Snape made to leave, and Harry felt alarmed. Surely they weren't going to leave Draco like this! He looked more dead than alive and clearly had no intention of changing the situation himself. But Snape kept coming, crowding Harry out of the doorway and into the hall. He moved out of the way as the man stalked past.

"But we can't... He..." he stammered, but the man kept going without pause and disappeared around the corner. Harry gaped after him. He turned back to the office, only to have the door slammed shut in his face.

"Draco? Draco?!" he called.

He tried the door and pulled his hand back with a hiss when a bolt of magic stung him. His fingers went instantly numb.

Harry got the message. Reluctantly, he left to follow after Snape. Outside, he had to run to catch up with his guardian. Despite his cane, the man had already neared the gate.

"We can't leave him like that!"

Snape regarded him blandly and didn't slow his steady, limping gait.

"And what would you have us do, Potter? Wrestle him to the ground and force feed him potions and good advice? This is his home, and we have no leverage against him. We cannot force the issue, and he is in no state to be reasonable."

"So we do nothing?" Harry accused.

Snape snorted and rolled his eyes.

"Gryffindors. It's always all or nothing with you, isn't it? Of course I'm going to do something, but there are those better suited to this task than either of us."

"You mean Ira? What can she possibly do that we can't? She barely even knows Draco."

"I find your lack of faith in my wife vaguely insulting, Potter and choose not to indulge questions with what should be obvious answers. Now put up your hood. We're taking the Knight Bus, and I would prefer not to be mobbed by your adoring fans."

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean that the way it sounded," he said, even as he pulled up his hood as ordered. Predictably, Snape ignored him.

"We will need to go to Bristol to pick up our papers, and then we will split up. You will go and visit Miss Cypher and request her assistance with Draco. Be prepared to negotiate."

Harry had never been to Natalie's house before, but he had sent her enough owls over the years to know the address by heart. It was a four-story townhouse sandwiched between rows of similar homes and shops. The neighborhood skirted the border between affluent and Bohemian, an eclectic mix of contemporary art studios, antique shops, salons, and coffee shops that seemed to be owned by the creative working class and patronized by the eccentric wealthy. Harry rather liked it.

Natalie's home doubled as an antique shop, so that while the building itself was a tidy brownstone that looked like it had been built within the last decade, the fixtures of the house, such as the door and

garden statues, were all ancient pieces artfully darkened by the passage of time.

Harry ran his fingers over a copper statue of a faun turned pale green with oxidation, feeling the unique magical signature still strong despite its age. It flicker its ears in annoyance and scampered off further into the garden. There was an antique door knocker with the face of a lion on a red door, and it growled menacingly as he tapped it. He wondered if one of Natalie's mums had been a Gryffindor.

A woman with long black hair and elegant black robes answered the door. Harry pulled back his hood so that she could see him properly. He could tell she recognized him, although they had never met, and also that she was surprised to see him.

"Hello, Mrs. Quinn," he said. "Is Natalie home?"

She blinked once, twice, and then her surprise became delight.

"Of course, please come in."

She escorted him inside, where the space was much larger than the outside would have led one to believe. The front door led directly into the shop, which was full to overflowing with furniture, armor, china vases, standing mirrors, and even an old carriage squeezed into a corner. He followed Mrs. Quinn through the shop, feeling the pleasant hum of so many magical objects crammed into a limited space.

"You don't have any portraits?" Harry noted curiously as they reached a spiral staircase at the back of the shop. The only paintings he saw were of animals and landscapes.

"Oh, you noticed that? Yes, I decided against selling portraits early in the business. No one wants to buy pictures of people they've never heard of, and they were shameless gossips."

Up the second floor was yet more antiques, but these were clearly not ready for sale. Some were locked behind glass cases, while others looked broken or in the process of being repaired. She noticed his curiosity and explained.

"My wife Adeline does most of my restorations for me. That's actually how we met. I contracted her to restore some old woodwork for me. The rest, as they say, is history."

"And the things in the cases?"

"Oh, those. Cursed or otherwise warded. I had a curse-breaker stationed out of London that I used to hire to handle these sorts of things, but he didn't survive the Italian siege. The poor man, he was nearly ninety and wouldn't have hurt a soul. I haven't found anyone to replace him. Most of the curse-breakers work for the Court or the Culties these days, and the rest are a bunch of crooks and swindlers."

"I know a good curse-breaker," Harry said. "He's in France right now teaching some seminars in Paris, but he'll be off for the summer soon. I can put in an inquiry for you if you like."

She looked impressed by his offer and quickly found some business cards for both him and his curse-breaker acquaintance. They took another set of stairs to the third floor where the living quarters started. The space was divided into sections by three sets of French doors in a U-shape. She opened a set of doors to their left and led him into a small parlor, sunny with fern patterned wallpaper and vases with yellow roses and lavender. There were family photographs on the wall, many of them with Natalie as a little girl. She had a sly, clever look even as a toddler that he would recognize anywhere.

"I'll go get Natalie for you and have Adeline make some tea."

She was gone before he could protest the tea. He honestly didn't have time to stay long. He continued to study the photographs for several more minutes, until the door opened and Natalie stepped inside. Harry smiled when he saw she had brought Inana with her, the ten foot long cobra draped around her neck and shoulders like some sort of fashion accessory. Inana seemed as comfortable with it as Natalie, and Harry wondered what they got up to with all the time they spent together.

"And here I thought you had forgotten about us," Natalie said, and strode up to him, lifting Inana from her shoulders and placing the snake around Harry's. The cobra regarded him lethargically and shifted only enough to settle herself comfortably.

"Never. I just got back from Sirius' yesterday, and I'm heading off to Paris this afternoon."

"So soon? Are you up for that?"

She made an unsubtle glance at his wounded hand. He had wrapped it in bandages again that morning. The limb was still ugly with bruising and several conspicuous bite marks he didn't want to have to explain.

"It's fine. Besides, it's a negotiation, not a Dueling tournament. I'll probably be bored to tears."

Natalie didn't look convinced, and he didn't blame her. To distract her, he turned to Inana and spoke in parseltongue.

"Ssso how are you getting along with my friend Natalie? Ssshe ssseems quite taken with you," he said.

"Sshe isss... tolerable," Inana admitted reluctantly. "At leassst, sshe does not ignore me for weeks on end."

"I'm very sssorry. I haven't given you the attention you deserve. I'll be ssseventeen thissss sssummer. We will return to the Nile together then, and you can ssshow me your kingdom."

"Yess. My kingdom. I will ssshow you the sssacred places, where the godsss sssleep and the Nile isss born," she said, her sibilant voice reverent with awe and longing.

"Sssoon," he promised.

"What did she say?" Natalie asked jealously. Harry grinned at her.

"Have you ever considered visiting Egypt?"

They talked for a little while longer, as long as Harry dared with errands still left to complete and his rendezvous time with Snape quickly approaching. They talked of the letters shared and the details that had been left out, Harry's plans while in France, what they were going to do about school, and various bits of gossip. They were interrupted by the door opening and a perky blond witch carrying in a tea service. Harry concluded she was Adeline, Natalie's other mother.

"Hello, dears. I didn't interrupt you two kissing, did I?" she said cheerfully, causing both teens to blush in embarrassment.

"Mum!"

"Like you hadn't thought about it. It's nice to meet you in person, Harry. Natalie talks about you so much, I feel like we've known each other for years."

Natalie's faced burned, and Harry was surprised to realize this was the first time he had ever seen her embarrassed. He might have enjoyed it more if he weren't so mortified himself.

"Fine, fine. I know where I'm not wanted. I'll just leave this here for you, and let you get back to pretending I was never sixteen and don't know what you're up to."

She gave Natalie an affectionate peck on the cheek. Then, to her daughter's absolute horror, gave one to Harry too before bustling out of the room. They both stood there in stunned mortification for a moment.

"You'll have to excuse me, Harry. I need to go find a rock to crawl under and die," Natalie said at last.

"Ewr..." he started awkwardly, looking for something say. "Perhaps you could do me a favor before you go do that."

Harry told her about his visit to Malfoy Manor and his concern for Draco. The change of subject helped distract them so that they were only a few shades light of a tomato by the time he finished.

"I'm overdue for a visit," Natalie said by way of agreement. "I've been busy helping my mums with the shop, but I'll ask for the rest of the day off to visit. Malfoy Manor is as good a rock to crawl under as any."

"Better than most, I should think," Harry joked feebly. "Thank you for doing this."

"Draco is my friend. Despite what the world thinks of Slytherins, that does mean something to us," she said dismissively.

"Natalie, I've never doubted the value of your friendship. Not ever."

Impulsively, he leaned in and kissed her cheek just as her mother had moments before. She stood there stunned. Suddenly embarrassed all over again, Harry took advantage of her shock to quickly deposit Inana back onto Natalie and beat a hasty retreat.

"I've got to go now. The boat's leaving soon. I'll send you a letter when I arrive. Tell me how it goes with Draco. Thanks again. Bye!" he babbled, and then practically ran for the exit, leaving Natalie standing there with a giant cobra and an untouched tea service.

She turned to Inana. Inana looked back at her and flicked her forked tongue. Natalie sighed.

"You said it, sister."

Wizarding London was still a depressing sight, but there were obvious signs that the city was on its way to recovering. Collapsed and burnt-out buildings had been mostly cleared away, leaving vacant lots and exposed basements ready to be built on top of. Snape hoped the builders would have the sense to use those magical advancements that had not been available when the city was first built to help make their homes and businesses more durable from these sorts of attacks in the future. He didn't put much faith into it, but hope was cheap.

The Red Weasel was as busy as ever, although several other competing businesses had opened up along the same street and seemed to be doing well enough themselves. With the war over, people were flooding back to the city in droves and those businesses quickest to open were thriving. He entered the tavern unnoticed and made his way towards the bar, side-stepping waiters and tables with patrons talking progressively louder to be heard over others patrons with the same idea. One of the Weasley twins was at the bar, filling drink orders and flirting with the waitresses. He did a double-take when he spotted Snape coming towards him and actually had the cheek to grin at him.

"Professor Snape! Long time, no see. What can I get for you? First drink is always on the house."

Snape considered the offer, but then decided against it. His limp already affected his balance, and he doubted a drink would improve the matter. He shook his head.

"I'm looking for your brother Ronald. Is he here?"

The bartender gave him a curious look that bordered on wary.

"He in trouble?"

"No," Snape said but didn't elaborate.

"That's too bad. He's doing inventory in the kitchen. Theoretically. Go on back."

"Mr. Weasley," Snape said with a nod and turned to go, nearly running into a waitress half a head shorter than all the others and carrying what looked to be six trays at once.

"Pardon me, sir. Oh, Professor Snape!" Ginny Weasley said, her eyes widening.

"Miss Weasley. It's good to see you're putting your education to good use," he said blandly. She ducked her head.

"Yes, well... money for college, sir. Best to start saving now."

He wasn't sure if he believed her, but he nodded anyway.

"A worthy goal. I'll leave you to it."

He found Ron Weasley slacking off in the kitchen pantry, reading a book on concealment and disguise charms. He looked up when Snape blocked light coming in the doorway and nearly fell off his stool.

"Jesus, what are you doing here?"

"We really do need to have mandatory etiquette lessons at Hogwarts. The manners in today's young people really are appalling," he drawled and stepped into the pantry. He closed the door behind him and cast some spells for privacy. Ron had stood and backed up to the far side of the pantry, which still only left about five feet between them.

"I doubt you came to discuss curriculum with me, sir. What is it then?"

Snape regarded him coldly.

"You owe me a debt."

Ron glowered, opened his mouth to snap something, hesitated, bit his lip, and finally nodded.

"Today you begin repayment. I am going to France on rather urgent business with Mr. Potter. My wife will not be accompanying me, and I cannot in good conscience leave her without protection of some kind."

"You want me to be your wife's bodyguard?"

"And errand boy, as needs arise."

"When and for how long?"

"Today. I told her to expect you. And for as long as necessary."

"But I have a job," he objected.

"I don't care. This responsibility takes precedent. I will not pay you for it, but if you perform adequately I will write a recommendation to whichever university or employer you wish to seek out upon graduation."

"I'll need money more than I'll need another scrap of paper."

"You'll need your life more than you'll need either. This is a Life debt, Weasley. One in which I have shed blood to uphold. Pray I don't require some of your own before it is repaid."

Rather than looking cowed, Ron only seemed to get angrier, his face turning redder by the second.

"You... you can't just..."

Snape smirked.

"Yes, Weasley, I can and I am. You can't just go about trying to murder a man with black magic and not expect there to be consequences. Certainly others have been paying for it, Hermione Granger not least among them."

Ron had no argument for that, and for a moment he even looked ashamed. His eyes skittered around the cramped space without actually settling on anything, until finally he gave up looking for excuses and just nodded.

"Good. You can start with these," Snape said, handing him a pile of letters. "Post them today. Except for the letter to my wife, which you will deliver to her in person, and then wait for her instructions."

The boy accepted the letters and stuffed them into his robes, nodding morosely. Snape stared at him for a long moment.

"If something happens to her," he said finally, "I will destroy you."

A brief touch of legilimency proved the boy believed him, but to his credit, Weasley didn't cringe or look away. Bravery wasn't a prized trait in Slytherin, but cowardice was an absolutely unacceptable trait for what Snape needed him for.

Snape nodded once, opened the door, and left.

Dumbledore did not like to visit Paris unless he had to. It wasn't that he disliked the city, per se. He admired its people, its intellectual and cultural vibrancy, and its unique approach towards muggle-wizarding relations. What he didn't like about visiting Paris was that if he left for even a month, he would have no idea what the city would be like when he returned. Paris was a city of political turmoil and philosophical wars. There were always some dissidents, revolutionists, social movement, or scandal that carried the hearts of the common folk in one direction and the French government in another.

In particularly dangerous times, the common folk and French government were in agreement and without the other setting boundaries things got particularly out of control. That hadn't happened since 1971 when the city had almost uniformly agreed to remove the boundaries between the muggle and wizarding sections of the city. It had seemed like a good idea at the time, in keeping with the perhaps overly sentimental view of muggle-wizarding relations. It had been an unparalleled disaster. For twenty years Parisian law enforcement was forced to direct most of its efforts towards maintaining secrecy and containing 'accidents' involving muggles. The government had quickly done a one-eighty and wanted to return back to the previous apartheid state, but citizenry was still intent on making it work. Only in the last decade or so that things had reached a relatively stable compromise, and it was a tenuous situation at best.

At the moment, the atmosphere of the city was a jubilant one. The German War (in their eyes it seemed the Germany held sole responsibility for it), was now over and their British allies had won while still maintaining the moral high ground. The opportunity for strengthening France's economical and political status within Europe was almost guaranteed. Queen Ophelia was at the height of her

popularity, leaving her critics biting their tongues in fear of public backlash. The mysterious and powerful Dark Lord and his young protégé had become international celebrities and the fashionable ideal.

Dumbledore knew he would not receive a warm welcome in this city.

Not yet, in any event.

Maybe next month or next year or next decade the tide would change in his favor, but by then it would be too late. He couldn't afford to wait. If Voldemort cemented his hold in Germany, there would be no ousting him from Western Europe.

As was his custom, Dumbledore set up operations in the muggle section of the city. A small apartment in a local slum, currently condemned until restorations could be completed. Magic had made the dwelling habitable if not entirely pleasant. His crew for this mission was a handful of witches and wizards fluent in French, most of them German military or militia fleeing the British invasion and one a British refugee from the civil war already stationed in Paris for several years. All of them had reasons to fear Voldemort. None of them had reason to believe Dumbledore could actually protect them, but they were desperate.

Having spent the first day settling in, Dumbledore spent the second day assessing the situation in the city and the country as a whole. Nothing comforting was learned, but nothing surprising either. The real work began late that evening when, disguised as a middle-aged Eastern European wizard, he entered a gallery on a small wizarding street nestled in the district of Avenue Montaigne. It was just before midnight, but the Galeries de Nocturne hadn't been open for more than an hour. Its unique management situation required unusual hours. The gallery itself was a long, narrow building with contemporary wood flooring and old-fashioned oil lamps. The walls were lined with paintings, none of them less than two hundred years old. The theme of this particular gallery seemed to be muggle historical paintings painted using wizarding techniques. Many of them featured Napoleon leading a charge in some battle or another.

Sometimes the charge led into another painting's frame, and an argument would break out between the diminutive combatants.

"Excuse me," he said in French with an Eastern European accent to a very beautiful and very pale woman who was spending more time watching the potential customers than the paintings. She turned towards him and smiled, lips closed politely over her fangs.

"How may I help you?" she said, her own French faintly accented. Perhaps Middle Eastern.

"I have an appointment with Master Clarion," he lied, handing her a card. It wasn't a business card, but rather a tarot card of the Magician. The woman took the card in confusion and then in suspicion.

"I was not made aware of any such appointment," she said.

"It's a standing appointment," he said. "Please give it to Master Clarion, and I am certain he will see me."

Her eyes narrowed, but she nodded and stalked off towards a set of stairs at the far end of the gallery. He noted absently that her heels didn't make a sound on the hardwood floors as she walked and estimated she was at least seventy years old but no more than a hundred. She disappeared up the stairs, and he occupied himself for several minutes with the paintings on the wall. Battles didn't much interest him, but there was a rather lovely painting of Bougainville's discovery of Tahiti.

The woman appeared again eventually and gestured towards the stairs she had just descended.

"He will see you."

He smiled, nodded politely, and strolled towards the stairs in no particular hurry. The upstairs gallery was just as long and narrow, but the wood floors were covered in rugs and the gas lamps were replaced with wall sconces and candelabras, with only a few of those lit. There were no paintings, only furniture. A large, antique desk, several book cases and cabinets, and sofas and chairs he thought he

recognized from some of the paintings downstairs. Most of said sofas and chairs were currently occupied with vampires, while Clarion himself was positioned behind his desk.

"It's been a while, old friend," Dumbledore said congenially. The vampire smiled thinly back at him.

"And I was just starting to relax. So what will it be then?"

Dumbledore didn't belittle him by drawing out the unnecessary pleasantries. Vampires had long memories. There was no need to remind Clarion what he owed him, what his vampire family owed him. The war with Grindelwald had devastated Europe, and vampires had not fared any better. There had been strife between wizarding kind and vampires, which had led to losses on both sides. The death of vampires had led to power struggles amongst rival clans, none of them so fierce or bloody as those in Paris. Clarion's rise as the Master of the City, indeed his very survival, had only been made possible by Dumbledore's support. More than his rise up the ranks, he owed the wizard for the lives of several of his children who had been directly or indirectly rescued from battles and government execution. Clarion would remember this as a matter of honor. And as a matter of honor, he would not... could not, turn Dumbledore away.

"Nothing too dramatic I should think. I would like you to keep me appraised of the situation in Bourges. Perhaps arrange a place to stay nearby."

"And what makes you think I would have any way of knowing what is going on in Bourges? We are vampires, not politicians."

"You are the Master of the City, therefore you have politicians in your pocket and probably a few aides and security guards besides. You can't afford not to know what the Queen and the Ministry are up to."

Clarion nodded in acknowledgment and sighed.

"Very well. How many people would you need to hide?"

"Only myself and maybe one or two others. It needn't be fancy."

"If you wish to be close to the action there won't be any choice in that regard. It is a rich, Pureblood city. The servants and workers flock in from Levet or Jussy-Champagne. At least in the wizarding section."

"As long as it is discreet."

"That I can guarantee. You will not make trouble for me."

"I am sure you have your own means of insuring that," Dumbledore said without changing his congenial tone. It went without saying that Clarion would be keeping an eye on him even as he helped him. Despite what was owed the wizard, Clarion would not risk being labeled a traitor of his country by being caught assisting a known terrorist.

There was little to say after that. They ironed out the details. Dumbledore inquired after Clarion's family politely, and Clarion answered vaguely. The vampire asked about Dumbledore's plans while in France, which were met with nonsensical answers. Dumbledore inquired about Clarion's 'business' these days which the vampire evaded altogether. Their conversation could have continued on for several more hours without any straightforward answers, but there was a disturbance from downstairs that drew their attention.

The vampires that had been lounging motionlessly around the room suddenly stood, including their Master. One of the vampires retrieved a sword from seemingly out of thin air and placed it in Clarion's hand. Just in time for the woman from before to come flying up the stairs and scurry to the far side of the room behind the crowd of her immortal brothers and sisters.

Dumbledore remained seated and watched things unfold from the rather precarious position directly between Clarion's people and the approaching danger. Their adversary turned out to be another vampire and, to Dumbledore's surprise, someone he recognized.

Despite being a few shades paler, Viktor looked just as Dumbledore remembered him. A heavy brow and dark eyes that made him look simultaneously earnest and menacing, and arms that looked like they

could wrestle a bear. If he hadn't entered the room with his fangs already bared, the old wizard might have made the mistake of jumping up to hug him.

But the fangs were drawn, and the look in his eyes held a savage gleam he had never seen before. It took him a moment to realize he had not seen him for over a year, nearly two. Had he been a vampire that entire time? What did it mean that he had not sought him out to tell him he was alive? Had his Master prevented him from seeking him out? Not unusual, but...

Whatever the case, it was not time to postulate. Viktor was joined by several other vampires following close behind him, and they all looked ready for a fight. Well this was certainly interesting. Not good, but interesting.

"Monsieur," Viktor said, looking at Dumbledore, "I would recommend you go."

For a second, the elderly wizard was confused by his formality; then realized he still had his disguise on. Viktor didn't recognize him.

"I will be the one to say when my guests may come and go, Viktor. If you have some business with me, then you will go through the proper channels," Clarion hissed, and behind him several of his children snarled. Several of the vampires behind Viktor snarled back, but were silenced when Viktor raised his hand. Dumbledore felt another shock of surprise. Viktor was the leader? The boy, for he really was little more than a boy, couldn't have been a vampire for little over a year, maybe less and yet he was in charge? More than that, Clarion clearly felt threatened by Viktor, which meant he held a sizable clan. What circumstances could have possibly led to that?

"Or I can just walk into your office and save myself the time of having to chase after you while you cower from safe house to safe house like a scared little rabbit," Viktor sneered, then turned to Dumbledore. "Why are you still here?"

Dumbledore smiled back at him, which startled the vampire.

"Master Clarion and I have an appointment, young man, which I believe takes precedent over your rather rude intrusion. Perhaps it is you who should come back later."

His tone did not change from before, but his wand slid into his right hand from the sleeve of his robe and tapped lightly on the edge of his chair in slow beat. Viktor stared at the wand. His eyes widened as he recognized it. He looked back to Dumbledore, fixing him with an unreadable stare. The old wizard considered legitimacy, but then decided against. Only a fool would go up against a vampire with such a tactic. His mind could be crushed like a grape under a troll's foot.

"Forgive me, monsieur. I have perhaps been overly hasty," he said evenly, betraying nothing. He then turned to Clarion and twisted his expression into unbridled contempt. "I know what you are up to. Your minions are clumsy at the best of times. If I find them meddling in my affairs again, I cannot be held responsible for what will happen next."

"And yet I most assuredly will hold you responsible, you savage brat. As will every other clan in this city. Don't mistake bravado for invincibility. You live only at my benevolence."

"And you only at my patience," Viktor replied. "This is your only warning."

No one said anything else as the invading vampires slowly withdrew. When they were gone, Clarion's vampires settled back into their respective seats and turned towards their Master for instruction. Clarion said nothing for a long time, his entire body shaking with the rage he felt at their confrontation. Dumbledore waited patiently for the vampire to collect himself. Eventually, he did and settled back into chair, laying his sword on his desk with a harsh clatter.

"Damn that boy," he muttered under his breath.

"Viktor was always headstrong."

"So you are not going to deny knowing him?" This seemed to surprise the vampire. "I could tell he recognized your wand. How do you know him?"

"We've crossed paths before he became a vampire," he said, but didn't elaborate. If Clarion didn't already know of Viktor's involvement in the Triwizard Tournament then he didn't want to be the one to inform him of it. Viktor might have dissolved his ties with Dumbledore, but that didn't mean he had actively betrayed him. The old wizard would not throw his old comrade to the wolves if he didn't have to. "I hadn't realized he had even been turned, let alone taken up residence in Paris."

Clarion sighed heavily.

"It's that damn Katarina's fault. She got in over her head in Germany and got herself killed, and suddenly this self-important bastard takes over her clan and moves them into my backyard without so much as a warning. I thought at first it was just ignorance, but it turned out he really is just that much of a prick."

"And yet you haven't driven him out."

"I can't drive him out. His clan is bigger than mine, and he knows it." Not to mention older, stronger, and just plain meaner. "I would have to call on the other clans to help me, and I can't afford that sort of favor hanging over my head with that many people. They'll see me as weak. He knows this as well."

"And yet you cannot let him do as he pleases without seeming weak either."

Clarion merely nodded.

Dumbledore regarded him thoughtfully.

Clarion looked back equally as thoughtful.

Neither said anything for a long time.

Horace was bored. Oxford wasn't nearly as interesting as he had thought it would be. At least, not from inside the Owl and Toad Tavern, which could have been any tavern from Inverness to

Portsmouth, with the exception of the photographs hanging behind the bar of famous authors that had visited rather than famous Quidditch players. Horace didn't recognize any of them, but then he would be hard pressed to recognize his own mother most days.

He was there with Charlie to meet with the publisher from the Oxford Wizarding Press for lunch and a discussion of his dragon book. Aside from a very brief introduction, he hadn't said much at all. Charlie had taken over the conversation almost immediately, and Horace let him. The publisher was a bit of a prig, and seemed more interested with dealing with a college graduate and career researcher over someone barely out of secondary school. Horace had managed to pay attention for a little while, mostly when Charlie was going over the credentials and interesting anecdotes of those behind the creation of the book. The story about how Hagrid had come into Charlie's employ under the recommendation of Harold Potter, gifted with three dragon eggs from the Triwizard tournament besides, was particularly interesting since Horace hadn't heard the story told straight through. After that, he lost interest in favor of the food that arrived. The food itself was pretty good for tavern food, nothing spectacular but good, and once he was done eating he realized he didn't know what Charlie and the publisher were talking about anymore.

He stood up, and they suddenly looked at him, startled as if just realizing he was there.

"I'm going to use the loo," he said simply. Charlie nodded and the publisher looked away as if he had said something embarrassing. He left, did his business, and while washing his hands, completely forgot about them. He went to the bar and ordered a butterbeer, and sat for a while looking at the pictures of famous people he didn't recognize. Then he grew bored and started looking around the tavern instead.

The tavern was only half full, occupied mostly with students and professors from the local university grabbing lunch between classes. He spotted Charlie and the publisher and was reminded why he was there again. They didn't seem to have noticed his absence, and he was in no hurry to return. He looked around some more and found himself drawn to a man and two young girls seated in a booth nearby. It was the girls that drew his attention, as they seemed to be the only

children in the place and none too pleased about it either. They were dressed prettily in lacy white dresses, their hair done up in satin ribbons, and accompanied by a man (presumably their father) dressed in a handsome gray and red three piece suit and coordinating maroon colored robe and bow tie. The girls were sulking over their lunch of pot pies, while their father scolded them softly.

He entertained himself imagining what was happening. Perhaps the girls had just come back from a party after causing some sort of mischief. Or perhaps their father was ordering them to behave as they prepared to go to some formal occasion that threatened to be exceptionally dull, like a baptism or a piano recital. His imaginings were interrupted when the older of the two girls suddenly threw down her fork and shouted for the entire tavern to hear.

"Who cares?! If Harry's too busy to be bothered then father will obviously be too busy to come either!"

With that, the girl clambered over her little sister and ran for the door, red faced and on the verge of tears. Her father sat there stunned for a moment, and it wasn't until she was nearly out the door that he jumped up to run after her. He stopped abruptly and turned back to the girl left abandoned in the booth.

"Stay right here! I'll be right back. Don't move from this spot!" he said sharply, and then hurried out the door.

The girl did indeed stay put, but her embarrassment and worry was obvious to Horace and likely to everyone else in the tavern who was now looking between the door and girl with blatant curiosity. The silence that followed was awkward and must have been awful for her. No one said anything. No one got up to approach the girl, not even the barkeep or any of the waitresses. Disgusted, Horace ordered a glass of pumpkin juice and walked it over to the table with the mortified child. He set it in front of the girl and startled her from her intense study of the table. He smiled at her, and then turned around to glare at anyone else who happened to be looking in their direction. Predictably, everyone looked away and hastily continued their conversations where they had left off.

He sat down across from her.

"Are you alright?" he asked.

She blinked at him owlishly and nodded.

"My name is Horace. Do you want to tell me what just happened?"

Her pink cheeks reddened further, and she shook her head. But then she glanced up at him, and perhaps seeing only kindness there, changed her mind.

"I'm Alyssa. My sister Morgana was angry at my dad because he says Harry might not be able to make it to her birthday party this year, and she shouldn't get her hopes up. He's really busy this year, but then he's always busy and still manages to come other times. Father has a new boss, and he's busy too, but I don't know why she would think he wouldn't come either. They'll both come. I know they will."

Despite her words, she looked despondent, or as despondent as a ten year old girl could look. He didn't like that look. Not at all.

"Is Harry your brother?"

She blinked at him, and just like that the despondent look disappeared into a grin.

"No! Harry's famous!"

This time Horace was surprised. His initial reaction to the name Harry was to mentally add a 'Potter' at the end, but he had dismissed the possibility just as quickly. Harry was an exceptionally common name, even among wizards. Famous Harrys were considerably rarer.

"You don't mean...?"

She took the glass of pumpkin juice he had brought her and took a sip, grinning into the glass the entire time. Mentally, he shuffled through his scattered memories. Harry was always a subject of

unusual clarity for him, and it didn't take him long to find some minor detail in a conversation they had had from years ago.

"Reicher," he said, and the girl choked on her juice. "You're one of the Reicher girls, aren't you?"

"How did you know that?" she squeaked.

"I know Harry as well. We went to school together. He mentioned your family sometimes."

Her eyes widened.

"He did?"

"He was very fond of you."

This seemed to please the girl, and she was more than willing to talk to him about their mutual friend. He was more than willing to listen. He even talked a little about his time with Harry at Hogwarts, which inevitably led to his recent exploits in saving the school. Her perspective of the events was a bit skewed by her obvious hero worship, but she painted a colorful picture that marked her as a talented storyteller.

He took out his notebook and pencil from his robes.

"What are you doing," she asked.

"I'm taking notes."

"Notes about what?"

"About Harry. About you."

"How come?"

"Because I'm Harry's biographer."

"What's a biographer?"

He explained it to her. She looked thoughtful, then frowned.

"What if I want to be his biographer?"

"Then you should also take notes," he said, attempting to hide his smile.

"Harry can have more than one biographer?"

"Sure. I'm sure there will be a lot of us eventually. We have a head start though, since we've known him for so long and are his friends."

"Wouldn't it be easier just to write one book about Harry?"

"Like a collaboration?"

She didn't know what that meant either, and he explained it to her.

"Yeah, like that," she said.

"Maybe," he agreed. "Do you want to collaborate?"

She nodded enthusiastically. So he flipped through his notebook and showed her some of his notes he had pieced together. She giggled at his sketches, and asked him if Harry had really caught blue pox while at Hogwarts and if Harry was really in love a werewolf 'princess' (her somewhat convoluted interpretation of the Head Alpha's daughter). Then, perhaps feeling it was only fair to share something of her own in this 'collaboration', she leaned over to one side and picked up a little white child's purse. She opened it and pulled out a rather large letter from the little pouch and showed it to him.

"This is a letter from Harry. We had to go to our cousin Becky's birthday party -only she's not really our cousin- and Morgana wanted to show it off because Becky said she didn't believe us when we told her Harry was our friend but dad wouldn't let her. He said it would be unfair to Becky to show off at her party, but she's always nasty to us so I don't know why we should be nice to her."

"I guess if your cousin is nasty, he doesn't want a daughter like her."

"Oh. I hadn't thought of it like that. I guess I wouldn't want a kid like her either."

He nodded sagely in agreement.

They turned their attention to the letter. Alyssa pulled the letter out of its envelope and showed it to him, and the first thing that caught Horace's attention was the highly detailed pictures of the Great Hall at Hogwarts drawn at the bottom of the letter and up along the sides. It appeared to be the Welcoming Feast, with all its traditional pageantry and crowded to the brim with teachers and students. It was not a fully enchanted picture, but the little pencil lined people did seem to moving a little from side to side in some places and the House Banners flapped slowly in the air while the floating candles bobbed up and down. In the top right corner was another sketch, this one of Inana coiled up in a flower bed, her forked tongue peeking out every so often.

Just as he was about to turn to his attention to the actual text itself, the letter was suddenly snatched from his hand. Alyssa's dad was now standing at the booth with her sister held firmly at his side by her upper arm and looking just as sulky as before. The elder wizard was looking at him like he was guilty of some crime Horace could only guess at.

"Who are you?" he demanded.

Before he could speak, Alyssa answered for him.

"This is Horace. He's one of Harry's friends from school. He's going to be Harry's biographer!"

Rather than reassuring her dad, it only seemed to condemn Horace in the other's eyes.

"His biographer? More likely a reporter for some rag paper. Come on Alyssa, we're leaving."

"But Dad!"

"One more word and I'm casting a Silencio! I've had enough out of the both of you for today."

Reluctantly, Alyssa gathered up her cloak and purse and climbed out of the booth to stand by her sister, who was glowering at the floor and shunning the world at large. Before they left, however, the man turned to spare him one last venomous glare.

"As for you, you ought to be ashamed of yourself. Exploiting a little girl like that the moment she's alone and vulnerable! Like some sort of..."

Whatever he was going to accuse Horace of being like, he made a quick glance at his daughters and seemed to think better of it. He turned on his heel and marched towards the bar to settle his bill instead of waiting for a waitress, leaving Horace sitting there stupidly for a moment. He wasn't entirely sure what had just happened. Had he done something wrong? Sometimes he didn't know, but Hagrid and Charlie had never been as cross with him as Alyssa's dad had been. Maybe it was a mistake?

He thought that must be the case. The man had called him a reporter, which must have been the source of the upset. He had been a school reporter, but honestly hadn't seen the appeal of it as a career outside of Hogwarts. Nobody liked reporters. Even he didn't like reporters.

"Hey, you okay?"

He looked up to find Charlie looking down at him, worried and a little angry. At him or for him?

"There was a misunderstanding," Horace said.

"Yeah, entirely on that guy's side. What a jerk."

Horace shrugged. Maybe. Maybe not. He didn't think it would have been good to have just made friends with Alyssa and then turn around and insult her dad. He didn't want to be like cousin Becky.

That thought made him smile, which seemed to confuse Charlie.

"Is the meeting over?" Horace asked, changing the subject.

"Almost. Looks good. He's sending us home with some paperwork to go over and sign, and then there are few editing decisions we'll have to go over with Hagrid."

Horace nodded and climbed out of the booth, but as he did he noticed the envelope Alyssa had left in her rush to obey her dad. There was something written on it.

Harry Potter

Snape Cottage

Longhill Rd

Elvenshire, Bracknell Forest

Lestranger thought she would happily travel to France just to get a little sun. Even in Bristol, one of the warmest and sunniest cities in England, the weather was gloomy and chill. The dementors that had been patrolling just off the coast had been recalled to Azkaban, and it was hoped that the unusually harsh winter weather would see an improvement soon. Soon, but not just yet.

Her uniform, flattering though it was on her, was not as warm as she would have liked. She felt a spike of jealousy as she recalled Potter's uniform, which had a cloak lined in heavy fur. No other uniforms among the Culties were similarly insulated. A perk of being Lord Voldemort's favorite, she thought bitterly, then quickly pushed the thought aside. Whether Potter was her lord's favorite or not was none of her concern. As her Master had said before, Potter served his purpose and served it well despite the occasional mishap or detour. She could do no less than him.

Indeed, she was highly qualified to do considerably more.

For instance, she could deal with Captain Reginald Stratus and his increasingly questionable loyalty to his country. Perhaps her Master would gift her with a fur cloak after she uncovered his treason.

A woman could hope.

"He's a manipulative little bastard. I don't know how Lucius could have trusted him... well, except that he supposedly went crazy. Convenient that," she said, her bland tone taking away the bite of her hatred for the man. She didn't want Amelon to think she had anything personal against Stratus. The inquisitor nodded, possibly in agreement or possibly in acknowledgment. She couldn't really tell with him.

They were out in London, making their way from the military floor station towards the Thames where a ferry was waiting to carry her and various other Court officials to Paris. She tightened her cloak around her. London was considerably cooler than Bristol, and a heavy fog lay over the city even as it began approaching noon and dampened her clothes. Beside her, Amelon blew warm air into his cupped hands before taking up his notepad and quill from under his arm again.

This was the third encounter with the man she'd had in two days, and she still couldn't tell what he thought of her suspicions against Stratus. He appeared to be checking up on the few details she knew regarding Stratus' employment to Lucius and his military career prior to that, asking follow up questions at their next meetings and making additional requests to classified personnel records and mission reports, but he may have just as easily been checking up on other suspects or even herself. He was a slippery fish.

She respected him for that.

"But you've still decided to go to France and leave him unsupervised?" he asked.

"I don't have a choice. I can't send a man I don't trust to France, where he could cause unspeakable mischief, and I need the Dark

Lord's approval before I start cleaning house. Stratus' war hero status prevents me from dismissing him or any of his people outright."

They turned down a narrow alley which twisted curiously so that after a time it seemed they were going into a spiral and getting no closer to their destination. The effect was intentional. The ferry and its necessary docking station were relatively new additions to Wizarding London, and not ones advertised to the public for security reasons. It was not blocked off from the public strictly speaking, but there were a number of minor hurdles, such as the crooked alley, that discouraged the casually curious from seeking it out.

The fog was lighter here, but the air was still damp. A peculiar rotting scent followed in after them, although the alleyway was empty of trash.

"Do you think he will try anything?" Amelon asked.

"Undoubtedly. He knows why I'm going. If he's smart, he'll try to weasel his way into the good graces of one of my rivals. If he's a fool, he'll try to sabotage me."

"Or kill you. If what you suspect is true, he isn't above murder."

"Then he would be exceptionally stupid," she said and spun sharply, her wand slipping from her sleeve and into her hand. "Aperio!"

The revealing spell expanded in a colorless bubble from her wand, distorted their vision of the alley as it expanded to fill the narrow space before suddenly bursting harmlessly. The alley appeared just as it had before, but for the black shadow now outlined on the wall. The shadow was roughly the size and silhouette of a komodo dragon, but completely flat. It let out a savage hiss, before scurrying up the alley wall.

"Quickly! Stop it! Stupefy!"

The shadow ducked back down, dodging her spell and scurried in another direction.

"Claustra incedio!"

The sky above the alley suddenly burst into flames, blocking the creature's escape upward. It let out another hiss and scurried quickly back down the wall, dodging several of Lestrangle's spells as it went. It was incredibly fast and impossible to predict which way it would turn next. It made one more attempt to flee in the opposite direction of the alley, but after dodging yet another stunning spell from Lestrangle, it suddenly turned and charged towards them. This time Amelon joined her in casting the Stunning hex, but the creature was like smoke and every attempt to hit it seemed to push it to the side rather than penetrate.

Then it was on them and too late to do anything. It leaped from the wall and straight for Lestrangle, seizing her arm without seeming to open its mouth, its body still strangely two-dimensional, like a flag flapping the wind. Lestrangle screamed more in anger than in pain, and unable to cast another curse while it held her wand arm in its grip, she pulled a dagger from her holster and stabbed at it. It squirmed and twisted away from her blade, but it was too close to evade her for more than a second or two before the blade struck something. It hissed and released her, dropping to the alley floor and scurrying away. This time they let it.

"Merlin, fuck me, god damn!" Lestrangle swore, dropping the knife in favor of gripping her wounded arm to slow the flow of blood. Amelon continued to stare after the creature for a little longer, as if making sure it was really gone before turning to her.

"How badly are you injured?" he asked. He reached for her, but she snarled at him like a wounded animal.

"Leave it be! It'll be fine. It's not venomous."

Amelon stared at her.

"You know what that thing was?"

"It's an anthifold. Think zombie lethifold," she said.

He continued to stare at her blankly.

"The Dark Lord used to use them for reconnaissance work. They're quick but relatively harmless."

"Seemed dangerous enough," he said, glancing at her wound pointedly. She smirked at him.

"The arm is still there, isn't it?"

He smiled at that and nodded in acknowledgment.

"Nevertheless, we should get you to a healer."

"No. The ferry won't wait, and I can't afford not to be on it," she said and continued onward. After a moment's hesitation, he followed after her.

"An anthifold, you said. Don't think I've heard of them before. They're not used by the Court anymore are they?"

"They were never used by the court," she said. "They weren't even used by the Death Eaters strictly speaking. They're created through necromancy, and we only ever had one necromancer in our army."

"Lord Voldemort."

"Yes."

"So he's spying on you now?"

"No."

"But-"

"He knows better than to use something like that against me. I know their smell. I know their tricks. Whoever sent that thing didn't know I knew this."

"Stratus?"

Lestrangle hesitated. Considered.

"If he did, he would have to be a necromancer himself."

"... That's rare."

"Not something easily hidden either. He's clever, but I don't know if he's that clever. It could just as easily have been sent by the Germans or some other nation. Lord Voldemort will have to be informed immediately."

They continued onward silently, their eyes darting about the alleyway for some sign of danger. Nothing sprang out at them. No anthifold or any other assailant appeared. The alley finally opened out into a large dockyard, bustling with activity. The fog here had been dispersed by enchantments for safety as large pieces of cargo were levitated on and off the sole vessel stationed there. Passengers were restricted to a narrow stretch of the dock where they could be lined up to go through security, before handing off their luggage to Culties who would stow their belongings (after checking them for suspicious items and contraband), then pass along to an even narrower ramp that led them on board.

The ferry itself was a handsome vessel, moderately sized with an upper deck that could comfortably hold five hundred (far more people than will ever likely need to cross into France at one time short of a national evacuation) and a lower cargo hold with a handful of private cabins for the crew and traveling diplomats and enough storage to haul half the goods in Diagon Alley. It was made of wood, Dwarven copper that wouldn't oxidize for at least a century, and brass. It was also painted black, a tradition amongst wizarding ships, to hide the runes painted beneath to protect it against storms and sea monsters (and more recently, sonar and satellites). The Albatross was painted in gold letters on its side.

"Are you sure you don't want to go to a Healer first?" Amelon said.
"It'll be back for another trip this evening."

"There will be plenty of Healers in France. Lord Voldemort must be informed of what happened as soon as possible. It could be a matter of national security."

Amelon nodded.

"I respect your patriotism, General Lestrage. I wish you the best of luck."

"You as well, Inquisitor Amelon. I hope you catch the bastard that killed my brother-in-law."

"And Crouch," Amelon reminded her.

"I don't give a flying fuck about Crouch," she replied with a smirk, and made her way towards the line of passengers shuffling through security. He watched her go, smiling curiously. What a strange woman, he thought to himself.

He seriously hoped he wasn't going to have to arrest her for treason.

The Albatross, while boasting more than enough passenger space for their small group, lacked anything resembling privacy outside of the loo. The passenger cabin was an open floor plan with rows of low-backed chairs facing each other and the passenger deck was completely empty except for the charmed life preservers mounted along the guardrails. It meant when Bellatrix Lestrage boarded the ferry, Harry and Snape spotted her almost immediately.

"Yech," Harry said.

"Quite," Snape agreed.

"She looks like she's been in a fight. She's bleeding."

"Then if we sink we'll know who the sharks will go to first and swim in the opposite direction."

"Professor!" Harry cried, going for scandalized but coming out delighted.

"A man can always dream, Potter."

Word of his people arrival from London reached Voldemort at a quarter to six that evening while he was reviewing the files Morgan had dug up on the German diplomats who would be there for the negotiations. It was informative and important but also tedious, and he was happy to have an excuse to do something else. One of his aides gave him a list of those who had arrived, and he was pleased to find all the necessary players were present and accounted for. The negotiations had been delayed long enough. The Germans were becoming restless, and so was he. Tomorrow, the day after at the latest, they would start. He called on his aides and had a series of instructions written for various members of his entourage, then set off to speak with some of them in person.

Harry was first. He would have preferred he be last so that he could spend as much time as he wanted with his protégé, but that wasn't an indulgence he could afford at the moment. There was far too much to do, and even working through the night he would be hard pressed to have everything completed in time.

He found Harry in his room, collapsed in a chair while Victoria unpacked his suitcase and gossiped at him. He knocked at the door to draw their attention, and the maid servant immediately dropped into a low curtsy. Harry just offered him a tired smile.

"Hey."

Voldemort smirked at him.

"Eloquent as always," he said, then turned to Victoria. "Leave us."

She bobbed another curtsy and hurried out of the room, closing the door behind her.

"Long trip?" Voldemort asked.

"Long day. We went to see Draco before we left today. He's... not well."

Voldemort honestly didn't care. If young Malfoy grew to be half the man his father was, then he would be more than happy to invite him into his inner circle, but it was still too soon to tell if he was worthy of that privilege or not. In the meantime, the boy still had his mother and godfather to look after his well-being and wasn't his concern.

"He's also not your responsibility. Your responsibilities are here in Bourges," he reminded Harry.

His protégé sighed and nodded.

"And what precisely do my responsibilities involve? The only official title I hold is Ambassador to the Werewolves."

"Which would be enough all its own to assure your place here. The Germans have attacked our werewolf citizens and must pay restitution. Then there is the matter of those werewolves still being held in Germany itself. We must decide what is to be done with them."

That seemed to catch Harry's interest. He sat up in his chair, and his tired expression hardened. Voldemort smiled. He knew that expression well. It meant Harry was going to be difficult. Hopefully, it meant he was going to be difficult with the Germans. That could prove infinitely entertaining. Perhaps even useful.

"Then there are other matters in which you may prove quite useful while you are here," he continued.

"Such as?" Harry asked, already suspicious.

"The Royal Family will be in Bourges for the negotiations, and that means most of the Royal Court and a number of Parliament will be accompanying them. There will be various functions to keep them entertained, and that means there will be opportunities for our people to mingle. I need you to be at your most charming."

Harry looked at him blankly.

"And how do I do that?"

Voldemort considered.

"You flirt for one thing. Every woman between the ages of eleven and one hundred and eleven likes to be flirted with, but never let it become vulgar or lead anyone on. Even if they want you to. For the men, show interest in their pastimes, particularly sports. These will mostly be men of leisure, and their sports are very important to them. When you do participate in said sports; lose. Not badly. Perhaps not even all the time. But lose. Nobody likes an amateur showing off, and you're young enough that allowing them to mentor you in some way will be flattering. And of course, you must show an interest in France and French culture itself. The Queen has already offered a tutor during your stay, which you will accept."

Harry didn't look enthusiastic, but he didn't argue which was something. Voldemort decided not mention the tour of France he had planned for him after the negotiations were over. His protégé was quite popular in France, and he wasn't above exploiting that to improve their international relations. And Harry could use the practice. Hogwarts was an excellent school, but it did not provide the sort of social education Harry would need. He would wait until the negotiations were over to bring it up. If he were lucky, his protégé would make enough friendly acquaintances that he might want to stay for a while of his own accord. Otherwise, it was simply better to avoid an argument for as long as possible. Given enough time, Harry could, potentially, weasel his way out of it.

"I will have your itinerary delivered to Victoria. You will be very busy, so I recommend you get some rest."

Harry smiled tiredly.

"No argument here. I'll eat in my room tonight and go to bed."

"Then I will leave you to it. Don't hesitate to ask Victoria for anything. That's why I brought her, after all. We will talk more tomorrow."

"Alright. Goodnight."

"Goodnight."

Victoria was waiting patiently outside the door as he exited. He closed the door to the suite and addressed her directly.

"Morgan has informed you of your purpose?" he asked.

"Yes, my Lord."

"Are you up to it?"

"I will not fail, my Lord."

He didn't reply. There was no need to threaten Victoria. She knew him well enough to know what he would do if she failed to protect his protégé. Instead he walked away. Snape's room was right next door to Harry's, but he was in no hurry to see the man. Private business could wait until later. He intended to meet with Rutherford Gillen, the Head of the Court Treasury Department, but was intercepted along the way by one of his aides with note from Morgan.

He read it and continued on, turning down another palace corridor to another set of suites. He entered a room without knocking and found Morgan and Lestrangle waiting for him. Lestrangle looked exhausted, but she rose from her chair immediately and bowed respectfully. He stared at her.

"You are injured."

"The wound is minor, but what it might mean is serious. I came as quickly as I could."

Voldemort nodded in approval. Lestrangle had always known what her priorities should be. Morgan moved to stand near the door. She told them what had happened in the London alleyway. About her discussion with Amelon, her suspicions of Stratus, the discovery and subsequent attack by the anthifold, and her journey to Bourges. He waited patiently for her to finish, and then nodded. He turned to Morgan.

"Summon a healer to attend to the general. Be discreet," he ordered, and Morgan wordlessly left the room.

Once alone, he crossed the short distance between them and placed his hands on her shoulders in sudden display of intimacy. She inhaled sharply, her eyes widening, her cheeks flushing.

"M-my Lord?"

"Thank you, Bella, for coming to me directly. Your loyalty is a source of great comfort to me. If I could trust even a tenth of my people as much as I trust you, the Court would run itself," he said, staring down at her warmly.

"I... I am only doing m-my duty, My Lord."

"Which I have always been able to rely on. If I have ever seemed unappreciative of that fact, I apologize."

She looked stunned and flattered and perhaps a little suspicious. He was not generous with his praises, and this likely seemed a little over the top. Which it was. Not that he didn't appreciate her loyalty, but he was hardly going to fall head over heels in love with her because of it.

"I will have the matter investigated. Stratus, of course, will receive extra attention. Whatever we find, you will not have to keep him on as your direct subordinate. He and your honor guard will be reassigned laterally and separately, and you will have your pick of the ranks to replace them."

That did please her. The Dark Lord didn't give gifts, but he was generous with his rewards. And to be given precisely what she had come there to get made this Christmas.

"Thank you, my Lord."

"I am afraid I cannot spend much time on this matter personally at the moment, but Morgan will keep me apprised of the situation. In the

meantime, I want you to let the healer attend to you and then rest. I will want you with me at the negotiations tomorrow."

"As you command, my Lord," she said, practically glowing.

He kissed her lightly on the forehead, bid her goodnight, and left. Outside of her presence, his expression darkened. The presence of the anthifold could mean any number of things, but he suspected he knew the culprit already. Necromancers were rare after all, and of the handful in Europe he could think of none that would go out of their way to spy upon Lestrangle. It was possible a necromancer could have been bribed by a local government, but unlikely. That left only one real possibility.

Tom.

He had been unaccounted for over two years. He had always known it was just a matter of time before he resurfaced, but he had become complacent. There were so many other things demanding his immediate attention he hadn't spared much thought to when or how his counterpart might return. Had Tom recouped enough to finally make his move against him? Or was this merely one of a string of maneuvers in a grander scheme that he had overlooked? And why Lestrangle?

Was it possible Reginald Stratus was somehow involved as Lestrangle theorized? A conspirator or a patsy? Could Tom have been involved in Lucius and Bartemius' deaths? The possibility hadn't occurred to him before, but now that it had it didn't seem the least bit implausible. But what would his motivation be? Revenge? An attempt to remove some of his closest supporters? Had Harry's fall that night truly been caused by the manor defenses or was it another possible act of sabotage by Tom himself?

He knew too little to make any sort of supposition, and yet he was suddenly uneasy. If his counterpart were active, it was perfectly plausible that he could infiltrate the Court and his inner circle. His interrogation of Horace McGunny had revealed Tom's ability to move from body to body. But if Tom got that close, wouldn't he have been able to sense him? He had always been able to before, but...

He wasn't the same as he was before.

Harry had...fixed him. The horcruxes were no longer pieces of himself. He was not longer missing any pieces in his soul. He was whole unto himself. It was possible he wouldn't even be able to sense horcruxes anymore. At least, not as he used to.

"Well, bother," he muttered to himself. "And things were going so well."

Chp143